

A Guide to Safety Conversations with Families

“Families are always learning. Parents or adult caregivers learn about their child, their role as parents, and ways to keep their families safe and healthy.”¹



Introduction

Young children are curious and eager to learn. They depend on their caregivers to keep them safe by making sure that nothing within a child’s reach can harm them.

Injuries are a serious health risk to young children, and many injuries happen when children are at home.² The good news is that most injuries are predictable and preventable! Whether families bring up safety concerns or you introduce the issue, children’s safety is an important topic to discuss. “Together, families and staff identify new opportunities for families to support children’s healthy development and learning.”³

This guide offers strategies that early childhood programs can use to support ongoing home safety conversations with families using home safety checklists.

1 Office of Head Start, National Center for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2014). *Families as learners. Understanding Family Engagement Outcomes: Research to Practice Series*. Boston, MA: Boston Children’s Hospital. Retrieved from: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/understanding-family-engagement-outcomes-research-practice-series>

2 Morrongiello, B. A., & Corbett, M. (2008). Elaborating a conceptual model of young children’s risk of unintentional injury and implications for prevention strategies. *Health Psychology Review* 2(2), 191–205. Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.1080/17437190902777594>

3 Office of Head Start, National Center for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2011). *Using the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement framework in your program: markers of progress*. Boston, MA. Retrieved from: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/ncpfce-markers-of-progress.pdf>

Many injury prevention experts talk about three factors — the child, the adult, and the environment — to explain how injuries occur. An injury happens when a child interacts with something that might cause them harm in an environment that is not safe.⁴ Even though all situations have some level of risk, knowing the common causes of childhood injuries and how they happen can help families protect their children.

1. Talking with a parent/guardian (**adult**) about their child's developmental abilities, skills, and [temperament](#) can help them predict how their **child** will approach and react to the world.
2. Finding and removing hazards in the **environment** is an important way of keeping children safe.

Families can use this framework and a home safety checklist to develop effective injury prevention strategies.



Common Causes of Fatal and Non-Fatal Injuries to Young Children:



Falls



Drowning



Fires and Burns



Poisoning



Suffocation



Motor Vehicle Crashes

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2012). *National Action Plan for Child Injury Prevention*. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/safechild/pdf/National_Action_Plan_for_Child_Injury_Prevention.pdf

⁴ Adapted from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Head Start Bureau. (1998). *Safety First: Preventing and Managing Childhood Injuries—Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community*. San Francisco, CA: Bowman (James) Associates. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED424025>

How to Have a Safety Conversation

Thinking about when and how to have safety conversations with each family is important. A parenting curriculum may guide you, a family member may share safety concerns with you and ask for your help in addressing these issues, or you may recognize a hazard that is necessary to address. You may also want to share general information or specific resources about some easy ways that families can protect their child from injury.

Home visitors and other early childhood staff can promote family well-being, an important family engagement outcome. You can engage families using strength-based attitudes and relationship-based practices that are:

- **Family-focused/child-centered:** Focuses on a family's interests and needs
- **Mutually respectful:** Includes two-way sharing of information
- **Culturally responsive:** Respects families' cultural perspectives and traditions

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is an evidence-based approach that encompasses these key principles. It offers home visitors and other early childhood staff a way to engage in an informational and nonjudgmental conversation about a family's safety concerns.

Unless there is an urgent safety issue that requires an immediate response, you first ask for and receive permission from the family to have a conversation about a safety concern. Then you elicit the family's perspective, guide them to set their own priorities, explore what they want to change, and choose an injury prevention strategy to get started.

The spirit of MI is based on three key elements:

- **Collaborating:** you use relationship-based practices to build trust and to partner with each of your families.

- **Evoking:** you recognize and support each family's desire to keep their child healthy and safe. You use reflective listening and open-ended questions to elicit the family's ideas about what they can do to prevent injuries.
- **Respecting (a family's autonomy):** you acknowledge that each family has to decide what they want to change, and you encourage "change talk."

When paired with a home safety checklist, MI is an effective approach to help families develop creative solutions to their safety concerns. However, there are many ways to have respectful conversations with families.



MI is a collaborative conversation that can strengthen a family's commitment and motivation to change.

<http://www.motivationalinterviewing.org/>

Conversation Starters

Use these conversation starters to explore safety issues with families.

