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A Home Visitor's Guide to Safety Conversations

How to Discuss Child Safety and Use Home Safety Checklists 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

The Head Start Program Performance Standards do not require programs to use home safety checklists, but they are a great tool for talking about how to prevent injuries to young children.

Introduction

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

Whether families bring up safety concerns or you introduce the issue, safety is an important topic for home visitors to discuss with families. “Together, families and staff identify new opportunities for families to support children’s healthy development and learning”.²

This Guide from the National Center on Health offers strategies to support ongoing home safety conversations with families using home safety checklists. You may also use a checklist to help families develop safety goals in their family partnership agreement.

¹Head Start National Center for Parent, Family and Community Engagement. N.D. Research to Practice Series, Families as Learners. Boston, MA: Author. Retrieved from: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/rtp-series.html>

²Head Start National Center for Parent, Family and Community Engagement, Markers of Progress. Boston, MA: Author. p. 58. Retrieved from: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/ncpfce-markers-of-progress.pdf>

Introduction

The Importance of Home Safety

Injuries are a serious health risk to young children. Consider the high rate of injury demonstrated in Figure 1. We know that:

- Young children are most likely to experience injuries in their own home.³
- Many children under five experience injuries that send them to the emergency room.⁴
- Injury is the leading cause of death and disability among children between ages one to five.⁵
- Children from families who are economically disadvantaged are at an increased risk of death from injury.⁶

The good news is that most injuries are predictable and preventable! Every injury involves three major factors: the child, the cause of an injury, and the environment. An injury happens when a child interacts with something which might cause him harm in an environment that is not safe. Even though all situations have some level of risk, knowing how injuries happen can help families protect their children.

Many injury prevention experts use The Injury Triangle⁸ (Figure 2) to explain how injuries occur.

1. Talking with families about their **child's** developmental abilities, skills, and [temperament](#) can help them predict how their child approaches and reacts to the world.
2. Finding and minimizing hazards in the **environment** is a critical part of knowing how to keep children safe.
3. Identifying the **causes** of injury helps families understand the reasons that young children can get hurt and what they can do.

You can use this framework and a home safety checklist to talk with families about effective injury prevention strategies.

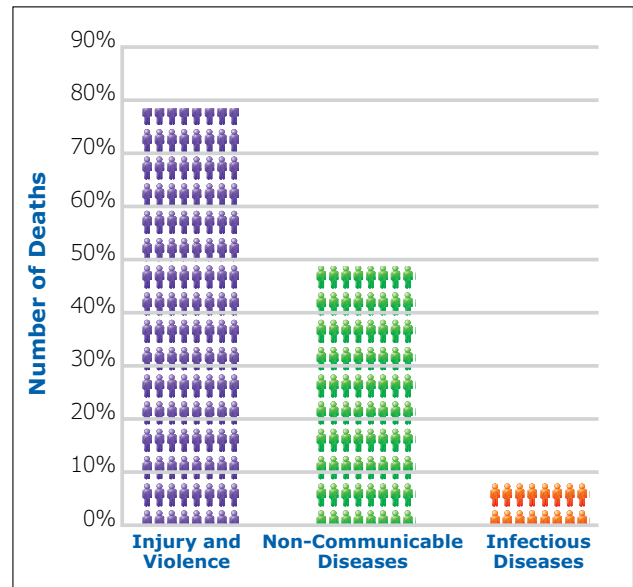


Figure 1: Injury deaths compared to other leading causes of death for persons ages 1–44, United States, 2011⁷

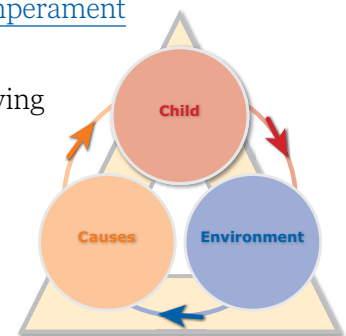


Figure 2: The injury triangle

³Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014) *Healthy Homes: Injury Prevention*. Atlanta, GA: Author. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyhomes/bytopic/injury.html>

⁴Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014) *Injury-related Emergency Department Visits by Children and Adolescents: United States, 2009–2010*. Atlanta, GA: Author. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db150.htm>

⁵Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2014). *Injury: The Leading Cause of Death Among Persons Ages 1–44*. Retrieved from: http://www.cdc.gov/injury/overview/leading_cod.html

⁶Birken, C.S. and MacArthur, C. (2004). *Socioeconomic Status and Injury Risk in Children*. Paediatric Child Health. 9(5): 323-325.

⁷Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2014, August). Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/injury/overview/leading_cod.html

⁸Bowman Associates. (1998). "Safety First: Preventing and Managing Childhood Injuries." Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community. Pp. 10. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED424025&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED424025

Part One: How to Have a Safety Conversation

Thinking about when and how to have safety conversations with each family is important. Your home visiting 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 you think 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.

As a home visitor, you have an opportunity to promote family well-being, an important family engagement outcome. You engage families using strength-based attitudes and relationship-based practices that are:

- Family-focused/child-centered: Focuses on the family's interests and concerns
- 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 the home visitor a way to engage in an informational and non-judgmental 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, and guide them to set their own priorities, explore what they want to change, and choose an injury prevention strategy to get started.

