
Baby furniture - safety tips

Summary

- Baby furniture accounts for around 10 per cent of injuries to children aged 12 months or less.
 - Cots must comply with Australian Safety Standard AS/NZS 2172-2003.
 - Even if your baby furniture meets every safety standard and suggestion, your child still needs close supervision.
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Every year, approximately 700 Victorian children aged 0-4 years require hospital treatment for injuries related to infant and nursery products. Around one in ten hospital-treated injuries to children less than one year old involve baby furniture.

First-time parents need to have an eye for detail when buying baby furniture. Instead of colour, style and comfort, make safety the priority. Remember, even if your baby furniture meets every safety standard and recommendation, your child still needs supervision.

Baby furniture – cots

Most people think all new infant and nursery products sold in Australia are safe. While most designers and manufacturers work to make sure that products on the market are safe, from time to time they don't meet safety standards. New products regularly appear on the market.

Sometimes, safety issues relating to their design or use emerge after they become available for sale. Be wary of second-hand and heirloom cots, as they can pose a hazard to children. Many people think hand-me-down and second-hand products are safe because they have been used by others without any problems.

It is a myth that second-hand products must be safe if their first owner didn't have any injuries. The risk of injury may still be high or have increased if the product is old and has worn, been damaged or lost its instructions for assembly or use.

Children have died in accidents involving hand-me-down and second-hand products that were fragile, broken or misused.

Make sure that you:

- check the safety features in the infant and nursery products you buy or are given
- use products safely
- find and remove hazards around your home that can make these products unsafe.

It is important to provide a safe sleeping surface for your baby. Only use a firm mattress that fits snugly into the cot. Don't use cot bumpers or soft bedding as these have been associated with fatal sleep accidents. Don't use extra mattresses.

An average of 134 Victorian children need hospital treatment every year for injuries related to cots. Most injuries occurred when children fell from the cot. Other injuries included children striking parts of the cot or getting parts of their body stuck between bars. Fittings such as bolts, knobs and corner posts can catch on clothing and cause strangulation. All cots sold in Australia need to comply with the Australian Standard AS/NZS 2172-2003.

If your cot is a hand-me-down, make sure it meets legal requirements, being that:

- The bars or panels should be spaced between 50 mm and 95 mm apart – bigger gaps can trap a baby's head, arms or legs. If the bars or panels are made from flexible material, the maximum spacing between the
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bars or panels should be less than 95 mm.

- The cot should have a minimum depth of 600 mm from the base of the mattress to the top of the cot.
- The gap between the mattress and the cot sides and ends should be less than 20 mm.
- Check that there are no spaces between 30 mm and 50 mm that could trap your child's arms or legs.
- Check that there are no small holes or openings between 5 mm and 12 mm that could trap your child's fingers.
- Place the cot in a safe spot and use locking brakes.

Safety for cots

When setting up the cot:

- Always follow instructions carefully when assembling and using a cot.
- Position the cot away from heaters, power points, windows, or curtain and blind cords. Cords are a strangulation hazard.
- Never use electric blankets or hot water bottles for babies or young children.
- Don't hang anything like pictures or mirrors nearby, as there is a danger of the item falling into the cot. Do not leave mobiles or toys with stretch or elastic cords within reach of your child.
- Do not use U or V-shaped pillows for children under two years old. It is safer not to use a pillow at all for children younger than two.
- Do not place small objects that could cause your child to choke in the cot or within reach.
- Keep the cot uncluttered. Remove climbing aids (such as large toys) from the cot once your child can stand, as they may climb on to them and fall over the cot rail or side.
- Make sure the cot has four castors and one pair must have brakes.
- Regularly check that nuts and bolts are tight, as per the maintenance instructions supplied with the cot.
- Put the drop side up when your baby is sleeping.
- Before your baby can sit up, you can adjust the cot to 'baby' (to the highest position) to avoid adult back pain, but lower the cot to the lowest position just before your baby starts sitting up.

Baby furniture – prams and strollers

On average, 189 Victorian children per year need hospital treatment for an injury related to use of a pram or stroller. Most injuries are caused by children falling out of the pram.

Choose a pram or stroller that complies with the Australian Standard NZS/AS2088. The standard requires:

- a tether strap to help carers retain control of prams and strollers. Wear the tether strap when walking, and use the parking brake and tether strap when the pram or stroller is stationary (standing still). Use the tether straps even when parking brakes are in use to help stop roll-away incidents)
- a restraint harness to prevent falls
- a red parking brake
- safe-use warning labels and safety requirements to prevent entrapment.

Safety for prams and strollers

When using a pram or stroller, remember:

- Prams and strollers are designed to move freely. Wear the tether strap when moving and use the parking brake when the pram or stroller is stationary.
- Use the full five-point restraint harness at all times – even for short trips.
- Unsupervised sleep in a pram or stroller is not safe. Never leave a sleeping child alone in a pram or stroller, and avoid using a pram or stroller as a substitute for a cot.

