Safety Article

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MEASURES TO TAKE TO PREVENT CHILDHOOD FALLS

The main cause of non-fatal injuries to children under age 19 is falls. The type of injury that a child can have from a fall depends on how far he falls, and the type of surface he falls on. Injuries that are caused by falls include broken bones, head injuries, bruises, or cuts. Children can also damage organs and structures inside their body. Most falls happen in the home, so it is important to keep your home safe for children.

What may cause falls among infants and toddlers?

- **Infants have a higher risk of falling from furniture, stairs and baby walkers.** Infants who are left on changing tables, beds, or sofas can roll off. Infants can roll off of furniture even if they do not know how to roll over yet. Children who are learning to crawl or walk may fall down stairs. Baby walkers are becoming less common for good reasons. Walkers have potential to tip over and cause injury. Some parents may believe that placing a child in a baby walker will help them learn to walk and keep them safe, but walkers may actually delay a child's ability to walk.

- **Toddlers have a higher risk of falling from windows, furniture, and playgrounds.**
  - Toddlers may climb up on dresser drawers and book shelves and fall off. These types of furniture can also fall on them as they are climbing. Children may also climb furniture to reach a window and then fall out of the window.
  - Children under the age of five are also at risk of falling from shopping carts. Children can fall off the cart while riding in, or on the outside of the cart.
  - Children under the age of five are also more likely to be hurt on home playgrounds such as backyard play sets. Very few home playgrounds have safe surfaces under them. Safe surfaces can protect children from hard falls and serious injuries. Toddlers are also at risk of falling from playground equipment that is made for older children.

What can I do to help prevent my infant or toddler from falling?

- **Do not use baby walkers on wheels.** The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that baby walkers not be used at all. There are activity centers you can buy that are like baby walkers, but do not have wheels. They allow children to bounce and rotate around while staying in place. These activity centers are safer because they prevent your child from moving around and falling down stairs.
- **Do not leave your infant alone on beds, changing tables, other tables, sofas, or cribs that have the guardrails down.** Use safety belts on changing tables and put crib guardrails up while your infant is in the crib. Move cribs and other furniture away from windows to prevent children from climbing on them to reach the window.
- **When you take your child to a public or park playground, choose the playground that is right for your child's age**. Some public playgrounds have separate play areas for smaller children and older children. At home, make sure you have the right material under backyard play sets. Put wood chips, mulch, or shredded rubber under equipment that is up to seven feet high. Make sure the material is at least nine inches deep. You

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may also use a nine-inch layer of sand or pea gravel for equipment that is up to five feet high. The surface materials should be placed at least six feet in all directions from the play equipment. Place surface material in the front and back of swings at a distance of twice the height of the suspending (top) swing bar.

• Use fitted safety gates at the top and bottom of stairs. Keep the gates closed and locked in place at all times.

• Place window guards on windows that are not emergency exits. You can buy window guards at hardware stores. If you keep a window open during the summer months, make sure your child cannot reach the window. Do not think that a screen will stop your child from falling out a window.

What may cause falls among older children?

Older children are at risk of falling from playground equipment. Most injuries that occur at playgrounds are caused by falls. Injuries on school playgrounds often occur because the children are not being watched by an adult. Older children are also at risk of falling from windows, roofs, and balconies. These falls happen more often in the summer months because people keep their windows open. Children are also more likely to play on fire escapes, roofs, and balconies during the summer months.

What can I do to help prevent my older child from falling?

• **Before allowing your child to play on the playground, make sure that the equipment is safe.** Avoid playground areas that have asphalt, concrete, grass, and soil under the equipment. Good surface materials include shredded rubber, hardwood fiber mulch or chips, and fine sand. The surface materials should be 12 inches deep and should extend six feet around the equipment. Watch your child at all times. Make sure that you can see and hear your child while he plays. Do not allow children to push, shove, crowd each other, or use the equipment in ways that are not safe.

• **Watch children at all times, especially if you have windows open.** Place locks on your windows that prevent them from opening more than four inches. If you have double-hung windows, open them from the top only. Place window guards on windows that are above the first floor. Do not allow your child to play on fire escapes, roofs, and balconies. This is especially important if they have railings with vertical bars, and openings that are greater than four inches. Most children younger than six years can fit through openings that are six inches wide. Do not place furniture near windows or balconies.

Where can I find more information?

• American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org
• National SAFE KIDS Campaign: www.safekids.org