

# Safety Around the Home



Children with autism may be more at risk around the house than 'typically' developing children as they may perceive things through their senses differently and seek out stimulation. They may also have a lesser understanding of things that are dangerous and of the consequences of their behaviour.

Parents of children with autism need to provide a safe environment for their child. Such interventions include making changes to the environment (e.g., fencing the property) and are straightforward to implement, in that they do not require any action of the child. Other interventions require changes in the behaviour of the child (e.g., teaching the child to stay out of the kitchen when the oven is on) and are more difficult to implement. It would be useful to teach your child about safety and safe behaviours using methods that have previously proven successful when teaching other behaviours.

Prevention is important and is preferable to fixing a problem only after someone has been hurt. Priority should be given to areas of the house that are regularly used by the child (e.g., bedroom, living room), and areas of the house that are dangerous (e.g., kitchen, bathroom). The abilities and behaviours of your child should also be considered, for example, if your child likes to run outside, then the security afforded by exterior doors may be considered, or the property may be fenced. It may be more appropriate to look for safety information for children of the same developmental age as your child, rather than the same chronological age.

## General household safety tips

Labels (symbol, photo, words) can be placed on household items that the child uses regularly (e.g., couch, rubbish bin). This may help your child to understand what the item is and what it should be used for. The label may help the child to understand what is expected of them and make them more likely to use the

item correctly. For example, a picture of a couch with people sitting on it may mean that it is less likely to be used for jumping and climbing. A 'stop' or 'hot' sign on the heater or oven may help the child to understand that it is dangerous and that they are not allowed to be near it. Coloured tape can be placed on the floor as a visual reminder to the child of where in the house they are and are not allowed to be.

Everyday items (toys and eating utensils etc.) can also be labelled and stored so that the child can see the items (e.g., in clear containers) and have access to them (on low shelves). Keeping items organized and consistently stored in the same place may also help.

Cabinets and drawers should have safety catches/latches so that fingers cannot be jammed and dangerous items may be hidden. These can go inside the cupboard similar to laundry tub latches, or can be on the outside, joining the handles together. Also available are magnetic locks which require a key to open. Gates and barriers can be placed in doorways and stairwells to limit access to certain areas of the house. Fireguards should be used on fires and heaters. When buying picture frames, choose ones that are plastic rather than glass.

The household should have an emergency evacuation plan and all family members should be involved in practicing the plan. Ensure that smoke alarms are working and test them regularly. Emergency phone numbers (doctors, the Poison Line 0800 764 766, etc.) should be listed next to every phone in the house.

**Dangerous household items** should be put away, in a lockable cabinet so that your child cannot get access to them. If they cannot be locked away, dangerous items should be placed far back in shelving systems so that

they are out of sight, as climbing may be encouraged if they are visible. For this reason, toys and items that are freely available to the child should be placed on lower shelves.

Dangerous items are not limited to, but may include:

- Breakable items
- Chemicals (may be mistaken for juice; cleaning products, gardening products, pool chemicals)
- Cosmetics
- Dangerous kitchen items (knives, blades, scissors)
- Food that is not on the child's diet and other items that should be limited (e.g., DVDs, video games etc.)
- Hair driers and straighteners
- Handbags
- Lighters
- Matches
- Medications (may be mistaken for lollies; you can ask your pharmacist for safety caps on medicine bottles although there may be an extra charge for this)
- Pet food
- Pills kept beside the bed
- Power tools
- Razors
- Small items that may be a choking hazard (small items fit into a film canister)
- Toiletries

### Windows

Window locks can be installed on windows to prevent them from fully opening. These may be purchased from hardware stores such as Bunnings and Mitre 10. If your child breaks windows, regular glass may be replaced with safety glass. This is two sheets of glass that are joined by plastic or resin. Safety glass may crack but will not fall apart. To avoid accidents, stickers can be placed on large

[windows and glass doors.](#)

<http://www.bunnings.co.nz>

<http://www.mitre10mega.co.nz>

<http://www.smithandsmith.co.nz/Safety-Glass.4376.0.html>

[www.ganz.co.nz](http://www.ganz.co.nz)

If your child likes to pull on things, blind cords should be wound up so that they are out of reach. 3M removable hooks may be placed

high on the wall and used to loop the excess cord around and will not damage your walls.

