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Babyproofing

A bundle of joy is on the way in this adult-friendly home? Here's what you need to know to make sure the place is safe.

By Douglas Brown
Denver Post Staff Writer



Lou Delaware, owner of Colorado Childproofers, installs a staircase gate in a house in Lafayette, using techniques that don't damage the rails and posts. (Post / John Epperson)

Granite crowds the kitchen, couples could swim laps in the bathtub, and cherrywood finally sheaths that dream library.

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But here comes Junior.

A few decades ago, childproofing the house meant little more than "keep the martinis away from tyro's reach." Now, it means a blizzard of products, a cacophony of advice and even professional childproofing services.

The cabinets? They need doodads to keep baby out. That lovely cherry wood coffee table? Time to wrap its edges with foamy "bumpers." Steps demand gates, the decorative outlets need stolid covers, and don't even think about leaving those antique glass doorknobs alone. Cover them.

"When we first got into it, it seemed so overwhelming and scary," says Roxborough mom and blogger Karen Mohler, 44, the mother of a 4-year-old girl. If she didn't buy the right stuff, she feared her "baby would die a horrible, flaming death right away."

The family babyproofed the house; Junior survived.

People in the know about childproofing say the market now is flooded with new products, many of them worthwhile. But the first thing any parent should do, experts say, is get down on hands and knees and scoot through the house.



Kim Huss gets a look at the installed gate with 15-month-old Kaden. (Post / John Epperson)

"Crawl around each room," says Debra Holtzman, a child-safety expert in Florida and author of "The Safe Baby: A Do It Yourself Guide to Home Safety." "You'll be surprised at what you see."

You might find nails sticking from the underside of tables, or televisions that could tumble with a yank, scatterings of things under couches that kids could choke on and a sharp knife too close to the edge of a counter.

Only after the crawling should a

homeowner begin babyproofing.

Most injuries revolve around these themes: falls, water, fire, poison, suffocation and collisions.

Each threat invites solutions.

Where childproofing used to hinge on the kind of hardware you screwed into place, now it increasingly relies on things you turn on, says Stephanie Brown, the parenting, baby and toddler guide at About.com.

Parents, she says, "are starting to rely on a lot of electronic safety devices. Remote fever monitors that you can hook up to your child. It used to be baby monitors - now people have them with cameras."

One popular device, she says, involves putting a bracelet on the child that is connected, electronically, to a base station.

"If they get a certain distance from the base station, the alarm goes off," she says. "There are pool alarms, a floaty turtle that goes in the pool, and if it detects a splash or water movement, the alarm goes off."

Magnet locks for cabinets now are the big thing, says Meghan Rabbitt, an editor at Parenting magazine.

"Everyone is doing their kitchens, making them look so nice, and it's a shame having your babyproofing ruining your cabinets," she says. The magnet locks, she said, don't mess as much with the decor.

Louie Delaware, the owner of Colorado Childproofers in Louisville, champions the magnet locks as well as relatively new plastic devices that thwart little fingers from slipping between doorframes and the hinge-side of doors. Many fingers, he says, have been smashed while pinned in those

spaces.

Most of his jobs, he said, end up running between \$900 and \$1200, and that

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could include cabinet locks, window guards, gates and outlet covers.

One thing he's seeing more of, he says, is interest in anchoring furniture that could tip onto children.

"The furniture they make today is not solid wood, for the most part," he says. "It's lighter. Kids will try to climb the dresser to get their toy on top, and the furniture falls over."

Cordless window coverings are a must, Holtzman says, because kids every year strangle on dangling cords. But you don't have to buy new coverings to solve the problem. Through the Window Covering Safety Council, windowcoverings.org, homeowners can get free kits to make their old window coverings cordless.

Windows in general should be examined carefully by parents of young children. Kids fall through screens and fall to their deaths every year. If kids are in the house, no window should open more than 4 inches, says Leslie Feuerborn, Safe Kids Denver Metro Coalition Coordinator. The marketplace offers a variety of products to keep windows beneath that threshold.

Babyproofing doesn't have to cost a fortune. Instead of buying bumpers for the kitchen table, just move the furniture. Bathrooms are full of hazards, but you don't have to babyproof everything inside: just put covers on the handles, so kids can't open the doors.

"It's all getting bumped up a notch, and certainly I think with that comes more safety for kids," says Rabbitt. But "nothing

helps more than keeping your baby in sight."

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Safety guidelines

In addition to the steps parents can take to make a place safe for baby, here are basic child-safety guidelines from the National Safe Kids Coalition:

Keep chairs, cribs and other furniture away from windows.

Don't leave a baby alone on a changing table, bed, couch or other furniture. Keep one hand on the baby while changing diapers.

Always strap a baby into a high chair, swing, changing table or stroller.

Get rid of hazards in the home like folded carpets, electrical wires or cords on the floor, and unlit stairways.

Teach children to use playgrounds or playing fields with rubber, wood, mulch or sand surfaces. Grass and dirt are not as good at preventing serious injuries. Avoid asphalt.

Use safety gates or other barriers at the top and bottom of stairs.

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