

Read This Special Report **Before** It's Too Late

# The 7 Most Common Childhood Injuries (and how to prevent them)

**In San Diego**, a 3-year-old boy accidentally set his house ablaze while playing with a multipurpose lighter. He died in the fire.

**In Fort Meyers, Fla.**, an 11-month-old boy fell into a 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-inch bucket containing bleach while his grandmother left him unattended. He drowned.

**In St. Louis**, a 1-year-old was left alone with a bottle of baby oil. He swallowed some and died. »

BY CYNTHIA HANSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANICE FABER



**Each of those tragedies** was the result of an unintentional injury—the No. 1 killer of America's children. The numbers are staggering: an estimated 1900 kids died in the home from unintentional injuries in 1998, the most recent year for which statistics are available; nearly 70 percent of the victims were just 4 years old or younger.

What's going on here? The answer, safety experts and pediatricians say, is twofold. First, parents greatly underestimate the dangers that exist around the house, wrongly fearing that fatal diseases or crimes like kidnapping are more serious threats to their child's well-being. Second, they greatly overestimate their child's ability to stay out of harm's way, falsely believing that toddlers will follow directions when told to keep their hands off a hot stove or not to put things in their mouths. "We no longer use the term *accidents*, because it implies that the injuries were unavoidable," says Howard Spivak, M.D., chief of the division of general pediatrics and adolescent medicine at the Floating Hospital for Children at New England

Medical Center in Boston. The reality: they're almost always avoidable, and it's up to you to make sure they don't happen.

"The home is supposedly the safe haven, the place where young children are the most secure and loved," says Heather Paul, Ph.D., executive director of National SAFE KIDS Campaign in Washington, D.C. "But it's also where young children are the most vulnerable to unintentional injury. The home is not a place where parents can let their guard down—even for a second." Begin today to take these seven threats more seriously—and you just might succeed in keeping your child out of the emergency room.

**1. Fire and Burns** It's your biggest nightmare: fire sweeping through your home, filling the rooms with fatal flames and smoke. And for good reason: fires and burns are the leading cause of at-home death for children 14 and under. Kids ages 5 and under are at the greatest risk, with fatalities in this age group occurring at a rate more than twice that of

other ages. Young children are particularly vulnerable to fire-related injuries because they lack a sense of danger and don't react promptly to life-threatening situations. Also, their small bodies are less able to tolerate toxic combustion products, making them more susceptible to smoke inhalation.

Yet there's a very simple way to minimize this threat: studies show that a working smoke alarm as much as halves the chances of dying in a residential fire. "Install smoke detectors in sleeping areas and on every floor of your house," Paul advises. "Test the batteries once a month to make sure they're working, and change them at least once a year." Other fire-safety strategies include storing matches and utility lighters in locked cabinets, preparing escape plans and conducting periodic fire drills to eliminate panicked confusion if disaster strikes, and talking to your child about the dangers of fire.

Scald burns from hot foods and liquids are another threat. At high temperatures, a second- or third-degree burn would occur in an adult in two to five seconds. Children probably require one-third to one-fourth of that time to burn. More than 88,000 kids were treated in emergency rooms for burn-related injuries last year. Follow these prevention tips:

▶ **Watch your water temperature.** As a general rule, it shouldn't be above 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

▶ **Keep hot drinks out of reach.** In a matter of seconds, a child can spill a scalding hot cup of coffee on herself by tugging at a placemat on the kitchen table. So leave hot drinks on high counters. Also, never hold a hot beverage while you're carrying your baby—you can't handle both.

▶ **Turn handles on pots and pans toward the back of the stove.** A child can suffer serious burns if he yanks a skillet off a burner and causes hot grease or food to splatter on his body. To be safe, keep babies and toddlers within view but contained in a playpen, high chair or stationary exerciser while you're cooking.

**2. Drowning** As a parent, you know that water is a kiddie magnet. Young children love to play in water wherever they can find it: bathtubs, toilets, sinks, swimming pools. But what you may not be aware of is that children ages 4 and under drown at a rate more than two to three times that of older kids. Water doesn't have to be deep to be dangerous. It's possible for a young child to drown in one inch of water—and in less than a minute. The reason: Little kids are top-heavy. If they topple into a toilet or bucket headfirst, they lack the strength to pull themselves out. While the image brings to mind those goofball cartoons, this is serious stuff. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, as many as 30 infants and toddlers drown every year in buckets of liquid used for mopping floors and other chores. "Drowning is a quiet death that comes without warning," says Paul. "There's no screaming, no shouting—the child just slips away."

