

June 2007

# Childcare and children's health

An information sheet for parents

## Injuries

Injuries are the leading cause of death of Australian children (Blakemore, 2005). More children die as a result of injury than from cancer, asthma and infectious diseases combined. Most injuries to children occur at home.

**Most of these injuries are not the unfortunate result of accidents – they are not chance events that could not have been anticipated and prevented. Injuries are rarely the result of accidents or bad luck. Most are predictable and therefore preventable.**

### Protection

How can we protect children from injury? While in care, children are protected by many safety principles that carers must comply with in planning and maintaining a safe environment. These regulations and guidelines provide basic protections for the safety of young children and the care environment is normally planned specifically to provide for children's needs. These include the need for experiences that provide appropriate challenges. Children learn through play, so the environment is planned to allow diverse experiences for play.

**At home and in the care environment, appropriate supervision of young children is the most important protection. Young children should not be left unsupervised.**

### Protection or overprotection?

We all want to protect children from injury, but children can be over protected to the extent that they are not given the opportunities to experience and learn from appropriate challenges. They need these experiences to grow, learn and to develop life long skills of self-regulation and self-protection.

A report from the U.K.'s Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents partly blamed a steep rise in the local number of child drownings to "children's poor judgement of the risks involved". Ironically, though tragically, the report pointed to overprotective parents "keeping their children too protected for them to be able to develop good risk awareness". The report concluded that children are "simply not aware of the dangers of the outside world". At a more mundane level, children face sport injuries if they have not learned how to fall when playing football, for example.

Children need direct experiences of the world: such experiences cannot be vicariously learned, or taught by direct instruction or learned through watching television and playing electronic games.

### Balancing protection with children's needs

Recently, a prominent paediatrician and road injury specialist noted that "Efforts to prevent injury should not put at risk vital opportunities to live, learn and play". This highlights the need for a balance between our desire to protect children from injury and children's need for appropriately challenging environments and activities.

Children gain pleasure from these activities, and they need physical challenges to develop healthy, strong bodies. Equally importantly, children need these experiences to learn how to cope with experiences now, as well as in later life.

There are two messages here:

1. Appropriate, supportive supervision can prevent many injuries
2. Over-protection, particularly if it involves preventing children from participating in activities, not only deprives children of desirable experiences, challenges and opportunities for healthy growth and development, but may contribute to the risk of later injury. Overprotection may put children at risk.

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