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Oregon's Children



Letters for parents of infants and toddlers: Letter 3

Oregon's Children



Contrary to usual excuses, most accidents are not accidents. They are controllable events. Only when parents understand the limitations of children to protect themselves from danger can needless pain, suffering, disfigurement, and death be avoided. Some parents raise their children without serious accidents and credit their good fortune to "luck." Don't believe it. They probably practice safety habits that favor the odds of safety for themselves and their children. Safe conditions and reasonable safety discipline at the right time decreases their chance of injury.

This is easier said than done. Child development specialists insist that normal child development requires freedom. But running, jumping, playing, and satisfying curiosity can be risky activities.

Accident prevention and carefree childhood is possible if you understand the nature of children. They barely understand the meaning of danger by age two. Even at age 10 they cannot be expected to accurately anticipate all dangers. Consider how many adults visit emergency rooms because they fail to protect themselves.

In addition, infant and toddler learning is based on imitating the actions of parents. They see you strike matches, cut across streets, use toxic chemicals, slice pickles with a large knife, or poke the fireplace. They imitate you with no thought of danger. Toddlers might grab a chair to turn on the range and cook or pour gasoline in a toy lawnmower. They cannot anticipate what might happen while exploring objects or copying your actions.

What can a parent do? Over-restriction can damage a developing child as much as underprotection. Underprotection exposes children to risky dangers they cannot handle. Safety is a habit of controlling or eliminating danger. While infants and toddlers busily explore their world, homes need to be "kid proofed." A safe childhood and happier parenthood are more likely when parents continuously protect, discipline, teach, and demonstrate safety habits

Children learn safety three ways:

By experience. Falls, bumps, bruises, and scratches will never be completely eliminated. It's an unpleasant way to learn caution and safety. Some children do not survive the lesson. But without the experiences they are unprepared for the world beyond home.

By instruction. If a child is scratched while mishandling a kitty, explain why kitty scratched and how to play carefully. First comfort the child when hurt, then explain why it happened, and how it can be prevented.

By example. If parents are careless crossing the streets or leave objects to trip over, children are likely to do the same. Good safety actions will be copied more often than obedience to all your "don'ts," "quits," and "carefuls."

This places heavy responsibility on parents. But consider how you protect yourself from accidents. If something seems dangerous, you'll probably determine whether it is threatening to your well-being. If so, you'll eliminate the danger. Infants and toddlers are not yet old enough for that kind of reasoning so you must do it for them.

Ground Rules for Babies

It seems difficult for tiny infants to get into trouble but some manage it. After three months baby's development is rapid. Given freedom to exercise and strengthen their muscles they'll be trying new things every few days. To safeguard them parents must practice three basic rules:

Never underestimate baby's rapid development. As infants change their power each day they expose themselves to safety hazards. It's never safe to leave them alone on the changing

table or any high surfaces such as a bed or davenport. The moment you look away or leave them unattended they may roll over for the first time.

Always be prepared for the unexpected. Even with a good idea of what is expected of infants at certain ages you cannot be certain yours will stay within those expectations. Babies start out helpless but in several months they are sitting, crawling, pulling themselves up, and grabbing and tasting whatever is within grasp. With each new accomplishment their potential for exploration and danger increases.

Never leave babies alone outside the crib or playpen when they're awake. Look in on baby while in the crib or playpen. Playpens are a wonderful invention—they change a baby's environment and give you rest from constant supervision. You can do routine chores, answer the door, or prepare meals. Place the playpen near where you are so baby can see you and talk with you.

You Can Expect

It's always fun and surprising when creepers and crawlers enter the age of great curiosity. Parents are usually casual about things lying about the home but baby finds them very interesting.

For a few years your home may look slightly barren as breakables and treasured objects are put away and safe playthings are within reach. Don't forget that what is "up" changes shortly as babies pull themselves up on tables and arrange chairs for better climbing and looking. Be glad when babies are filling their heads with important discoveries but be sure to control what you want them to discover.

Infants up to 6 months. Even with tiny babies there's no substitute for being watchful. Since they're always wiggling and squirming you'll form a habit of never leaving them alone on a high surface. Have everything with you when changing or bathing so you won't have to run for diapers or towels. When they're sleeping remove pillows, toys, and extra blankets from the crib. These can fall over a baby's face and prevent breathing. Keep baby in and other children and pets out of the crib by always raising and latching the crib sides. Never leave infants or toddlers in the house or car alone or in the care of children under the age of 12.

Infants 6 months to 1 year. By now your little explorer has mastered a good deal of muscular and visual ability. Watch for swallowable things: buttons, beads, and detachable toy parts. They'll find and taste objects like balls of lint, scraps of plastic wrap, pins, matches, or tiny sticks. Be alert to dangling appliance cords when baby is out of the playpen. Cover electrical outlets with safety plugs available at the variety store. Guard heating registers and avoid electrical space heaters. Fireplaces are interesting before baby has any realization of the danger of getting into them. Never leave babies alone in the bathtub. If you must leave, wrap baby in a towel and take with you. Even small amounts of water can drown babies.