Drowning claims the lives of an estimated 1000 kids ages 14 and under annually, many of whom fall into back-yard swimming pools. "There is no substitute for adult supervision," insists Susan Pollack, M.D., a member of the American

## How to Avoid a Car-Seat Catastrophe

Once you leave the house, the biggest threat to your child becomes a car ride.

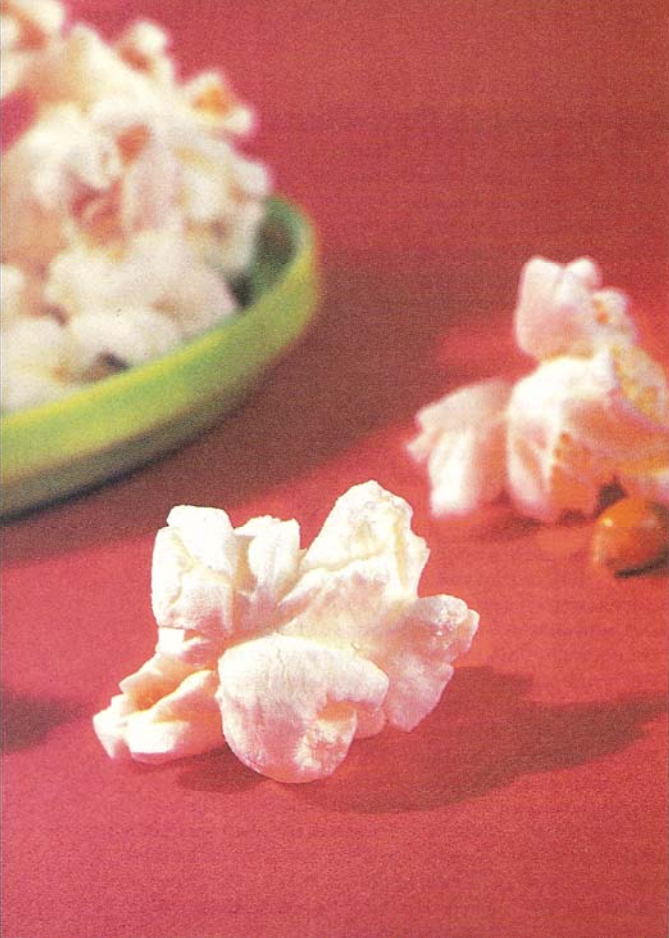
Motor-vehicle incidents remain the leading cause of death and injury for children, claiming the lives of nearly 1800 young passengers each year and causing injury to another 274,000.

Despite laws requiring safety seats, the nonfatal child-injury rate has increased four percent over the past decade. The reason?

Twenty-nine percent of children ages 4 and under still ride unrestrained in cars, and 85 percent of parents who use safety seats or booster seats install them improperly. Simple mistakes can compromise your child's safety, so here's how to avoid them:

- **Keep your infant in a rear-facing safety seat in the back of the car—preferably in the center—until she is at least 1-year-old and weighs at least 20 pounds.**
- **Never position a child safety seat or a booster seat in a seat with an active air bag next to it.**
- **When the safety seat is installed, make sure the lap part of the belt is tight enough so that the seat won't move more than an inch side to side or forward. To make it as tight as possible, use your knee and your full body weight to push the safety seat down into the seat cushion while you secure the belt tightly around it.**
- **Make sure the harness is properly positioned and snug against your child's body. The harness straps should be at or below the shoulders of infants facing backward. For children facing forward, the harness straps should usually be in the highest slots, at or above the child's shoulders. The harness (or chest clip) that holds the two straps together should be positioned at armpit level.**
- **If your car was manufactured before 1996, you may need to use a locking clip on the seat belt to make sure it stays secure in a crash. (Vehicles built after the 1995 model year are required to have seat belts that restrain a car seat without a locking clip.) New safety seats come with a locking clip. If you do not have one, they can be purchased from all safety seat manufacturers and some car manufacturers, including Ford, Nissan and Toyota.**
- **Use a top tether, an adjustable strap that's attached to the upper back of a forward-facing child seat and the rear shelf area of most cars. Used properly, the top tether helps limit movement of a child's head in a forward crash and thus reduces the risk of injury. The strap also adds stability to the safety seat. As of September 2000, all new cars are required to have tether attachments; some older models already have holes drilled behind the rear seat to hold the tether anchor. Read your vehicle owner's manual to find out how to attach the tether. Most car seats manufactured after September 1999 have tether straps, and some manufacturers offer tether kits for older models.**
- **When your child reaches 40 pounds, switch to a belt-positioning booster seat that's used with the adult lap and shoulder belt. Children should ride in a booster seat until they reach about 80 pounds and 58 inches in height. Don't allow a child age 12 or under to ride in a front seat.**
- **Replace your child's safety seat if it's been in a crash.**