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

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

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; and
- **Respecting** (a family's autonomy): you acknowledge that each family has to decide what they want to change and you encourage "change talk".



Photos courtesy of EHS NRC

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.

Part One: How to Have a Safety Conversation

Conversation Starters

Staff with varied communication styles can use these “conversation starters” to talk about safety issues with families. Note that [active listening](#) is a key element of the process.

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:

- “Parents 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 parents 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 member to make the changes she thinks 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 in 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 or leaves the household) or as children grow. These conversations will be ongoing, because children grow and develop so quickly from birth to age 3. When introduced early in your relationship with a family, a checklist can serve as an injury prevention reminder.



Photos courtesy of EHS NRC

Part One: How to Have a Safety Conversation

- “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 us 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 triangle 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 mentioned that you aren’t sure what temperature your water heater is set at and it can be unsafe to give the baby (**child**) a bath (**environment**) when the water temperature (**cause**) is too hot. You can ask your landlord about this, but in the meantime, would you like to talk about what you 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 that have small parts (**cause**) while also keeping them out of the baby’s (**child**) reach. Let’s brainstorm together some changes that might be doable for your family.”

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

You may see something during a home visit that requires an immediate response to protect a child from injury. At these times, 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, you can see that 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 accidentally strangle. 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.



Photos courtesy of EHS NRC

Part One: How to Have a Safety Conversation

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 changes in the environment—new objects and new places—as well as their child’s changing abilities as he/she grows. A child with new or emerging skills may be much more vulnerable to injury.

For more information on home safety, you may want to review The National Center on Health Home Safety Webinar on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC). For more information on MI, you may want to review [Engaging Families Using Motivational Interviewing Strategies & Principles](#), a webinar from the 17th Annual Virtual Birth to Three Institute. Finally, use the [Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Simulation](#) to practice responsive conversations with family members.

Leading Causes of Injuries to Young Children⁹

- Falls
- Drowning¹⁰
- Burns/Scalds
- Poisoning
- Choking/ Suffocation/ Strangulation

Part Two: How to Choose a Safety Checklist

Home safety checklists are useful tools to raise a family’s awareness of childhood injury and offer 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 \(the Chart\)](#) contains selected tools that are available online, at no cost. Each of the checklists 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
- Literacy level

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 relationship 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 to address 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 hazards 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.



Photos courtesy of EHS NRC

⁹Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS). (2013). *2011, United States Unintentional Injury Deaths and Rates per 100,000*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/>

¹⁰National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Unintentional Drowning: Get the Facts*. Atlanta, GA: Author. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationsafety/water-safety/waterinjuries-factsheet.html>

Part Two: How to Choose a Safety Conversation

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 also 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 cause injuries to young children.

Once you choose a home safety checklist that meets the needs of your families, you can use it to integrate home safety and injury prevention into your schedule of home visits. 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

The chart contains home safety checklists that include the leading causes of the most common childhood injuries. For more information about the differences in the organization of these tools, refer to [Part Two: How to Choose a Safety Checklist](#).

You may record your notes to choose a checklist or compare different tools in the “Comment” column. Note that there is a blank row at the bottom of the chart for you to insert your program’s checklist. This will help you compare what you use with the other checklists available to make sure your checklist is comprehensive.

SYMBOL KEY:					
Age Range: By child’s age or PN for prenatal		Language: E: English; S: Spanish; P: Portuguese			
Organization: G: General; A: Age; H: Hazards; R: Room		Literacy Level: Based on Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level ¹¹			
To find a resource online, select the hyperlink listed under each title.					
Title	Age Range	Organization	Language	Literacy Level	Comments
Healthy Families Florida <i>Home Safety Checklist</i> http://www.healthyfamiliesfla.org/home_safety.html	PN-4	G	E	Grade 1.9	
Iowa’s State University, University Extension <i>Home Safety: A Checklist for Parents</i> https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Home-Safety-A-Checklist-for-Parents	Under 5	H	E	Grade 7.1	

¹¹The authors calculated readability scores using <https://readability-score.com>

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Home Safety Checklist Chart *continued*

Title	Age Range	Organization	Language	Literacy Level	Comments
KidsHealth: Nemours Foundation* Household Safety Checklists http://kidshealth.org/parent/firstaid_safe/home/household_checklist.html#cat150	Under 5	R	E	Grade 4.2-6.5*	
Massachusetts Department of Public Health <i>Safe Home Checklist</i> https://massclearinghouse.ehs.state.ma.us/CHILD/IP2915kit.html	Under 6	R	E, S, P	Grade 3.8	
Minnesota Department of Health <i>Home Safety Checklist</i> http://www.health.state.mn.us/fhv/homevisitor.cfm	Under 6	R	E, S	Grade 7.6	
New York State Department of Health <i>Safe Home, A Home Safety Checklist</i> https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/3106.pdf	All ages	R	E	Grade 4.8	
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	R	E	Grade 4.1	
Your Program Checklist					

School readiness begins with health!