<http://www.3m.com/intl/nz/english/about3M/innovation/command.html>

### Doors

Door locks can be used for security, to keep people out of your house, to limit access, or to restrict access to dangerous areas of the house. The doors of rooms that you do not want your child to enter could be secured with a childproof lock (e.g., bathroom, attic, laundry, and garage). Door knob/lever covers can be used to lock a door from one side. Door latches similar to window latches are available, and allow doors to be opened slightly. However, if you take such measures, you need to make sure that people can exit the house quickly in an emergency.

If your child can reach or undo childproof locks, you can improve your own awareness of where your child is or whether anyone enters your house with door and window alarms or chimes. These can indicate when a door or window is opened or when someone passes through a doorway or window.

If restricting access to a room is not a problem, but slamming doors are, hooks can be used to keep doors open. Finger guards can also be used to prevent doors from slamming shut, and will prevent children from becoming locked inside a room.

### Kitchen/Eating

If your child likes throwing or to sweep things off surfaces, at meal times use plastic plates, bowls, glasses and utensils. If necessary, these may be attached to the table with Velcro or to the table leg with string. Placemats are safer than tablecloths as they are less likely to be pulled. Heat sensitive spoons may be helpful in indicating whether a food item is cool enough to eat.

Oven, fridge, dishwasher and microwave locks may be purchased to restrict access. It may also be a good idea to place cutlery downwards in the dishwasher. Hot drinks, electric jugs and their cords should be kept out of reach. Pot handles should be pointed towards the back of the stove.



## **Appliances/Electrical**

Appliances (e.g., the TV) and other furniture (e.g., shelves) can be strapped to the wall so they will not tip over if they are climbed on or moved. There are also straps that can attach appliances such as the TV to the surface it is on. Appliances such as DVD players and VCRs should be locked or put inside a lockable cabinet. Wiring for appliances should be concealed and multi plugs should be covered. Electrical outlets that are not in use should have plastic plugs inserted.

## **Furniture arrangement**

Furniture should be rearranged so that collisions are unlikely and should not be placed where it will allow access to dangerous items, windows or door locks. Corner covers can be purchased to protect your child from the sharp edges of tables and other furniture.

## **Bathroom**

If your child likes to run taps, it is advisable to turn your hot water cylinder down to 55 degrees.

Heat sensitive alarms, toys and stickers are available for the bath. Toilet seat locks are available to prevent access.

## **Bedroom**

To keep track of your child at night, consider using an audio or visual baby monitor.

## **Outside**

A high fence can prevent escape from the backyard and can also prevent people from entering your property. The slats should be vertical and the framing should be on the outside so that the fence is not climbable. The same goes for deck railings. As with inside furniture, outdoor furniture should be kept away from deck railings and fences so that they do not make climbing easier.

<http://www.alsteel.co.nz/page/5-Home>  
<http://www.nocowboys.co.nz/fencing-contractors/New-Zealand>

Various devices may be purchased and installed inside vehicles to increase the field of view of reversing drivers. These include wide angled mirrors, video cameras and sensors that detect when a collision is going to occur. However, such devices do not address all blind

spots and children should be supervised closely when there are cars around. Preferably, play areas should be fenced off from the driveway.

Garages should also be fenced off from play areas as they often hold many safety hazards such as chemicals, gardening tools and power tools. It is easy to leave the garage door open. Garden sheds should also be locked.

Pools, ponds and spas should be fenced off, and other drowning hazards (empty buckets, tubs, open drains etc.) should be filled in or removed. It would be beneficial to teach your child to swim.