Academy of Pediatrics' committee on injury and poison prevention, and a pediatrician at the University of Kentucky. Even if your young child has had swimming lessons, you shouldn't assume that they will reduce her chances of drowning, she notes. The AAP, which is not in favor of swimming lessons before age 4, recommends four-sided fencing, alarms and coverings for back-yard pools. To reduce your child's risk of drowning inside the home:

- ▶ **Keep toilet seats down and locked.**
- ▶ **Never leave a toddler or preschooler in the bathtub alone. Children shouldn't bathe unattended until they're at least age 6, and even then, they should be monitored.**
- ▶ **Empty all the water from a bathtub, wading pool, bucket or any container of water immediately after use. Never leave full buckets unattended.**

**3. Choking** Kids explore the world with their mouths, so it's natural for them to try to chew anything that's not bolted down. Their curiosity can yield tragic results: an estimated 185 infants and toddlers choke to death every year. "Anything that can fit inside an empty film canister is too small for young children to play with," Dr. Pollack says.

Hard, round foods—peanuts, popcorn, raw carrots and grapes—should also be off-limits for children under 6. When it comes to the ever-popular hot dog, pediatricians recommend not cutting it into the traditional cylinder-shaped slices. Cut lengthwise instead into tubelike slivers, so if your child accidentally swallows a whole piece, it won't lodge in her trachea and cut off her breathing. Minimize choking by:

- ▶ **Making your child eat at the table. That way, you'll see the exact size of the foods she puts in her mouth.**
- ▶ **Taking safety labels seriously. If a toy comes with the warning "not appropriate for children under 3," it's because there are small parts that could cause choking. Insist that your baby or toddler play only with age-appropriate toys and games.**
- ▶ **Storing toys made for older children separately. Tiny dice and doll shoes aren't a threat to a 6-year-old, but they're huge hazards to toddlers.**
- ▶ **Avoiding latex balloons. They pop easily, and children can choke on the broken pieces. Many experts recommend Mylar balloons as a safer alternative.**

**4. Poisoning** Childproof packaging for toxic substances used in and around the house has helped poisoning deaths decline 45 percent between 1974 and 1992. But each year, 80 kids ages 14 and under still die from this totally preventable injury. Another 1.1 million poisonings of children ages 5 and under that don't result in death are reported.

Why is this happening? First, children may be at increased risk of poisonings because they have different metabolic rates and they're less able to tolerate toxic chemicals. Second, to an inquisitive preschooler, colorful liquids and tiny tablets are fair game for taste-testing. In other words, everything from dish detergent and bleach to over-the-counter medicine and

gardening supplies could end up in your child's mouth unless you're vigilant about storage and supervision. "It can't be said enough: parents must keep medication, toiletries and household cleaners out of their children's reach," warns Harold Simon, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics at Emory University in Atlanta.

