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TITLE: Nursery Safety: A First Priority

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Is your nursery safe? Churches providing nursery care have taken on increased responsibility for protecting the safety of children while their parents worship and participate in other activities. Physical injuries to children left in a nursery could range from minor cuts and bruises to more serious injuries such as broken bones and concussions. Falls, electric shock, food poisoning or the spread of communicable diseases could be the consequence of a poorly supervised nursery or an unsatisfactory physical environment.

Building and room inspections should be undertaken at regular intervals and focus on the physical conditions of ceilings, walls, floors and floor coverings, lighting and general housekeeping.

A "kid's eye view" inspection of the church nursery, adjacent areas and washrooms used by nursery students is recommended. When you inspect your nursery, get down on your hands and knees and observe the room from the height of the children who use the nursery.

There are several potential hazards which should be checked. Any stairs used by nursery students should have anti-slip treads and child-high handrails. Walkways and stairs should be free from recognized "trip and fall" hazards. Climbing toys that are not age-appropriate for nursery students should be removed. Do not leave furniture or toys stacked so a child would find them inviting to climb, which may result in physical injury to them or others in the nursery. All cribs and playpens used in the nursery must meet current safety standards. Serious injury may occur if a child's head becomes wedged between the slats or other opening. The distance between components in the cribs (such as slats, spindles, crib rods, corner posts) should be no wider than 6 cm. The dimensions of openings in your cribs and playpens should be checked to verify that the safety standard is met. If any equipment does not meet this standard, discard it.

Electrical wiring, switches and outlets should be checked and brought up to local electrical codes. Electrical outlets should be covered when not in use, preferably with a non-movable piece of furniture, or with safety caps. Do not allow cords from clocks or other electrical appliances dangle, creating potential strangulation hazards. Extension cords should never be used as permanent wiring, and must not be exposed to access by children even when used temporarily for electrical devices such as video cassette recorders or tape, compact disk, or record players.

Gates should be installed on stairwells and windows that are accessible to young children. Doors need to be closed to prevent children from wandering off, while maintaining access for parents and other adults into the nursery. A safety glass viewing port in the door, or the use of a split door can provide a solution.

Great care needs to be taken in the proper and safe storing of cleaning supplies, insecticides, matches, power tools and any other hazardous materials. Such materials should be stored in child-resistant, locked enclosures away from the nursery area. Any supplies utilized in nursery activities, such as paints, crayons and the like, must be non-toxic.

Nursery furnishings, equipment and toys should be sanitized on a regular basis. Crib and playpen mattress covers should be made of washable vinyl. Proper disposal facilities for soiled diapers are a requisite. All trash cans in the nursery should be securely covered.

If snacks or beverages are provided by either the church or parents, provisions to keep the food at proper temperature until it is consumed are essential. Clean up thoroughly after the children eat to avoid food poisoning from the consumption of spoiled leftovers or spillage and/or to avoid attracting insects or mice.

Churches with nurseries in a location at some distance from the church sanctuary, fellowship hall, church office or another location where adults are present when the nursery is in use will want to consider the installation of a remote audio monitor. This can speed the response should a nursery worker require additional assistance or has an emergency to deal with.

The fire and emergence evacuation plan should be posted and known to every nursery worker. At a minimum, two remote fire exits with illuminated exit signs, and preferably with panic hardware, should be provided. Never lock exit doors with padlocks or deadbolts. Emergency lighting should be installed in order to provide necessary illumination in the event of power failure. An approved automatic sprinkler system is the best defense against the peril of fire, and may be required due to your building construction or local ordinances. Check your local building code to verify that you are meeting all ordinance requirements.

Approved fire extinguishers should be properly placed according to code and accessible to adults but not young children. Extinguishers must be inspected or recharged and tagged at least annually. All possible sources of fire should be eliminated or properly controlled. Boilers and furnaces should be enclosed within a minimum one hour fire rated room, and located well away from the nursery.

A safety check of your nursery facilities should be completed at least twice a year.

Compiled by Ken Pennock, former Property Officer for Toronto United Church Council.

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