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Don't Let Your Child be Injured

Please check your den for unreasonably dangerous recliner chairs.

By Jeffery H. Warren, Ph.D., P.E., CSP

It was an ordinary afternoon for Mary and her two daughters Erin and Sally. They were watching television when the 3 month old Sally, started to throw up. Mary grabbed the infant and ran into the nursery. When she came back less than five minutes later, Mary found 18 month old Erin's head trapped between the footrest and seat of a recliner chair. Erin was turning blue due to her windpipe being cut off. While she survived death, Erin was brain damaged for life.

An investigation of injuries involving recliner chairs indicates that the injured children typically are found with their neck on the edge of the footrest, their chin over the edge of the footrest, and their head against the chair seat. The weight of the child's body pushes downward on the footrest and keeps the head and lower jaw wedged between the seat and footrest. The edge of the footrest catches in the curvature of the neck formed by the lower jaw which compresses the throat and strangles the child.

For the smallest children at risk, those as young as 12 months old, the measurement from the lower jaw to the top of the head is 5.8 inches. The hazard exists when the distance between the footrest and the seat is greater than 5 inches, and when the footrest can be raised and lower by a young child.

Millions of recliner chairs exist in homes all over America with the distance between the footrest and the chair varying from 5 to 17 ½ inches when the leg rest is at full extension. For the reported injuries, the distance is typically 7-8 inches.

Investigations reveal that children can lift the footrest on the recliners and do sit on the footrest with adults or play on them with other children. In most injuries it appears that the child stands in front of the chair and while facing it, bends down and lifts the footrest. The entrapment then occurs while the child is in the process of climbing on it.

In June 1985, the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) and the American Furniture Manufacturers Association (AFMA) issued a national consumer alert about possible accidental injury or death to young children using or playing on recliner

chairs, reporting that the victims involved in the accidents they had investigated in the last 5 years were:

1. Between the ages of 12 months and 30 months
2. Unsupervised by parents and alone in the room at the time of the accident
3. Apparently climbing or playing on the leg rest of the chair while the chair was in a reclined position, and
4. Trapped when their heads entered the opening between the chair seat and leg rest as their own body weight forced the leg rest down.

In November 1985, the president of the American Furniture Manufacturers Association reported to the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission that a Voluntary Industry Recliner Chair Committee had made a recommendation to the industry that:

A device be installed on all chairs to restrict the access between the extendible leg rest and the seat on the recliners to five inches or less.

Additionally, the following caution was to be attached to all recliner chairs:

CAUTION: Do not allow children to play on this mechanized furniture or operate the mechanism. Leg rest folds down on closing so that a child could possibly be injured. Always leave in an upright and closed position and keep hands and feet clear of mechanism. Only the occupant should operate it.

Mid-ottomans are a common way to reduce the space between the leg rest and the seat. Mid-ottomans range from simple pieces of metal rigidly attached to the linkage to padded and upholstered boards that move into position by additional linkages. Typically the mid-ottomans are from 2-4 inches wide and function to reduce the opening between the footrest and seat to less than 5 inches.

Some manufacturers are also installing locking mechanisms that prohibit movement of the recliner from its original position to another position without moving the locking handle. Additionally, a piece of cloth located between the footrest and the seat does prevent a child from sticking his hands into the opening; however, a loosely attached piece of cloth may not prevent the child's head from being entrapped.

Every homeowner should check his recliners to ensure that a death trap does not exist in his den. If it does, please throw it out. It's a known fact that an uncontrolled hazard will, in time, produce its share of injuries.