If baby has a forbidden object, trade it matter-of-factly for a safe toy. Don't be afraid to remove baby from threatening situations. In spite of screams you are the protector. If you have work to do, safely strap baby into a high chair and place the chair away from the table or cooking surfaces so all objects are out of reach.

Toddlers from 1 to 3 years. Toddlers are super snoopers but let them do this under your supervision. They'll want to conquer stairways so install a fence to prevent unsupervised experiments resulting in bad falls. On stairways be ready to catch them. They forget where they are or turn around dangerously close to the edge. Stay in back of a toddler going up the stairs, in front going down.

They now know how to turn door knobs. Unlocked basement or outside doors may result in tumbles or a quick trip down the street. Make sure windows are locked and screens secure. More than one toddler has made a tragic exit through a window.

Prevention is the key to safety at this age. Infants and toddlers will test everything within reach so parents must make reachables as safe as possible.

Check Danger Zones

Your home is not a big booby trap but a quick check of danger spots makes life more trouble-free.

Kitchen: Make this room off-limits for infants and toddlers unless you are there. Small fingers turn on burners, touch hot pots, or pull hot food over themselves. Make a habit of turning all pot handles toward the center of the range.

Babies usually learn very early that "hot hurts." Teach them that appliances and utensils are for adults only. Avoid leaving plastic bags or wrappings within reach. They stick to the throat or cling to the face and prevent breathing. Clean up spills because toddlers do a lot of jogging around the house before they walk steadily.

Bedroom: It's a room often associated with parent's privacy so things are considered safe there. Toddlers want to look around there too. Whisk away the cosmetics, nail files, polish remover, sewing kits, needles, pins, or coins. Purses stored there may contain hazardous items.

Bathrooms: They have charm for toddlers. It's best not to leave children under 3 in this room unattended. Keep your medicine chest out of reach or locked. Remove razor blades, creams, lotions, and powders after you use them. Be cautious with baby aspirin or cough syrup. They are as appealing as candy. If babies know it's for them, they are apt to take some.

Outdoors: "I just saw him a minute ago," are famous last words when accidents occur. Minutes tick by faster than you realize. Do not depend on toddlers to observe boundaries. They're tempted by children across the street or to follow a dog. Always check the driveway for children before leaving in a car. Toddlers and small children are too short to show up in a rear view mirror. They spontaneously dart into cross walks or out from behind parked cars. Keep them away from streets and driveways—constantly talk with them about safety around automobiles.

Garages and storage sheds. They are fascinating places but definitely off-limits. Garage doors and hanging equipment are hazardous playthings. Keep play away from gas cans, paint buckets, rusty nails, lawn and garden equipment, and sharp pointed tools. Close garage doors to keep out all children. You are responsible even if curious neighbor children are hurt in your garage.

Poison Prevention

Adults handle unknown substances with caution but babies blunder into trouble with them. Crawlers reach, touch, and put things into their mouths. Remove products that can cause accidental poisonings from the floor or under sinks: soaps, detergents, and household cleansers. Also make sure that cosmetics, nail polish, perfumes, and hair sprays are out of reach. Toddlers normally cruise about checking night-stands, low

tables, tub ledges, counter tops, tables, and chairs.

At age 3, and sometimes before, mobility and climbing capabilities reach a peak. High shelves and medicine cabinets become challenging places to explore. Poison prevention is a matter of using and storing medicines and household products higher as toddler's range of activity increases. However, many poisoning incidents take place while the product is in use. Some suggestions for poison prevention may help you be one step ahead of your baby:

- Keep household products in their original containers. Swallowing household chemicals often takes place when users put products into cups, bowls, glasses, pop bottles, or containers associated with food. Toddlers assume it's something to eat or drink.
- Keep the product in sight while in use. It tempts toddlers to sample contents if you leave a product unattended while you answer the doorbell or phone. Remember to close the dishwasher after placing detergent in the dispenser.
- Discard empty hazardous product containers or cans in tight receptacles. Make it impossible for toddler to retrieve the items to use for toys or sample leftover contents.
- Store all drugs and other medicines including vitamins and aspirin out of reach. Avoid taking medicine in front of infants and toddlers or teaching them that medicine and vitamins are candy. Sometimes they get the idea that medicine will cure anything. A toddler, amidst tears from a hurt finger, wailed, "Me bitamin." Store medicines in the original containers and check dosage each time you use it.
- In addition to your doctor's phone number, have the Poison Control Center number posted on your phone. It is free and available 24 hours a day. Call 1-800-452-7165 from anywhere in Oregon.

One worry many new parents have is the possibility of accidents, illness, or choking. Ask your baby's doctor what to do in emergencies. Doctors can suggest emergency supplies to have on hand. They will also tell you what to do if a toddler is choking, burned, bleeding, or has eye or severe head injuries. Being alert and prepared are your best defenses against childhood accidental injuries.

Dear Parent: As you look at your baby the last thing you imagine is needless injury or harm. Remember that babies are completely dependent on others to keep them safe from accidents or injury. Accidents occur because things are available to a child that should not be. Accidents cause guilt and heartache for parents and pain for children. This letter reminds you about casual habits that are hazardous when small children imitate you while innocently discovering the world.

Sincerely,

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