How to tell if a family is ready to talk about childhood injuries

When a family gives permission, you can talk about safety hazards and injury prevention strategies they can use to protect their child. For example:

- *“Families often ask me how to make sure their child can explore safely. Do you have any concerns about (**child’s name**)’s safety that you would like to discuss?”*

Or

- *“Your baby is now able to roll over. This means crawling and walking aren’t too far off. Many families like to plan ahead. Do you have any questions about how to prepare?”*

Or

- *“Many of the families in our program have questions about everyday items in the home that can be dangerous to a young child. Is this something you would like to talk about too?”*

How to talk about barriers to improving home safety

When addressing a family’s safety concerns, keep in mind how easy or difficult it may be for a family to make the changes they think are necessary. Consider the type of residence and who is responsible for making home improvements, such as a landlord or other people who live in the home. For example:

- *“You’re not sure what to say to your grandmother about your concerns since you are living in her house. Would you like to think about how you can bring this up with her so she can help you make her home safer for her grandson?”*

Or

- *“You have shared your concerns with your landlord several times, but he has not responded, and you don’t know what else to do. Would you like to talk about this to see if you can find a solution?”*

Or

- *“You told me that you have talked with the property manager about the broken tiles on the kitchen floor. You worry that (**child’s name**) will fall and get hurt. I brought you some information on tenants’ rights that may help you to get the floor fixed, but let’s talk about what you can do right now to protect (**child’s name**).”*

When to use a home safety checklist

You can use a checklist any time you have a conversation about keeping children safe. A checklist is an easy-to-use tool to help families identify possible hazards as home environments change (for example, the family moves or someone joins the household) or as children grow. These conversations will be ongoing, because young children grow and develop so quickly, especially from birth to age 3. When introduced early in your relationship with a family, a checklist can serve as an injury prevention reminder. For example:

- *“You told me you were worried about taking care of your baby. I have a safety checklist that we can look at together. It may help you see all the great things you have done already to make sure your baby is safe. We can also talk about anything on the checklist that you are concerned about. Would you like to talk about this next week?”*

Or

- *“Many families like using a safety checklist to help them figure out how to find and remove items from their home that could injure their child. I have a checklist with me. Would you like to look at it together?”*

How to discuss the next steps

You can use the injury prevention framework to help families reflect on the hazards they identify with a checklist. Asking open-ended questions and summarizing what you discussed are two easy ways to help families decide what action(s) they want to take. For example:

- “You know that it can be unsafe to give your baby (**child**) a bath (**environment**) when the water temperature is too hot, but you aren’t sure what temperature your water heater is set at. You can ask your landlord about this, but in the meantime, let’s talk about what you (**adult**) can do to bathe (**child’s name**) safely.”

Or

- “The checklist says that toys with small parts are a choking hazard for children under age 3. You said that you’re not sure how to make space in your living room (**environment**) for your older children’s toys so that your baby (**child**) can’t reach them. Let’s brainstorm together some changes you (**adult**) can make that might be doable for your family.”

What to say if you notice a hazard that needs to be addressed immediately

If you see something during a home visit that requires an immediate response to protect a child from injury, it is best to clearly identify the issue and state what needs to be done instead of asking a question. For example:

- “I know it’s hard to keep track of all of the things you need to do to keep your children safe. However, some cabinets in the kitchen where you keep your cleaning supplies don’t have any child-proof latches. Because these products contain dangerous poisons, they need to be stored out of (**child’s name**)’s reach. Let’s find a safe place to put them now.” **Note:** this is not a question, because an immediate action is required.

Or

- “Using the checklist, we noticed that the crib is very near the window, and that the window blind cord is dangling into the crib. This is really dangerous because (**child’s name**) could get the cord wrapped around their neck and suffocate. I will bring you some wraps next week to wind up the cord but let’s move the crib now so that the cord won’t be in (**child’s name**)’s reach.”

Through these conversations, you can help families recognize that they can make small but important changes even if they feel that injury prevention is beyond their reach. You can also help families obtain free or low-cost safety equipment and connect families to community resources to help them address unsafe living conditions.



Safety conversations are not one-time conversations. One of the most important ideas to share with families is that they always need to be alert to watch for changes in the environment as well as their child’s changing abilities as they grow. A child with new or emerging skills may be much more vulnerable to injury. Families that make sure the environment is safe and use [active supervision](#) can prevent many childhood injuries.⁵

5 Morrongiello, B. A. (2018). Preventing Unintentional Injuries to Young Children in the Home: Understanding and Influencing Parents’ Safety Practices. *Child Development Perspectives*: 12(4), 217–222. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12287>

- For more information on home safety, you may want to review the [Home Safety Webinar](#) on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.
- For more information on MI, see [What Is Motivational Interviewing?](#)
- For more information on using MI in conversations with families, see the [Motivational Interviewing Suite](#).
- Finally, use the [Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Simulation](#) to practice responsive conversations with family members.