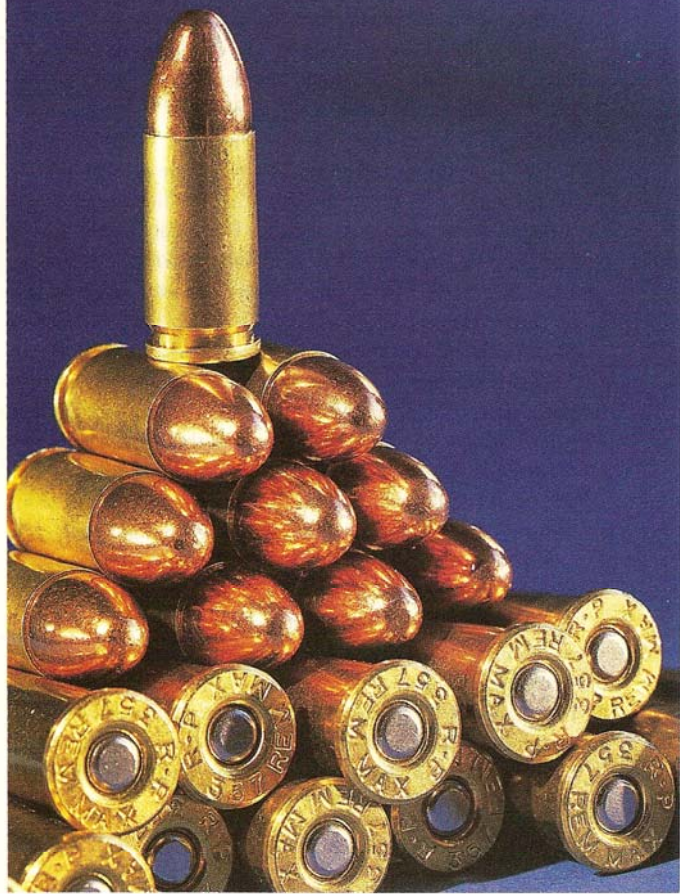
The consequences of ingesting such poisons are grim. Even if your child survives, household cleaners can burn the esophagus, causing permanent damage. "There can be so much scarring that a child would need constant medical intervention to be able to eat, drink or swallow," notes Dr. Pollack. To reduce the risk of poisoning:

- ▶ **Clean out your medicine cabinet. Check expiration dates and flush everything that's more than a year old. Keep only the prescription and over-the-counter drugs that are absolutely necessary.**
- ▶ **Be smart about storage. Household products—cleaners, chemicals and medicine—should be tightly capped and stored completely out of sight and reach.**
- ▶ **Use safety latches on any drawers and cupboards that are within your child's reach.**

**5. Suffocation** Fluffy pillows, fuzzy blankets and fleecy stuffed animals make for a super-cute crib. But they also make your baby's bed a death trap. According to the AAP, suffocation is the leading cause of unintentional injury death for children under age 1. Bedding is a prime culprit, because if a baby's face sinks into a pillow or gets trapped in soft material, she won't be able to breathe.

Danielle Laraque, M.D., associate professor of clinical pediatrics at Columbia University in New York, endorses the following AAP guidelines for crib safety: Infants should sleep on a firm mattress that fits snugly, with no space between it and the crib walls. Pillows, stuffed animals, bulky comforters and heavy blankets do not belong in a crib; a baby can smother under them. The crib sheet should be tight-fitting. If you use a blanket, make sure it is thin, place it no higher than your baby's chest and tuck it tightly around the crib mattress. Also, make sure your baby sleeps on his back—now considered the safest position. "If you place a baby on his stomach with his face down, you're putting him at risk for suffocation and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome," Dr. Laraque explains. Other ways to reduce the chances of suffocation:

▶ **Think twice about allowing your child to sleep in your bed. Although the family bed is a popular approach with some parents, the Consumer Product Safety Commission took a stand against parent and child bed sharing last year when a new study concluded that 515 children under the age of 2 died over an eight-year period as a result of sleeping in adult beds. More than half the children—394—were suffocated or strangled when they became entrapped between mattress and wall or mattress and headboard. The other 121—three-quarters of whom were under 3 months old—were smothered when an adult or sibling rolled on top of them. Mothers who nurse**



## Where to Find Help

For more information on protecting your child from injury, consult these organizations:

- **The National SAFE KIDS Campaign:**  
[www.safekids.org](http://www.safekids.org)
- **The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:** 800-424-9393 or 888-327-4236 or <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov>
- **The Department of Auto Safety:** 888-DASH-2-DOT
- **SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.:** 800-745-SAFE or [www.carseat.org](http://www.carseat.org)
- **The American Academy of Pediatrics:** [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

wrapping around the house. Kids will play with anything they can get their hands on—and plastic is irresistible.

**6. Firearm Injury** It's a disturbing national trend: children carrying guns to school and opening fire on their classmates. In the past three years, school shootings have taken the lives of more than a dozen youngsters in communities nationwide. Last February, the country was shocked when Michigan first-grader Kayla Rolland was killed by a 6-year-old classmate who brought a handgun from home and reportedly shot her in the chest.

