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Your Health

Falling TVs: A Growing Threat For Young Kids

by Patti Neighmond

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Morning Edition, May 4, 2009 · Your drawers and medicine cabinets may be child-proofed, but what about your TV? As it turns out, unhealthy messages on TV may not be as dangerous as the TV itself, if it's perched on a high dresser or desk.

Researchers at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, who analyzed federal data on injuries estimate that as many as 14,700 children are injured at home every year by falling TVs and other heavy furniture.

A Tragic Incident

Shawn Stevenson and his wife, Charlene, of Plain City, Ohio, can only piece together what happened at their house one day last year. Stevenson was at work and in a meeting when he received a call from his wife. Their 2 1/2 -year-old son, Michael, had been badly hurt.

Michael was conscious and crying, but, Shawn says, his wife could see blood and clear fluid coming out of his ear. One side of his face was in a grimace. The other side appeared to be paralyzed.

What They Think Happened

Charlene was home with the kids, who were in the parents' bedroom. She went into the bathroom and soon after heard a loud crash, followed by crying.

When she rushed back into the bedroom, she saw her 4 1/2-year-old daughter under the dresser. Her son was laying on the floor. The TV that had been on top of the dresser was on the floor near Michael.

The Stevensons think their son must have climbed on top of the dresser. Their daughter probably followed, using the drawers as steps, causing the entire dresser to topple over.

Shawn Stevenson thinks the television smashed into Michael's head. Head and neck injuries are the most common in these types of accidents, followed by injuries to the legs and thighs.

Michael suffered two skull fractures, nerve damage that caused facial paralysis, and one burst eardrum, among other injuries. His sister suffered only minor abrasions.

Michael spent a week in the hospital, and it took him another seven months to recover. But eventually, his father says, he recovered completely. "We're pretty thankful," Shawn says, that at age 3 1/2, their son is once again healthy.

Thousands Of Injuries Every Year

Dr. Gary Smith, former emergency medicine doctor and head of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at the

Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital, says other children aren't so lucky.

Smith and colleagues analyzed data from the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System. They looked at all emergency room patients younger than 17 years old who suffered injuries related to furniture or TV tip-overs from 1990 to 2007.

They estimate that a total of 264,200 children and adolescents were treated for such injuries during the 18-year study period. That averages out to 14,700 injuries among children every year. Three-hundred died as a result of their injuries during the period.

Most of the children were younger than 6 years old, and the number of injuries was highest for 2-year-olds — the age of Michael Stevenson when the TV hit his head.

Researchers say when young children are toddlers, newly mobile and curious, they will grab onto anything, no matter how unstable, in order to steady themselves.

Safeguards

"The best parent in the world can't watch their child 100 percent of the time," Smith says. "So, if a parent leaves the room for even 10 seconds, the child can climb up on furniture, trying to reach for something on top, pull over the furniture and, with a bang, the parent runs back into the room and finds the child pinned under the furniture."

That's why safety experts say parents need to implement safeguards in the home, essentially baby-proofing their furniture, particularly TVs.

Chrissy Cianflone, who directs program operations for the consumer group Safe Kids USA, says today's TVs may be more lightweight than the old tube TVs, but they're still accident-prone. They're much easier to tip over, she says, because they're thinner and not as stable.

Cianflone says TVs should be taken off dressers, bookshelves or any tall piece of furniture that could topple over. She adds that TVs are best placed on stands specifically designed to hold them. A low stand is clearly better than a high one. And it's always best to mount TVs on the wall. Even when placed on furniture, TVs should be anchored to the wall. "If it's not secured to the wall," Cianflone says, "a child can pull the TV right off its base."

She says TVs and other heavy furniture can be anchored to walls with simple brackets or straps bought from any hardware store.

Parents often don't consider the hazards of furniture, she says, because they're typically very focused on baby-proofing cabinets and drawers to protect children from medicines and poisons. She recommends that parents do a walk-through of the home to determine what furniture might be a hazard and then take steps to anchor it, much as they would to protect the home during an earthquake.

Required Safety

Smith takes it a step further, suggesting that federal safety regulations should require vendors to include anchoring attachments when selling potentially unstable furniture. "You can't buy a car without seat belts," he says. "Consumer products are sold all the time with safety devices as part of the sale."

Other safety precautions include placing electrical cords out of a child's reach, and teaching children not to play with the cords. Smith says parents should take care not to put items like remote controls or toys on top of bookshelves or other high furniture, where children might be tempted to climb up in order to get them.

Parents should never underestimate children's curiosity, Cianflone says, or "their strength and ability to pull and climb."

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Monty Hinson (MontyH) wrote:

While opinions vary from one person to another, one thing is clear. When parents or other responsible caretakers are not supervising the activities of small children, the chances of serious injuries prevail.

As a small child of about four years of age I found myself amazed to watch clothes squeezed of almost all the water they contained as they were fed through the ringer on our semi-automatic washing machine. In time, the fascination turned into an ill advised experiment when I decided to feed my left arm through the ringer on top of the machine. As the ringer climbed up my forearm it became clear to me that I was not going to retrieve my arm without having to enlist the help of a parent. Fortunately my mother was home. Even so, I suffered a third degree burn that is still slightly visible at fifty two years of age. This experience has taught me at least three things; (1) Children are amazed by things most adults take for granted. (2) Children usually act on their amazement when no one is around or looking upon after them. (3) Those with insight should take measures to protect children of all ages from themselves as children rarely foresee the potential dangers and risks of their actions!

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Dan Kovalcik (Dan_K) wrote:

Well, I still can't get past that 2nd sentence... For whatever harm the physical television can do to your child – the harm the programming poses is an infinitely greater threat.

It's not the material, foul language, or even graphic depictions on TV that threatens such a danger as much as it is the general disruption to vital cognitive development.

Television should be viewed much like sugar or over the counter medicines... you need to be EXTREMELY careful about the doses that your children digest because they absorb the mental as differently from adults as they do the physical!

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