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Deck the halls – and childproof them, too

By NATALIE BRUNELLAND AND ZACK ALDRICH, Medill Reports
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With the holidays around the corner, you might be stocking up on silver bells and tree trimmings. Consider the kind that don't break and can't be swallowed.

But if you're going to have little ones running around the household, you'll want to add child-proofing to this season's to-do list.



"Really, from the time they get off their backs and start to crawl, to 3-1/2 to 4 years old, there's a potential hazard in every room of the house," said Gene Kucharski, owner of Safe Baby Boundaries, a service that offers in-home child-proofing in Chicago.

The holidays host all sorts of dangerous items and choking hazards for children: glass decorations on trees, heavy objects placed on a hearth mantle, small candies placed in a dish, bows and gift wrap, and hot cocoa marshmallows, Kucharski said.

But he pegs the Christmas tree as the biggest danger of the season.

"I don't want to be a bah humbug, but the tree is an absolute death trap," he said. "The whole thing can fall over, the electrical hazards, the choking hazard from the lights ... a kid should never be around a Christmas tree unsupervised." Like stairways, the door to the tree room needs a gate.

And parents can't be too careful in light of the recent accidents in Chicago and elsewhere involving television sets falling on and killing toddlers.

"It's tragic that babies are still being hurt severely by in-home accidents," said Sasha Watts, 22, mother of a 2-year-old girl.




To childproof her house during the holidays, she uses soft or paper tree ornaments on the lower half of her Christmas tree, avoids tinsel and tries to coach her daughter to look at, but not touch, some of the pretty, shiny things that light up the season.

Three other overlooked hazards can pose a risk to child safety during the holidays, said Dr. Kyran Quinlan, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics council who works at Erie Family Health Center in Chicago.

The first are button batteries used in electronic items such as greeting cards with recorded messages or toy car remote controls.

"Unfortunately, around the holiday season, they're going to be everywhere," he said. "Young children have the fine-motor abilities to get them out. All it takes is a simple rip."

The battery, if ingested, might get lodged in a child's esophagus, and the negative and positive charges might create a current that has the potential to tear a hole through the organ's tissue. To make matters worse, the battery often resembles a quarter in an X-ray image. Quinlan said medical professionals might misread the object as a piece of change that can pass through the digestive system, when the child's life actually is threatened.



Another danger includes common stocking stuffers. Rare Earth magnets and Bucky Balls magnet toys are other emerging dangers, Quinlan said.

"If a child were to swallow two, the magnets could find each other within the intestine and, if they're in adjacent loops of the bowel, they'll connect across the bowel wall and literally cut a hole."

He compares the experience to getting shot.

And the third danger exists in the kitchen, where you might be cooking up a holiday meal with the help of a microwave. Quinlan cited a University of Chicago study that found toddlers were being scalded by items heated with a microwave. Children as young as 18 months old had removed food from the microwave and spilled it on themselves when they were alone. In some cases, they needed a skin graft for the severe burns.

"Once something is done cooking, the child, having heard the ding a million times, is drawn to that sound," Quinlan said.

But child-proofing is never a substitute for simply watching a young child, according to Deborah Michael, an occupational therapist and founder of North Shore Pediatric Therapy.



"The No. 1 thing is not to rely on baby-proofing. The parent or whoever is hosting must watch the child," she said. A mother of five, Michael encourages relatives who anticipate inviting family children in their homes to observe toy recall lists available on the Consumer Product Safety Commission's website. But, beyond this, she advocates vigilance.

"You can teach kids rules like, 'You are not allowed to get close to that menorah or touch the Christmas tree,'" she said.

Brittany Sola, 27, makes it a priority to talk to her 23-month-old son, Reid, and take preventative measures before bringing him to someone's home.

"This is the hardest thing about having a toddler. I am always so worried that he will break something," Sola said. "I don't let him out of my sight when we are in other people's homes."



Incidents occur when parents develop the mentality that "it's not going to happen to me," said Bob Baulac, owner of Safe Surroundings, another Chicago-based child-proofing company.

"What they're thinking is that the child won't figure something out or that they will be there 100 percent of the time, and that's not always the case," he said. "It's incredible what these little ones are capable of doing these days."

Sola says her son, Reid, is a climber and agrees that parents should be vigilant when it comes to making sure furniture and appliances are mounted securely.

"Honestly, I didn't even think about anchoring our bookcase until I caught Reid trying to climb it," she said. "I'm sure it's one of those baby-proofing things that you don't think about until it's too late."

Baulac says the best tip he can offer is to have a professional come to your house to cite the hazards in the home that an average parent may not think about or notice.

"The rule is, if you can think it, they can do it," he said. "Parents should get down on their hands and knees and look at the room from the child's point of view."

But at the end of the day, there are also many things to look forward to in this holiday season with little ones around.

"I'm so excited to bake with Reid, watch Christmas movies, and I think he will actually be excited to open presents this year," Sola said.

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