

factsheet

children and accidents

This factsheet presents background information mainly for people working with children and families, and students undertaking projects.

Child Accident Prevention Trust publishes a range of resources for parents, carers and older children, containing comprehensive safety advice. A complete list of these resources – leaflets, booklets, posters, guides, etc – can be found at www.capt.org.uk together with details of how to obtain them.

What is an accident?

In the dictionary accidents are defined as ‘unforeseen events’. In fact, much can be done to reduce death and injury from accidents. In many cases they can be predicted and prevented.

Why do children have accidents?

Accidents to children are common as they develop and explore. The type of accidents children have relate very closely to their age and stage of physical development. Children are not small adults. They learn and develop rapidly and surprise us by how quickly they change. One day they may only be able to lie on their back. The next they will be able to roll over. Understanding the links between the development abilities of a child and the risks that these changes bring is essential to preventing accidents.

Accidents to children also happen because of they are naturally inquisitive and learn by exploring. Like most beginners they can be clumsy when first learning to do things. Young children do not have the experience or understanding to keep them safe from the hazards around them. Children should not be prevented from learning and developing naturally but they need to grow up in a safe environment protected from unnecessary harm. This requires a combined approach through education and training for adults who are involved in caring for children, safe product design and modifications to the environment.

It is also important for children, as they get older to learn how to deal with everyday risk like climbing the stairs, crossing the road, using knives or scissors or boiling a kettle. Learning to deal with risk is a skill that will help keep children safe as they grow up. Bumps and bruises are part of growing up and learning, but no one has to have an accident that results in serious injury.

How many children have accidents?

In 2008, about 240 children aged under 15 years died in the UK as the result of accidents. Each year, over two million children are taken to hospital after an accident – about half of these happen in the home.

Accidents are a principal cause of death for children and young people. They are also a major cause of long-term disability and ill health.

Which children are most at risk of accidents?

Children have different accidents at different stages. Babies and toddlers have most accidents in the home, as this is where they spend most of their time. Typically the accidents they have are as a result of inexperience or poor coordination. By school age, children are experiencing fewer accidents in the home and more on the roads, at school and at play. Often these accidents are as a result of increased risk taking as children begin to test their limits.

The sex of a child also seems to be a factor in childhood accidents. Boys are approximately twice as likely as girls to have accidents. This may be a result of boys being more exposed to risk – more active, out and about more, more boisterous or aggressive or more subject to peer pressure.

Despite recent initiatives to reduce inequalities, children in the manual social classes are still estimated to be one and a half times more likely to die in accidents as other children. Any figures used are however indicators only as about a third of all deaths cannot be split by social class either because the information is not given or because no socio-economic class can be attributed.

The physical environment where a child lives or plays may have an influence on accidents. For example, high-rise flats with balconies or communal stairs where safety gates are not allowed, unsecured windows, cars parked in side streets or lack of public playgrounds can all increase the likelihood of accidents happening.

How can accidents be prevented?

Education, engineering and legislation can all be used to reduce accidents. However these approaches are most effective when used together rather than individually. For example seat belt law was only introduced after a major public education campaign. This meant that by the time people had to 'belt up' they were already aware of the safety reasons for doing so.

Other examples of effective safety products or changes to the environment are:

- traffic calming measures to reduce speed in residential areas
- child restraints in cars
- cycle helmets
- window locks
- smoke alarms
- child resistant tops on containers
- safety gates

Safe behaviour can also help to reduce children's accidents, for example:

- running cold water into a bath before hot to prevent scalds
- tidying up toys after use to reduce risk of falls
- turning pan handles to the back of the hob so that young children cannot reach up and pull them down
- emptying paddling pools after use to prevent drowning

Further information

Factsheets with more detailed information on different types of accidents and their prevention can be found on the Child Accident Prevention Trust website www.capt.org.uk and in the series of leaflets, written for parents and carers, that **capt** publishes. Sample copies of our leaflets can be downloaded from the website.

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CHILD ACCIDENT PREVENTION TRUST Canterbury Court (1.09) 1-3 Brixton Road London SW9 6DE
t 020 7608 3828 f 020 7608 3674 e safe@capt.org.uk www.capt.org.uk

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