

BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY

Nine steps to better safety for your little one

BY CHARU BAHRI

Gulnar Joshi, hands-on mum of an infant and a six-year-old, makes it a point to schedule her work life around the needs of her boys. She plans to install a stair-gate and put up a little barrier at the entrance of the family room on the first floor, before her newborn begins crawling around. “Parental vigilance is the key to keeping little ones safe. Still, it takes only a few seconds of oversight for an accident to occur,” she says.

Experts would give Gulnar’s plans the thumbs-up. According to Dr Deepak Ugra, president, Indian Academy of Paediatrics, the rate of

accidents caused by the incorrect use of baby products—bathing accessories, strollers, play pens and cribs—is fairly high in India. A lack of awareness and unintentional carelessness seem to be the key reason for this sorry state of affairs. As a study conducted at the Kalawati Saran Children’s Hospital and Lady Hardinge Medical College (New Delhi) and the Hospital for Women & Sydney Children’s Hospital (Australia) showed, a fall is the most common injury sustained by children. In spite of that, an overwhelming majority of the two hundred parents interviewed for the study had not made any provision for

restraint at the top and bottom of the staircase in their homes.

When it comes to your precious tiny tot, it's better to be safe than sorry. A little effort can go a long way in creating a safer home environment and having a healthier baby, not to mention guaranteeing your peace of mind.

Baby-proof your home

Entrepreneur and mother Ashwini Pathare shares some must-dos related to baby-proofing a home. "Cover low-lying plug-points with dummy plugs. Don't leave sharp objects like knives or scissors lying around—keep them, as well as other risky objects like medication and tiny things that can be swallowed, under lock and key. Put away low tables with sharp corners, lock the front door as well as doors leading to bathrooms and balconies, and install a stair-gate if you have a staircase in your home." Moreover, keep a close watch on how your tiny tot reacts to these measures. If the situation demands, you may have to improvise on these methods like Pathare did when she found her clever toddler pulling out the dummy covers from the sockets! "We had to fill the grooves of the plugs and then tape the switches to ensure the measure was foolproof," she adds.

Practise good hygiene

Vini Gupta, a mother and child development professional

working with the early education services division of ICF International, has a strict rule in place for her maids: "Wash your hands as soon as you enter the house and again before you prepare or handle the baby's food." Gupta also has no qualms about asking her guests to wash their hands before playing with her young one! Dr Nalini Shenoy, senior consultant, Department of Paediatrics, Fortis Hospitals, Bangalore, cites frequent hand-washing as a must for parents as it prevents the transfer of germs to an infant. She also suggests keeping a spray sanitizer handy for when you are outdoors. For the same reason—germs—she discourages the use of a pacifier.

Architect mom Juhi Santani recommends following standard practices relating to hygiene, if like her, you need to use a breast pump. "Clean and sterilize every plastic part of the machine, that is, the bottles, suction pipes, suction cups, and so on, before use," she cautions.

Use walkers safely

In Dr Ugra's opinion, walkers or strollers are the most misused baby accessory in India. "Mothers," he observes, "put their baby in the stroller while they are doing other chores. This leads to all sort of accidents—a baby left unattended in a stroller can fall out if it topples or bang against a wall if it moves. I strongly discourage this most



ALEXANDER KALINA/ISTOCK

improper use of strollers." A playpen or mat on the floor within sight, is a safer option, and in any case it's best not to leave an infant unsupervised.

Baby walkers are an unnecessary item. Children will learn how to walk without any help. Walkers, by enabling them to move at speed before they are ready, lead to accidents as they steer around uncontrollably. It is like handing a car to a teenager before he has the skills. Strollers and prams with a wider wheel base are more stable. Essentially, it should not tip backwards when you press down lightly on the handles. The leg openings should be the right size, not large enough to allow an infant to slip through, and the push bar should be at an appropriate height (your waist level or slightly lower) to allow you to steer the stroller in a straight line when pushing with one hand.

Don't cuddle your child to sleep

Experts strongly discourage parents from sleeping in the same bed as their infants, as a child can easily suffocate to death beneath large blankets or pillows, or if a parent rolls over it while asleep. In fact, considering that babies spend most of their time sleeping, a crib is by and large the most important baby product you should invest in.

However, don't assume that all cribs are equally safe and well constructed. Dr Shenoy, who frequently treats babies who have fallen out of their cots, recommends that the slats of the crib should not be too far apart, to protect

babies from falling out and toddlers from trapping their heads between the slats. Cribs having side rails that can be lowered should have foolproof locking devices to prevent older infants from releasing them. Side rails that lower should be at least nine inches above the mattress support, and the height of the side rail must be tall enough to prevent toddlers from trying to climb over. "And once an infant has started crawling, never leave it unattended in the crib," she advises.

