

The Big Five

Summer Safety: What Every Parent Should Know

By Alan Nager, M.D.

"I just ran in to get the phone. I was just out of the room for a couple of minutes. I never imagined this could happen..."

I often hear such laments from parents pacing the Emergency Department at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, waiting for news of their child. Most are well meaning, doing their best to keep their children safe. But kids face so many hazards. Injury remains the leading cause of death for children under age 14, more than all diseases combined, and is a significant cause of disability.

I'm a doctor in the busiest pediatric Emergency Department in the city. We see more than 62,000 kids each year, and summer is our busiest time as kids trade their school books for boogie boards and skateboards. In fact, we call May through September "trauma season," with dozens more bone fractures each day than we see in winter. The rate of traumatic brain injuries, lacerations and near drownings also increases. Fortunately, most injuries are preventable with proper supervision, precautions and safety gear.

As a parent of two children, I know that kids don't always like to wear helmets, sit in a booster seat or follow playground safety rules. It's up to you to develop rules, instruct your child, be a role model and set the necessary boundaries.

Your children will also be less prone to injury if you give them an active role in staying safe. For example, ask your child, "What do you think would happen if you played here or if you didn't wear a helmet?" He will feel as though he is helping invent the rules, and therefore will follow them more closely.

Following are the top five hidden dangers that I want every parent to understand:

1. Pools and Spas

Almost 1,000 children die each year from drowning. Another 4,000 are hospitalized, and 16,000 are treated in emergency departments. A child can become submerged in 10 seconds and die in the time it takes to answer a phone, find a towel or get a snack. Drowning is a quiet killer. Your child will

not start flailing – he'll just go under.

- Having a fence is not enough. Never leave children unsupervised near water, not even for one second.

2. Balconies and Windows

Furniture is enticing play equipment. A lot of kids fall out of second-story windows because they jump on a bed or climb on a dresser near an open window. Others fall from balcony ledges. They often die or suffer permanent brain damage.

- Never let children play near open windows or on balconies.
- Window screens do not always prevent falls.
- Keep furniture away from windows.

3. A Cup of Soup

Sounds harmless, but we see many children with moderate to severe burns from reaching for a cup of soup heated in the microwave. Parents leave the soup on the countertop, where a child can reach it in the time it takes for a parent to get a spoon.

- Always place hot items completely out of the reach of children.

4. Monkey Bars

They are part of every playground, but we see about half a dozen elbow injuries per week from falls from this dangerous play equipment, especially in the summer months. These injuries can be severe, with 75 percent requiring pins.

- Make sure children play on age-appropriate equipment. Two-year-olds do not belong on monkey bars.
- Make sure the material under the equipment can absorb shock: Wood chips or sand are the safest.

5. Visiting Grandparents

Summer is a great time to visit relatives and friends, but take extra precautions. We see a lot of kids who were visiting their grandparents and found high blood pressure pills in a bowl in the bedroom or bathroom. More than 1.2 million children under 5 are poisoned each year.

- If staying with relatives or friends, ensure that the house has proper safety devices – including a pool fence – and that potentially harmful items such as medications, alcohol and firearms are locked out of reach of children.

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