

Strategies for happy and safe holiday visits

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Visiting relatives for the winter holidays is a treasured and time-honored tradition for many families. Few experiences, after all, can compare to the shared delight of grandparents and grandchildren celebrating each other, along with seasonal festivities. To be sure that your little ones are as safe away from home as they are under your own roof, here are some steps you can take:

Don't assume that wherever you're staying, or visiting, has been childproofed. "When you walk in, check the decorations, the tree, electric cords, and outlets," said Dr. Garry Gardner, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention.. "Look at the knick-knacks and collectibles that are around. You may have to re-decorate temporarily."

Dr. Gardner suggested that you have this conversation with the grandparents, or your hosts preferably before you arrive, to be sure that areas like staircases and bathrooms are barricaded against curious little wanderers. You may want to bring your own portable safety gate or pick one up when you arrive. See our buying advice and Ratings (available to subscribers) for [safety gates](#).

If there are pets, be sure that there are ways to keep your child away from the dog or cat—and vice versa—to avoid bites and scratches. Even well behaved pets can act out when there are small children running around. Explain to your older children how to behave around these animals for their own protection.

The joyful chaos of the holidays, with guests coming and going, presents its own issues when it comes to safety.

"We are all very excited and distracted," said Angela Mickalide, director of Research and Programs for Safe Kids Worldwide.

Consider items like purses that may be brought in by guests, which often have cigarettes, pills, matches, and coins that can be dangerous to your curious crawling baby or inquisitive toddler.

"One emerging risk is button-battery ingestion," said Mickalide. Be especially careful with coin-sized lithium batteries, which are "found in objects we all have, like thin remotes, key fobs, flameless candles, and greeting cards. There's a natural tendency of young children to put everything in their mouth. Suppose the remote control falls down and the child finds the battery. In a matter of two hours, there's a chemical reaction that can burn the child's esophagus, even after going to the emergency room." See [Safety Alert: Button Batteries and CPSC issues new warning on button batteries](#).

One of the major sources of these batteries is hearing aids, explained Dr. Gardner, so be sure that no one leave these within easy reach of small children.

Kitchens, which are centers of increased activity during the holidays, need to be safeguarded, too. "It's a time when you're using all four burners," said Mickalide. "Use a piece of masking tape to mark off the area, and let children know 'don't come near.' The oven can be hot."

She cautioned that even the most responsible grandparent may be less vigilant during the holidays. "Grandma's hearing another child in a different room, and your curious toddler is left alone in the kitchen," she said.

Dr. Gardner also urged adults to be careful with hot drinks, especially coffee, "which he said has the worst scalding burns. Don't pick up a baby and a scalding hot cup of coffee." Non-parents should be reminded not to leave coffee mugs on surfaces, like low tables, where children can reach them.

Pay attention to foods that may be lying around that can pose a choking risk to your child, said Mickalide. Popular party snacks, like hard candies, baby carrots, grapes, nuts and popcorn shouldn't be accessible to your young child.

Decorations and indoor Christmas trees can also pose a risk. According to recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, don't use lighted candles on a tree or near other evergreens. Be careful not to use decorations that are sharp or breakable. Keep trimmings that have small, removable parts out of the reach of young children, to keep them from inhaling or swallowing small pieces.

It's also a good idea to clear away the wrapping papers, bags, paper, ribbons and bows from the tree and fireplace once the gifts are opened, as these can be a choking and suffocation hazard. Don't burn wrapping paper in the fireplace, as a flash fire may result.<3>

With the change in routine and settings, it's especially important that you keep a close eye on your child.

"This is an unfamiliar environment for your child," said Mickalide. "You're most distracted, when you need to be most attentive."

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—Merri Rosenberg