Gupta also suggests using a crib that has padded sides, a firm mattress that fits snugly and no toys hanging over it by strings. To prevent your baby from suffocating while asleep in the crib, do not smother it with blankets, pillows, comforters or soft toys. Santani prefers dressing her child warmly for bed and putting him to sleep on his back, thus avoiding the use of a blanket altogether when the climate permits. She also cautions—do not place the crib near a window where an infant can get tangled in the cords of curtains or blinds.

Bathe safe

"Baby baths are tricky to use," says Santani, "because they tend to be slippery whereas babies need support to hold them in an upright position." Santani prefers using the more stable bathing chair which may be safely used in an adult bath. "The age-old Indian tradition of the ayah or mother or granny bathing the child on the floor, by putting it in the lap, is very safe. It works well in the bathroom, and if the bathroom is too

cold, you could move to a warmer location,” suggests Dr Ashutosh Jindal, senior consultant, Paediatrics and Neonatology, Fortis Escorts Hospital, Jaipur. Even if you decide to use a bath tub, Dr Ugra suggests never using it to store water in the bathroom because if the bathroom door is mistakenly left open, a toddler may crawl in, identify the tub as his or her toy, climb into it unattended and drown. Buckets of water are also a drowning risk. Toddlers have drowned in very shallow water. Store them empty and turned upside down. If there is a water shortage, look for alternative storage methods, like loft tanks or tightly covered drums. Keep bathrooms and kitchens shut or inaccessible in any case, because these rooms have a greater scope of accidents—fire, hot taps, hot pans,



cleaning products, and so on.

Another aspect related to safe bathing is selecting appropriate cleaning products. Dr Shenoy suggests using unscented mild baby soap to bathe the infant and to gently clean the umbilical cord stump with spirit after the baby's bath. If the baby develops cradle cap, that is, crusty flakes on the scalp occurring because of sebaceous secretions, she suggests using an organic baby shampoo to clear it up.

Select child-friendly toys

Dr Surender Kumar Yachha, professor and head, Department of Paediatric Gastroenterology, Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Lucknow, treats many child victims of unfortunate accidents that could have easily been prevented. “The moment a toddler sees a small object lying on the ground, it will crawl to pick it and instantly put it in its mouth. This is the natural reflex of a small child. It may be a battery or a button or a coin – each is equally interesting to a child,” he observes.

So, he recommends that you keep the floors of your home clean and free of clutter. Do not store cleaning solutions in the corner of a bathroom or kitchen where they may be picked up by a child. Also, avoid giving your child collapsible balloons (balloons that pop) to play with, or toys with small parts that can break or be chewed off by a teething infant. Toys for tiny tots should be unbreakable, large in size, with concealed battery openings and with no sharp edges or

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strings attached. Preferably buy soft toys painted with lead-free or organic paint. Most importantly, do not delay consulting a doctor if your child has difficulty swallowing or is irritable for no apparent reason.

Travel safe

Pathare swears by child safety car seats, which she counts as the only infallible means to ensure the safety of a child when you're on the road. Explaining why, she says, “It is a normal tendency to reach out to the dashboard for support when the vehicle stops abruptly. This natural response leaves a child seated in your lap bereft of support and prone to fall forward.” Of course, if it is to be of any use, a car seat must fit the child it is intended for and should ideally be in the back seat.

Use a playpen safely

According to Dr Jindal, playpens are not easily available in India and hence, the overall experience regarding their use is rather limited. Even so, although he agrees that playpens are gaining popularity because they allow parents to get on with other jobs knowing that their infants can't crawl too far, he cautions parents to never leave a child

unattended in an enclosed playpen for an extended duration of time. “If you use a mesh playpen, ensure that its holes are no larger than a quarter-inch to keep small fingers from getting caught and the sides are at least 20 inches high. Ideally, choose a child-friendly playpen with protective padding covering the rails and locks that are out of the baby's reach,” he adds.

Drawing on her experience, Pathare suggests rotating the toys given to the child to play within the pen, as otherwise, children tend to get cranky and lose interest in the play area.

Install a child monitoring system

If you need to leave your baby with a nanny for extended periods of time, Santani recommends installing a child monitoring system, that is, a kind of wireless video surveillance device that allows you to look into your home when you are outdoors. That way, you can visually check on how your baby is doing and whether the babysitter is attending to it well in your absence. Even if the child is old enough to talk, this is a good idea, because children have been known to be abused or threatened by temporary care givers. ■

It was a woman's first time on a plane. She boarded the aircraft and found herself a window seat in a non-smoking area. After she had settled in, a man came over and insisted that she was in his seat. She ignored him but he continued to hover over her, so she told him to go away. “Ok,” replied the man, “if that's the way you want it, you fly the plane.”

Laughter Is The Best Medicine