



Deaths Associated with Playpens

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U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission
Toll-free Hotline: 1-800-638-2772
www.cpsc.gov

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Parents and caretakers use playpens today as places for infants and toddlers to both play and sleep. Playpens are often used by parents and caregivers as substitutes for full-sized cribs when babies nap.

Over the years, playpens, portable cribs, and play yards have evolved into virtually identical products. More than 2.5 million of these products are sold annually.

In past years, CPSC has conducted information campaigns and issued warnings about putting babies to sleep safely in cribs. Since 1994, CPSC has warned parents that soft bedding such as quilts, comforters, and pillows in cribs can be a risk factor for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). As many as one-third of baby deaths attributed to SIDS, in fact, may be suffocation in soft bedding.

For the first time, CPSC has found that soft bedding may be a factor in deaths to babies in playpens. In addition, mattresses appear to be implicated in these playpen-related deaths.

Hazards

Since 1988, CPSC has received reports of over 200 babies who died while in playpens. In almost 100 of these deaths, soft bedding or improper or extra mattresses were present in the playpen, and the children died of suffocation or SIDS.

Over this period, CPSC conducted follow-up investigations on many of these deaths. In some cases, these investigations led to recalls of products. In other cases, CPSC identified hazards not necessarily related to the design and construction of the playpen. These problems included:

Soft Bedding. Soft bedding can be a risk factor for infant suffocation and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). For example, 68 children died in playpens where soft bedding was present and the cause of death was suffocation or SIDS.

Mattresses/Cushions. In addition, 25 deaths involved mattresses or cushions. The majority of these children died as a result of either being wedged between mattresses, foam, couch cushions, and other large objects placed in the playpen or being wedged between these items and the side wall of the playpen. In some cases, mattresses were too small for the playpen.

Other Hazards. Other hazards identified included:

- Side rails that collapsed, resulting in children being entrapped in the “V” shape created by the two sections of the rail.
- Protruding rivets or other components, which snagged clothing and strangled the child.
- Hardware on older-style wooden playpens, which failed or pulled out of the wood, resulting in falls or entrapment hazards.
- Large mesh on older playpens, which caught buttons on children’s clothing and resulted in strangulation.
- Strangulation on drapery or blind cords when the playpen was placed too close to windows.
- Plastic bags inside the playpen resulting in suffocation.
- Modifications to the playpen to keep the baby inside. These were “lids” consisting of plywood, larger mattresses, or some other material – creating entrapment hazards.
- Broken or damaged playpens, with openings that entrapped infants.
- Mesh pockets created when one side of the playpen was left folded down, creating a suffocation hazard for young children.

Location

CPSC staff reviewed investigated cases to identify locations – in addition to the child’s own home – where children died in playpens. For example, 26 deaths occurred while the child was in a playpen at a day care setting. Four deaths occurred while the child was in the care of other babysitters (i.e. not a day care setting). Eleven deaths occurred in playpens at the home of a grandparent.

Victims

Of those babies who died, 38% were females and 58% were males. In 4% of the incidents, gender was not reported.

About half of the victims were infants less than 6 months old. Another 22% were babies between the ages of 6 and 11 months. Seventeen percent of the victims were toddlers between the ages of 12 and 17 months. Eight percent of the victims were 18 months of age or older. Age was not reported in 3% of the cases.

Preventing Deaths and Injuries with Playpens

To help prevent death or injury to a child in a playpen, parents and caretakers should take the following precautions.

- Always put a baby under 12 months to sleep on his or her back in a playpen with no soft bedding – like quilts, pillows, pillow-like toys, or sheepskins. This can reduce the risk of SIDS and help prevent suffocation.
- Set up the playpen carefully before putting a child in it. Make sure the sides are locked into place. If you have questions, check the manufacturer's instructions or call the manufacturer for assistance. If the sides are not locked in place, children can strangle in the sloping, V-shaped spaces. Infants can suffocate if they roll into a pocket formed at the bottom of a mesh playpen side when the side is down.
- Use only the mattresses or padding provided by the manufacturer. Do not add additional mattresses in playpens. Children can suffocate in the spaces formed between mattresses, from ill-fitting mattresses, and between additional mattresses/padding and the side of the playpen.
- Check that the playpen is in good shape. Using a modified or improperly-repaired playpen can create hazards.

- If using a mesh-sided playpen, make sure the mesh is less than ¼ inch in size (smaller than the tiny buttons on a baby’s clothing). Make sure the mesh is securely attached to the top rail and floor plate and that the mesh does not have tears, holes, or loose threads. The top rail cover should have no tears or holes. If staples are used, they should not be missing, loose, or exposed. These precautions can help prevent strangulation.
- Do not use a playpen with “catch points,” such as protruding rivets. Remove any strings or cords on children’s clothing or around their necks that could catch on the playpen. These also can be strangulation hazards.
- **Before using a playpen, make sure it has not been part of a CPSC recall. Contact CPSC at 1-800-638-2772 or visit CPSC’s website at www.cpsc.gov. If the playpen has been part of a recall, take advantage of the remedy provided by the manufacturer.**