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Are Toddlers Safe In The Home?

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. H. B. TURBOTT, Director of the Division of School Hygiene)

IN a section of a big New Zealand hospital recently were some little pre-school children who should have been home playing. They were very sick, and all from the same trouble—burns sustained in the only really safe place they know—home. Some of them will be crippled for life. One had pulled the flex of the hot water jug and got a boiling shower bath. Another had tugged the scalding milk pot over himself. One toddler had fallen into the bath that mother had left half-full of extremely hot water. Another had clutched both the red-hot elements of an electric heater.

Not all escape with damaged bodies only. In 1940 67 children under five years of age died accidental deaths. Over half of these, 35 of them, died from accidents in or just around our homes. Swallowed objects that suffocated or punctured vital spots, head the list, and the balance comprised deaths from burns, poisons, gases, suffocation, falls, and handling or getting mishandled by machinery. Now, surely all this damage and loss of life is senseless, for almost all of it is preventable. A glance back at the figures show that more children die from home than from street accidents in our country.

Take burns and scalds. One survey of accidents in the home showed that the kitchen was the main scene of damage, and that burns caused half the accidents. Handles of pots and pans should be turned out of reach of toddlers, away from the front of the stove. Matches should be out of reach. Electric flex should hang high and not be left dangling when the hot water jug or iron are left for a few minutes. Open fires should be screened. Only in this morning's paper one reads of a little boy standing in front of the fire in his dressing gown after his bath, the door opened, the breeze blew his dressing gown into the fire, and he was removed to hospital severely burned.

Avoiding all falls is impossible. Little ones have to learn balance and poise by trial and error, but dangerous tumbles can be minimised. Gates can guard steps or stairs, highly-waxed floors are unnecessary, and small objects—toys, blocks, balls, etc.—can be picked up when left on steps, stairs, or floors. They roll or slide when trod on, and in any case, children should be trained to put toys away when finished with. When busy, put baby or toddler in the play pen where he won't come to any harm—outdoors in fine weather, and in sun suits as often as the climate allows.

Scissors with sharp points, sharp tools, or knives, open safety pins, and such-like are best kept out of reach. Gas taps, electric equipment and articles should be taboo. Poisons should be out of sight and inaccessible in a special cupboard. It is useless to go on enumerating a lot of don'ts, for you can easily think of precautions that will keep the little tots out of trouble. The trouble is that folk do not give enough thought to the problem.