Ensure your potted and outdoor plants are not harmful, and do not pot them with small stones or marbles as they may be a choking risk. Supervise your child closely when there is an open fire or barbecue.

## **Away from the home**

When you are on outings, it may be helpful to dress your child in brightly coloured clothing in case you are separated. If your child is prone to wandering, ensure your child remains close to you with safety harnesses (reins) and wrist harnesses. If your child removes their seatbelt in the car, seat belt covers are available as a deterrent.

If your child escapes from your property or does wander when you are on an outing, it is important that they can be identified. Your child may not be able to tell someone who they are or where they live. You could teach your child to show people an identification (ID) card with their name, address, medical details, their behaviours and your contact information on it. Alternatives include medical ID bracelets or necklaces, dog tags (like the army) attached to clothing or school bag, silicon wrist bands, ID belts and ID shoe tags. Also available are stickers/ labels and patches that may be ironed onto clothing. For further protection away from the home (e.g., for school or with a new caregiver etc.), temporary tattoos may be purchased detailing medical conditions and allergies. GPS tracking devices have also been used to keep track of children with autism.



It would be useful to get to know your neighbours and explain to them that your child may wander. You could also give them a recent photo of your child and your emergency contact information in case they see your child wandering away from home.

### **Behavioural interventions to teach safety**

These include the reinforcement of safe behaviour and having consistent consequences for unsafe behaviour. Safe behaviours may be modeled by you, by peers or by video modeling. Activity schedules (pictures, photos or symbols etc.) can be used to break down and describe a task or behaviour. Social stories can describe behaviours that are appropriate in certain situations. Visual rules such as tape and signs may help to remind your child of safe behaviours and areas of the house.

See references and useful links over page.

Disclaimer: The ideas in this article are for parents and caregivers to consider. Please check with your child care/health professional about the needs unique to your child and home environment.

### **References**

Gaebler-Spira, D., & Thornton, L. S. (2002). Injury prevention for children with disabilities. *Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Clinics of North America*, 13, 891-906.

Smith, L. (2010, March 1). Safe as houses. *Little Treasures Magazine*, pp. 50.

### **Useful Websites**

- <http://www.safekids.org.nz/>
- <http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/at-home/environment-and-surroundings>
- [http://www.autismsocietycanada.ca/life\\_with\\_asd\\_resources\\_families/tips\\_from\\_parents/index\\_e.html](http://www.autismsocietycanada.ca/life_with_asd_resources_families/tips_from_parents/index_e.html)
- <http://www.okautism.org/ofca/faqs/safety-solutions/>
- [http://www.okautism.org/sites/okautism/uploads/documents/autism\\_20and\\_20safetymarch2007.pdf](http://www.okautism.org/sites/okautism/uploads/documents/autism_20and_20safetymarch2007.pdf)
- [http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=research\\_safeandsound\\_homesafety](http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=research_safeandsound_homesafety)
- <http://www.altogetherautism.org.nz/file/Newsletters/October-2008.pdf>
- <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=1390477>
- <http://blogs.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&friendId=120667439&blogId=482112547>
- <http://www.talkaboutcuringautism.org/learning/autismsafety.htm>
- [http://www.safekids.org.nz/index.php/pi\\_pageid/22](http://www.safekids.org.nz/index.php/pi_pageid/22)
- <http://www.maa.nsw.gov.au/default.aspx?MenuID=152>
- <http://www.consumer.org.nz/reports/car-reversing-aids/our-advice>

### **Products Mentioned**

- <http://www.mypreciouskid.com/products/special-needs-children-products.html> (\$US)
- <http://www.mypreciouskid.com/child-autism-safety.html> (\$US)
- <http://www.wanderingkiwi.co.nz/products.php> (\$NZ)
- <http://www.safety4baby.co.nz/> (\$NZ)

