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Keeping Children Safe from Brain Injury

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Anyone can acquire a brain injury and, unfortunately, head injuries from motor vehicle and bicycle accidents, falls and sporting injuries are very common among children, especially those with disabilities. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (2006) indicates that the highest rates of traumatic brain injury occur in the age groups of 0-9 and 15-19. "Children with disabilities are 2-3 times more likely to sustain an injury that requires medical attention," states Dr. Karen Lindgren, Neuropsychologist, Bancroft. In most cases, these accidents are preventable, and one of the most effective approaches to the problem is to be vigilant to potential hazards in all situations. It's the simple things parents and caregivers can do to prevent their children from having a head injury.

March is National Brain Injury Awareness Month and, in honor of this important time, we should asses the steps we can take to protect our children's heads. "Since many children with disabilities have physical, cognitive and behavioral challenges that make them especially vulnerable to brain injuries, the prevention of accidents must be a primary goal," states Dr. Cynthia Boyer, Senior Director, Brain Injury Services, Bancroft. The following are tips to keep in mind as spring approaches and children are spending more time outdoors playing sports, riding bikes and traveling in cars.

Sports
There is a great risk for subsequent traumatic brain injuries among persons who have had at least one previous brain injury that occurred in a sport associated with hits to the head, including boxing, football, ice or roller hockey, soccer, baseball, basketball and skiing. Any time a child participates in a sport where their brain may be at risk, they should be encouraged to wear a helmet. Additionally, another safety precaution parents can enforce among their children is to wear a mouth guard. The most important function of a mouth guard is in preventing concussions and brain injuries.

Bicycle Riding
When worn correctly, bike helmets are 85% effective in preventing brain injuries, according to the Brain Injury Association. Children are especially at risk because of their lack of skills, knowledge and perception of danger when riding a bike. It is suggested to replace a helmet over 5 years old as well as always after a crash. In addition, a bicycle helmet should fit snugly on the child's head, and only two fingers should fit between the chin and strap. Insisting that a child wears a helmet every time they jump on a bike will protect their brain and help reduce the chance of getting into a fatal accident.

Riding in a Vehicle

Motor vehicle crashes are a major cause of traumatic brain injury in all age groups. A vehicle crash happens so quickly we sometimes don't realize what happened. It's important to take the necessary lawful actions with children when getting into a car to drive. According to the CDC, motor vehicle injuries are the leading cause of death in children 4-11 years of age. For children 4-7 years, belt-positioning booster seats reduce injury risk by 59% compared with seat belts alone. Playing in and around cars is dangerous and something parents should speak about with their children. In addition, parents should never leave a child unattended in a car.

Falling

Believe it or not, falls are a major cause of brain injuries. "Difficulties with balance, perception and impulsivity can lead to falls in children with disabilities," says Boyer. Most falls occur on the swings, monkey bars or climbers and slides. There are many steps parents can take to protect their children on the playground, and the most important one is making certain there is supervision at all times. Adult presence is needed to watch for potential hazards and dangerous objects.

Suffocation

Children under 1 year old are the most at risk for unintentional suffocation due to choking or strangulation. The child may live, but the loss of oxygen to the brain can cause Anoxic Brain Damage, which affects all of the brain and is difficult to treat. The increased risk may be attributable to the fact that children are curious and like to explore their environment. Supervision and parenting play a major part in preventing unintentional injuries. Educating ourselves on what everyday objects could cause harm to young children and then taking the proper steps to ensure safety can prevent head injuries and ultimately save lives.

Child Abuse

Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS) is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality, and the physical consequences of shaking an infant or toddler are fatal. The brain bounces back and forth within the skull cavity, injuring or destroying the brain tissue. If the parent or caregiver feels they are doing something that may cause harm to a child, they must put the child in a safe place and leave the room for a few minutes. After cooling off, go back and handle what's going on with the child.

A head injury can change a life forever. Parents and caregivers need to understand the greatest risk factors for their children and to take the appropriate preventive steps to reduce the risk of unintentional injury.

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