



Falls from Windows Position Paper

Background

Falls are the leading cause of non-fatal injury in Australia and internationally. Falls from windows, though few, are often associated with a serious or fatal outcome and mostly involve pre-school children.¹ The incidence of children falling from windows is likely to grow in the coming years with population growth and housing shortages pushing the need for more high density, high rise dwellings.

There is an identified need for stricter building safety legislation and for more community awareness of this issue to ensure that these preventable injuries and deaths do not occur. In a five month period over 2010-2011 in NSW alone, 7 children have been known to have fallen from windows.² From 1998 to 2002, 252 children under the age of five presented to emergency departments throughout the state of Queensland following a high fall from a balcony or window.³ Clearly, much more is to be done to stop these preventable injuries and deaths.

The importance of coordinated action on this issue cannot be overstated. In the 1970's the 'Children can't fly' program was an initiative developed by the New York City Department of Health to counter the high rates of death and injury among children following falls from windows. The results of this program resulted in the NYC Board of Health amending the building codes to ensure safer window guards were being fitted. Many other cities around the world have since followed New York City's lead. In addition to the lives saved, this intervention has been shown to be cost-effective in terms of savings in hospitalizations, rehabilitation and the costs of maintaining injured or permanently disabled children.⁴

A lack of knowledge, arising from the paucity of national research in this area poses a problem for evaluating the scope of the problem and, therefore, advocacy efforts in this area. This paper aims to present the best available evidence and offer some recommendations for further action.

The AIPN recognises that:

- The National Injury Prevention and Promotion Plan 2004-2014 aims to promote a positive safety culture and the creation of safe environments; under this plan, mandatory safety standards for baby products and home safety is seen as an 'ideal'.⁵
- Initiatives like Victoria's 'Safe Living Programme' 1991-1996', though they do exist, have achieved little success in promoting home safety; five per cent of households reported making safety changes as a result of receiving the home safety package in 1991 compared with 0.3% in 1996.⁶

- The Working Party for the Prevention of Children Falling from Residential Buildings was formed in 2009 at The Westmead Hospital in Sydney to address the fact that there has been an alarming increase in children accidentally falling from windows and balconies.
- Any action that is taken to improve safety of buildings must be based on strong scientific evidence, given the high cost of implementing changes to legislation.

The AIPN acknowledges:

- Falls from windows are predominantly experienced by pre-school children; older children tend to fall from more dangerous play areas such as rooftops or fire escapes.¹
- Falls are the leading cause of traumatic brain injury, especially in young children, with a significant risk of long-term consequences.⁴
- Research has shown that children only need to fall 1 to 3 metres to sustain a fatal injury, therefore, one can assume that falls from windows generally have a devastating outcome.⁷
- Between the years of 1998 and 2001, 252 children presented to hospitals across Queensland with injuries sustained in falls from windows and balconies; more than 50% of high falls within this group sustained intracranial injury and 90% of these injuries occurred in the home.³
- Males are much more likely to suffer an injury from a fall than females and are more likely to be aged between 0-14.¹
- Current community programs, such as the Victorian 'Safe Living Program' have shown to have little effect on home safety, much more work is to be done in injury prevention in this area.⁵

The AIPN recommends:

- Using the 'Children Can't Fly' program as a model for development of regulatory and or legislative intervention in reducing the risk of children falling from windows.
- Promote the use of windows guards/ Public safety messages in the media.
- Local council enforcement of housing standards and building regulations.
- Home visitation programmes for vulnerable low income families.
- Bring together municipal authorities, architects, builders, town planners, furniture designers, product manufacturers, health-care services, social services and non-governmental organizations to steer safety changes in the home.

References

1. Monash University Accident Research Centre; The relationship between slips, trips and falls and the design and construction of buildings. Ozanne-Smith et al. Report no. 281, April 2008.
2. ABC News. First posted March 17, 2011 12:29:00. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-03-17/nsw-parents-warned-after-7th-child-window-fall/2653922>. Accessed: 15th May 2012
3. QISU Bulletin, Barker R et al. Toddler Falls from Balconies and Windows. No. 8 February 2004. http://www.qisu.org.au/ModCoreFilesUploaded/Bulletin_80110.pdf. Accessed 15th May 2012.
4. World Report on Child Injury Prevention. Edited by Peden M et al. WHO 2008. http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2008/9789241563574_eng.pdf
5. National Public Health Partnership (NPHP). 2004. The National Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion Plan: 2004-2014. Canberra: NPHP.
6. Ozanne-Smith J et al. Controlled evaluation of a community based injury prevention program in Australia, Injury Prevention, 2002;8:18-22.
7. Steenkamp M & Cripps R 2001, Child injuries due to falls. Injury Research and Statistics Series. Cat. no. INJCAT 37. Canberra: AIHW.

Other useful references and resources:

- Kidsafe factsheet: <http://www.kidsafewa.com.au/factsheets.htm>:
(www.kidsafeqld.com.au: <http://kidshealth.schn.health.nsw.gov.au/projects/falls-windows-and-balconies>)
- Kidsafe site: <http://www.kidsafe.com.au/>
- www.safecommunitiesqld.org
- Research Centre for Injury Studies: <http://www.nisu.flinders.edu.au/about.php>
- Queensland Injury Surveillance Unit: www.qisu.org.au
- Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit www.visu.org.au
- Monash University Research Centre: www.monash.edu.au/muarc/
- Australian parenting website:
http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/preventing_falls.html