

This factsheet presents background information mainly for people working with children and families, and students undertaking projects.

More advice on preventing burns and scalds can be found in capt's leaflet *How safe is your child from a serious fall?* written for parents and carers. A sample of this leaflet can be downloaded from capt's website www.capt.org.uk, where you can also find out how to purchase bulk supplies.

Child Accident Prevention Trust publishes a range of resources for parents, carers and older children, containing comprehensive safety advice. A complete list of these resources – leaflets, booklets, posters, guides, etc – can be found at www.capt.org.uk together with details of how to obtain them.

How many children are injured after a fall in the home?

Falls are the most common cause of accidental injury to children of all ages. In 2002 in the UK:

- falls in the home and garden accounted for nearly half of all home accidental injuries
- an estimated 390,800 children under 15 were taken to hospital with injuries resulting from a fall at home
- almost sixty per cent of children who went to hospital after falling at home were under five years old
- 56 per cent of under fives injured after falling at home were boys

Deaths and severe injuries are often associated with a fall from a high window or balcony or down stairs. Falls can also result in serious injury if the surface the child hits is hard - such as concrete or paving stones.

How can falls be prevented?

Falls can be difficult to predict and therefore to prevent. Many are the result of young children's inexperience or unsteadiness. There are measures that can be put in place to reduce the risk of falls happening or to reduce the severity of injuries. Falls relate closely to the age and stage of physical development of a child. It is important to know what a child is able to do in order to prevent falls.

New babies

Babies are able to roll, kick and wriggle. This means babies can roll off furniture such as beds, changing tables or sofas. Babies should be changed on the floor to reduce the risk, and not left unattended on any high surface.

Babies have also been hurt falling from highchairs, prams and pushchairs. A five point harness should always be used. Where there is only a three point harness it needs to be tightly secured around the baby's waist.

Bouncing cradles and baby car seats can fall if they are placed on tables or other raised surfaces. Babies will kick and fidget and these movements can cause the cradle or seat to move.

First steps

As babies begin to learn to walk they are very unsteady and so are vulnerable to falls on the same level (trips and stumbles) and from stairs. They often stumble or lose their balance and can fall on to furniture such as low tables or fireplaces. At this stage it is important to make sure there are no sharp edges that could cause injuries when they fall. Soft corners put on to table corners and fireplace hearths may reduce the risk of injury.

Fireguards are important to prevent babies falling on to hot fires. Safety gates should also be used at the top and bottom of stairs. At the top of stairs it is better not to put safety gates and barriers directly on the top step to reduce the risk of an adult or older child who may trip on the bottom rail of the gate or climb over the barrier falling down the stairs. The gate or barrier may be better placed across the child's bedroom to create a secure area as there can be other hazards, such as harmful bathroom chemicals, accessible from the landing.

It is also important to keep floors clear of toys and other clutter as babies learn to walk. They do not watch where they are putting their feet and so can easily trip.

Toddlers

Safety gates should be used until children are about two years old, although older toddlers cannot be relied upon to use stairs safely. It is important to teach young children how to use stairs safely and to supervise them while they learn. Children should be taught never to play on steps or stairs.

Accidents can happen when babies and young children fall through or over banisters or balconies. Horizontal railings or gaps of 6.5 cm or more between vertical railings should be covered with boards or safety netting.

Windows should be fitted with safety locks to restrict opening to less than 6.5 cm as babies and young children could be seriously injured or killed in a fall from a high window.

Children can also be injured if they fall into windows or glass doors. Safety glass or film should be used for any doors or windows at floor level.

Older children

As children get older they become less at risk of falling in the home, but accidents do still happen. Children will run in the house and garden but awareness of the dangers and some basic safety measures can help reduce the risk of serious injury.

As the severity of injury relates to the height from which a child falls, children should be taught not to climb on to roofs or other high areas such as sheds, fences or trees. Particular care should be taken in houses or flats with balconies. There should be a barrier of at least 110 cm around the edge and no furniture that children could climb on. As children get older they should be taught about the dangers of falling from balconies so that they understand the need to be careful.

Running and playing in the garden is good for children's health and fitness but active play increases the risk of accidents happening. All children fall, but children should not be put at risk of serious injury. Children are more likely to be badly hurt if they fall on a hard surface such as paving stones or concrete. Making sure paving stones are level and have no cracks can help to reduce the risk of children tripping. Grass or special impact absorbing surfaces such as bark chips are the safest option when children are running around.

Further information

The statistics used in this factsheet are drawn from a number of sources. The government's Home and Leisure Accident Surveillance System that collected information throughout the UK from 1978 was closed down in May 2003. The enquiry service will be maintained for 5 years. Enquiries should be directed to Information Centre, Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Edgbaston Park, 353 Bristol Road, Birmingham B5 7ST, email: infocentre@rospa.com, fax: 0121 248 2001, tel: 0121 248 2066.

Copies of the Annual Reports of the Home and Leisure Accident Surveillance System can be downloaded from <http://www.ndad.nationalarchives.gov.uk/CRDA/58/DD/1/detail.html>. The reports for 1998 – 2002 inclusive can be downloaded from <http://www.hassandlass.org.uk/query/reports.htm>. Visit www.hassandlass.org.uk to interrogate the database for 2000-2002 yourself.

Factsheets with more detailed information on a variety of accident topics can be found on the Child Accident Prevention Trust website, www.capt.org.uk or can be provided by post on receipt of a stamped address envelope and a list of the subjects you require.

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