School shootings may make national headlines, but these are just a few of the more than 142 children killed by guns each year—in part, experts say, because parents misjudge their child's ability to get hold of a gun and fire it. For every child who dies from an unintentional shooting, seven more are treated in hospital emergency rooms for gun-related injuries. It's no wonder when you consider the statistics. According to a recent survey conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles, and Rand Corp., a Santa Monica, Calif., think tank, 35 percent of the homes in the U.S. with children have at least one firearm, and 61 percent of the homes failed to store the firearms locked, unloaded and separate from ammunition.

Another study of parents' gun storage practices and their perception of their children's behavior around guns in suburban Atlanta found that 28 percent of the respondents kept a firearm in the home. Of those, three-quarters believed that their child could tell the difference between a toy gun and a real gun. And 23 percent of the gun owners thought their child could be trusted with a loaded gun. "Parents simply don't realize the potential risks of keeping a firearm in their home," says Dr. Simon, one of the researchers.

"Guns don't belong in homes that have children—period," notes Dr. Spivak. If you must own a gun, the AAP recommends that it be kept unloaded and in a locked place separate from the ammunition. Other steps to keep your child safe:

▶ **Don't let your child play with toy guns. Kids can't tell**

often prefer to have baby close by for middle-of-the-night feedings, but a safer alternative would be to keep a crib in your room. Or purchase one of the new "co-sleepers" that attaches to the bed like a sidecar and provides baby with a convenient but separate space.

▶ **Don't prop your baby up on a sofa or cushion—she could topple over and get her face stuck.** "Babies need a firm seat or firm surface," Dr. Pollock emphasizes.

▶ **Don't leave plastic shopping bags or dry cleaner's**

the difference between a toy and the real thing. Toy guns also send the message that firearms aren't dangerous.

▶ **Make sure other houses are safe too. Don't hesitate to ask the parents of your child's friends whether they keep a gun in their house.** "Firearms may be a touchy issue and people may be defensive," Dr. Simon says, "so broach the topic in the context of general safety."

**7. Falls** Falling down seems like a predictable part of an active childhood, but not when it involves a staircase, window or shopping cart. It's these types of falls that are the leading cause of nonfatal, unintentional injury, resulting in more than 2.5 million visits to emergency rooms. Infants are at greatest risk from falls associated with furniture, stairs and baby walkers, which account for more injuries than any other nursery product. In fact, each year nearly 13,000 young children are hurt from tipping over in a walker or falling down stairs in walkers; their injuries include concussions, broken facial bones and teeth. What's more, walkers put babies in harm's way for other injuries. "The walker raises them up a level, giving them access to things they wouldn't be able to reach if they were crawling," Dr. Spivak explains. As they scoot along the floor, they can pull tables, small appliances and other heavy objects on themselves.

Toddlers are more likely to suffer window-related falls, and older children typically experience playground-related falls. Make your child as fallproof as possible by:

▶ **Watching your baby when she's on furniture. It does not take long for infants to start moving and pushing against things with their feet. As soon as they can roll over, they will fall off any surface unless protected. Don't leave a baby alone on a changing table, bed, sofa or chair.**

▶ **Replacing a mobile walker with a stationary exerciser. They're just as much fun, without the danger.**

▶ **Blocking stairways, both top and bottom, with sturdy safety gates that your child can't dislodge.**

▶ **Installing window guards on all windows above the first floor. "Fifty percent of children who fall five stories or more die of serious injuries," says Dr. Laraque. "Screens don't protect kids because they can put their face against the screen and push themselves out the window."**

▶ **Keeping furniture away from windows. Your toddler may not be tall enough to reach the window on his own, but he can get to it by climbing on a nearby sofa or chair.**

▶ **Only visiting playgrounds that have protective surfacing. That includes a depth of at least 12 inches of wood chips, mulch, sand or pea gravel, or synthetic, energy-absorbing, rubberlike mats. Protective surfacing should extend a minimum of six feet in all directions around stationary play equipment. For swings, protective surfacing should extend at least twice the height of the suspending bar in both front and back. ■**

*Cynthia Hanson, a contributing editor to Chicago magazine, also writes for Ladies' Home Journal and Redbook.*