How to Choose a Safety Checklist

Home safety checklists are useful tools to raise a family's awareness of childhood injury and identify strategies to keep their child safe. By choosing a home safety checklist that meets the specific needs of the families you serve, you can talk about ways to promote a safe home environment.

The [Home Safety Checklist Chart](#) contains selected tools (checklists) that are available online at no cost. Each checklist includes items about the leading causes of injury to young children.

Checklists differ in a number of ways. Your program may choose one or more checklists from the chart after carefully considering these differences. When reviewing a checklist, consider the:

- Age group addressed
- Language(s) in which it is available
- Organization of the tool

It is important to note that some checklists are organized by **general injury prevention** topics, while others are organized in one of three ways.

- **By age.** Using a checklist organized by age is an easy way to help families consider their child's developmental abilities in relation to hazards that can lead to possible injury. You will want to choose a checklist that reflects the developmental abilities, not the age, of the child and addresses the safety issues of all children in the household if the family has children in different age groups.
- **By hazard.** Using a checklist organized by hazard makes it possible to have a series of conversations about specific dangers to young children. You can also use this type of checklist to highlight a particular hazard that may be an area of concern.
- **By room or area.** Using a room-by-room or area-by-area approach allows families to make changes to one area of their home at a time.

You may also want to use topical resources to supplement a checklist, since no checklist will address every cause of childhood injury. For example, when visiting a family who owns a firearm, you can share information about the importance of storing firearms safely by locking them up, so they are never accessible to children. See the [Safety and Injury Prevention Resource List](#) for resources on many types of hazards that can cause injuries to young children.

Once you choose a home safety checklist that meets the needs of your families, you can use it in your home safety and injury prevention conversations. Families that know how to use a checklist and feel empowered to make changes to their environment create safe places for children to learn and grow.

Home-Safety Checklist Chart

This chart contains home-safety checklists that include the leading causes of the most common childhood injuries. For more information about the differences among checklists, refer to [How to Choose a Safety Checklist](#).

You may record your notes on choosing a checklist or compare different checklists in the “Comments” column. There is a blank row at the bottom of the chart to add your program’s checklist. This will help you compare checklists to make sure you choose one that is comprehensive.

SYMBOL KEY:

Age Range: By child’s age or PN for prenatal

Language: English; Spanish; Portuguese

Type of Checklist: General; Age; Hazards; Room

To find a resource online, select the hyperlink listed under each title.

Title	Age Range	Type of Checklist	Language	Comments
Healthy Families Florida <i>Home Safety Checklist</i> https://www.dcf.state.fl.us/programs/childwelfare/caregivers/docs/HomeSafetyChecklist.pdf	PN-4	General	English	
Iowa’s State University, University Extension <i>Home Safety: A Checklist for Parents</i> https://store.extension.iastate.edu/product/5123	Under 5	Hazards	English	

Home-Safety Checklist Chart

Title	Age Range	Type of Checklist	Language	Comments
<p>KidsHealth® from Nemours <i>Household Safety Checklists</i> https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/household-checklist.html</p>	Under 5	Room	English	
<p>Massachusetts Department of Public Health <i>Safe Home Checklist</i> https://massclearinghouse.ehs.state.ma.us/PROG-INJPREV/IP2915.html</p>	Under 6	Room	English Spanish Portuguese	
<p>Minnesota Department of Health <i>Home Safety Checklist</i> English: https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/injury/pubs/documents/homesafechk-eng.pdf Spanish: https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/communities/fhv/homesafechk-spa.pdf Minnesota also offers a <i>Home Safety Checklist Reference Guide</i> https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/communities/fhv/homesafegde.pdf</p>	Under 6	Room	English Spanish	

Home-Safety Checklist Chart

Title	Age Range	Type of Checklist	Language	Comments
New York State Department of Health <i>Home Safe Home: A Home Safety Checklist</i> https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/3106.pdf	All ages	Room	English	
North Dakota Department of Health <i>Home Safety Checklist: Are Children Safe in Your Home?</i> http://www.ndhealth.gov/injury/publications/home_safety.pdf	Under 5	Room	English	
Your Program Checklist				