

CHILDPROOFING

Not too long ago, I heard a tired mother say that it felt like her job was to simply keep her toddler alive until he got old enough to stop trying to dangle from the ceiling. Yes, that about sums it up. When you have an infant or a toddler at home, every walking moment can be spent trying to keep him or her safe. That alone is a full-time job!

Childproofing is an ongoing process. It would be nice if we could buy a few outlet covers, install a few gates, put safety locks on the cabinets, put the poisons on the top shelf and then relax, but parenthood is not that simple. You cannot let your guard down. You cannot forget to close the gate at the top of the stairs, you cannot forget that putting your change down on the coffee table creates a choking hazard, and you cannot talk on the phone while your baby is in the bathtub or get too comfortable while you are watching your kids in the swimming pool.

Accidents are the leading cause of childhood death in this country. Automobile accidents, fires, and drowning are the top three (depending on the study, these three could be in any order), followed by suffocation, falls, poisoning, bicycle accidents, and firearms. The number of children “saved” by doctors every year is not even in the same ballpark as the number of these accidental deaths that could have been prevented.

Parents often ask me for childproofing tips, and I usually list four things: gate off the entire kitchen, put a gate across your toddler’s room door, get a “fire plan” for your home, and constantly scan the home for choking hazards. Everyone knows to put gates at the top and the bottom of the staircases, and everyone knows to use outlet covers, but these four things are often either overlooked or purposefully discarded as unnecessary. Let’s briefly take a look at each one.

The kitchen is a dangerous place for an active toddler, and there is really no good way to supervise a child while you are cooking. You simply cannot do both safely. About once a month I see children who get burned in kitchens from splattered liquids, hot pans, or stovetops. Then there are the knives. Then there are the plastic bags. Then there are the poisons. You get the picture. Even open floor plans can be gated off with fences. Let’s face it, when you have young children, your home is not going to be “beautiful”, so go ahead and embrace the idea of having fences and gates.

The whole idea of gating off a toddler’s room seems ridiculous to some, but do you really want your preschooler walking around the house in the middle of the night? My mother found me sitting in the dryer eating crackers early one morning when I was about 2 years old. The crackers were originally in a cabinet over the stove, and I apparently had to do a pull-up to get them down. It is a wonder I survived my childhood!

What do I mean about a “fire plan”? Aside from having working smoke detectors and fire extinguishers, I think it is a good idea for everyone to think about how they are going

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to get their children out of a burning house. What are your escape routes? Do you need a rope ladder in your bedroom? Hopefully, you will never need to use your plan.

Choking hazards really worry me, because you can have a new hazards coming into the house every day without you even realizing it. It could be a little driveway gravel on your shoes or a button that pops off of your shirt. You have to be constantly on the look-out for the little things that appear on your floors (right at eye-level for a crawling baby), because these things can easily plug up a baby's airway in an instant.

Of course, there is more to being safety-conscious than childproofing. All of the childproofing in the world is no substitute for constant, close supervision. It is so tempting to try to supervise an active toddler from a seated position, but that rarely works well. Young children are especially good at finding little things on the ground, and in order to keep things out of their mouths you have to grab whatever it is quickly, right then and there. In general, toddlers are also good at falling, and in order to keep that from happening you have to be right there at their sides.

As if it was not hard enough, childproofing becomes even more complicated when an older sibling is thrown into the equation. Picture a baby crawling around while her big brother is sitting on the floor and playing with his little plastic blocks (some of which are about an inch in diameter), or while her big sister is playing with her little dolls. Where do you think she is going to put the little block when she finds it? Where do you think she is going to put the doll's shoe when she picks it up? You guessed it: right in her mouth. We cannot expect a preschool-age sibling to be aware of these possibilities, no matter how many times you may have warned them. There is no substitute for constant supervision.

A toddler's job is to explore and discover how everything works. It may look like random chaos, but every time a toddler runs around, picks something up, throws something, or pulls the dog's tail, he or she is learning more about the world. Unfortunately, anyone who has ever tried to keep up with a toddler knows it takes more energy than most adults have, but you have to try to keep up. Young children are often fearless and truly unaware of the possibility of getting hurt, so it is up to us to make their world as safe as possible.