

## Window Safety and Children: A Warning for Parents

A two year old boy awakens from his nap and falls three stories from the window above his bed to the street below suffering permanent brain damage. An eight year old girl hiding behind the curtains of a hotel room window winds up in the parking lot three stories down, severely breaking her leg in the process. Are these rare and isolated incidents? Unfortunately not as stories such as these repeat themselves far too often each year, leaving severe damage and unanswered questions in their wake.

At the center of these tragic events there is a common thread – the presence of an open window, seemingly protected by a window screen that in reality cannot hold back the weight of a young child who pressed up against it, and which results in the child falling through the screen to the street below, often sustaining severe injury or death as a result.

The screened window often looks to be more secure than it actually is, and lulls parents into a false sense of security such that they do not appreciate the danger a window can pose to children. A playful child – climbing, hiding or just playing – leans against the screen and when the screen gives way, the child falls through and life for the family is forever altered in that instant. These accidents are quite common and preventable.

Most screens are not designed to keep children in; they are designed to keep insects out. As such, they cannot tolerate much weight or resistance, and the screens will easily give way when the weight of a child is placed against the screen. While some screens have warnings to this effect, the warnings are often placed on the frame of the screen, in a location where too often parents do not see the warning and thus remain unaware of the danger. Many times a parent will not have realized that a screen will not restrain a child, the presence of a screen that appears to be a barrier against a fall causes the parent to not give the matter any further thought, and appropriate cautions are thereby not taken.

What can be done to prevent such accidents from ever happening to begin with? First, parents need to be made aware of the fact that most screens are not designed to restrain a child, such that parents will not allow a child to come into contact with such a screen to begin with, much as parents make sure their children do not have access to a medicine cabinet, a hot stove and other common dangers around the house.

Additionally, the industry should respond to the critical issue of protecting children – among the most vulnerable in our society, by making screens that can restrain children widely available, by providing more effective warnings where the screen in use will not restrain a child, and by manufacturing windows that will not allow children access to the screen – such as a window lock that stops the window from opening more than 4

inches. The issue of how wide a window opens must be consistent with fire safety codes that allow firefighter's access and occupants an exit in the event of a fire or other emergency that requires entry or exit through a window. As the technology exists to accommodate both child safety and emergency access, laws should be enacted and codes updated to provide for child safety where windows and screens are involved.

Additionally, parents can take other steps such as not placing furniture or beds under or near windows, and to be sure there is nothing under or near a window that would allow a child to climb and gain access to the window. Particular attention should be focused on windows that are closer to the floor as a child can more easily gain access to such a window. If your windows are so designed, open them from the top and not the bottom. Window guards that can be opened in the event of a fire can be installed.

The bottom line is this: Never rely on screens to prevent a child from falling out of a window, and treat a window as a danger to children just like a hot stove, medications, sharp objects and all the other common household dangers. When you check into a hotel or stay at the home of family or friends, remember to put window safety on your checklist if you have children. Tell your friends and neighbors about the danger as well. Together, we can make a difference and save children and families the pain of what is an avoidable accident.