Other considerations include:

- Prams for babies under six months should have a backrest that reclines at an angle of more than 135 degrees to the bottom of the seat.

- Use a full, five-point body harness to reduce the risk of falls.
- Brakes should be fitted to at least two wheels.
- Sensible storage space is important, such as a basket slung underneath. Do not overload the pram. Avoid hanging shopping from the handles as this may cause the pram to tip over.
- A gap-free interior will reduce the risk of your child's fingers and toes getting caught.
- Look for a pram that has a strong frame, easy steering, solid and durable wheels, and brake locks that work.

Baby furniture – high chairs

On average, 100 Victorian children aged less than three years per year need hospital treatment for injuries related to high chairs. Falls are a common cause of injury. A high chair is suitable for a baby who can sit upright alone, usually at about six to eight months of age. The chair may be useful until the child is two or three years old.

When buying a high chair, consider:

- a sturdy and stable design that doesn't rock easily
- a simple design that is easy to clean
- a tray that can't be moved by the child.

To reduce the risk of injury from high chairs:

- Always remember to place your baby in the five-point body harness to prevent falls.
- Supervise your child at all times.
- Keep the high chair away from appliance cords, curtain cords and anything else your child could grab.
- Keep the high chair at least one metre away from kitchen benches and stovetops to avoid the risk of scalds.

Baby furniture – change tables

Around 100 Victorian babies and infants aged less than two years need hospital treatment for injuries related to change tables. These injuries are usually caused by a baby falling from a height of 1.5 metres or less. Around one in four baby furniture-related injuries that require hospital treatment involve change tables.

A change table should be sturdy and have:

- roll-off protection, such as a child safety harness and raised edges. Change tables should have ends and sides that are raised at least 100 mm, with smooth edges.
- no gaps that could injure your baby's fingers or toes.

When using a change table:

- Consider whether you need to use a change table or if you can change your baby on a large towel or changing mat on the floor instead.
- Have everything you need to change your baby ready and within reach.
- Never leave your baby alone.
- Always keep one hand on your baby.
- Ignore interruptions, or take your baby with you if you have to leave the room.
- Use a safety harness.

Baby furniture – playpens

Playpens can be used to put young children in for short periods, such as when cooking or on the telephone. When buying a playpen, consider:

- Children as young as nine months of age can pull themselves up into a standing position, so make sure the playpen is sturdy.
- Make sure that all folding parts have latches that lock securely, and that those latches are locked securely before use and cannot be undone by your baby. Stop using the playpen when your baby can undo the latches.
- Don't use a portable cot as a playpen
- The playpen should be at least half a metre high.

- Check that the playpen is strong and not easily tipped over or dragged around from inside.
- The bars should be spaced between 50 and 95 mm apart (similar to a cot). Larger gaps can trap a child's head.
- Keep the playpen well clear of heaters, stoves and power points.
- Keep the playpen away from blind and curtain cords as these may become caught around your baby's neck.
- Keep your baby within your sight while using a playpen. Never leave your baby alone in a playpen.

Dangerous baby furniture – baby walkers

Baby walkers are unsafe and should not be used. On average, 12 Victorian children per year need hospital treatment for injuries related to baby walkers. Children can suffer head injuries and other serious injuries such as fractures if the baby walker they're in tips over or falls down stairs. Head injuries are the most frequent and serious injuries associated with baby walkers.

Baby walkers are banned in some countries. Walkers do not help babies learn to walk and can actually interfere with normal development. Babies have little control over the direction and speed of a baby walker and can easily overbalance. They cannot see where they are going or what they are running over.

Babies in walkers can move faster and reach higher than usual, putting them at greater risk of scalds and poisoning. Child safety experts recommend a stationary play centre as a safer alternative to baby walkers.

Dangerous baby furniture – toy boxes with heavy lids

A child might have the strength to open the lid of a toy box, but not to hold it. Children can be injured if a heavy lid closes suddenly. Children younger than two years old are most at risk.

A special slow-closing hinge on the toy box can prevent finger jams, or better yet, choose a toy box without a lid, or remove lids that are heavy or have a child-resistant lock. If you buy a toy box with a lid, the lid should be lightweight and removable. Children like to hide in items such as toy boxes and there have been cases where children have been trapped inside.

Provide ventilation holes in toy boxes to allow a trapped child to breathe and prevent suffocation. A lightweight plastic crate is safer than a heavy box with a lid. If a toy box has a lock or latch, it must be a simple one that a trapped child can open from the inside.

Where to get help

- Baby furniture manufacturers and retailers
- The Royal Children's Hospital Community Information team (formerly Safety Centre) Tel. (03) 9345 5085
- Consumer Affairs Victoria Helpline Tel. 1300 558 181
- Product Safety Australia Infocentre Tel. 1300 302 502
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)

Things to remember

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