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Furniture retailers urged to make a difference in home safety

Leading consumer product safety consultant, Gail Greatorex, is calling on all furniture retailers to take some simple steps to help families prevent furniture tip-over fatalities to children.

Gail, who runs Melbourne based consultancy Product Safety Solutions, said 'Apart from a few conscientious manufacturers and retailers, not much is being done in this vital aspect of home safety. An opportunity exists for furniture retailers to step up and make a difference.'

What's the problem?

Kids explore by climbing and often know that things they're not supposed to have are kept up high. So they find ways to climb - using open drawers as steps or clamber up a bookcase.

At least 14 children under nine years old died in Australia during 2000-2015 after domestic furniture fell on them¹. This is around one death per year.

The website Grave Lessons recently posted a furniture tip-over story² of a Victorian toddler who was unable to be revived after a chest of drawers fell on her.

Severe non-fatal injuries also occur - estimated at more than 300 per year - involving fractures and damage to internal organs.

All these injuries and fatalities are easily prevented!

Easy solution . . . but it requires awareness

As Dr Ruth Barker says in a related video³ 'From a toddler's perspective their home looks like one big playground, but they don't recognise the dangers. The trouble is, most parents don't recognise the dangers either.'

'So, one might think that furniture manufacturers and retailers would remind customers and offer ways to anchor furniture at the time of sale. This would help those who already intend to fit an anchor and educate those who are not as aware', Gail said.

But with a few notable exceptions, this isn't happening in Australia.

Opportunity for retailers to easily make a difference and show leadership

At a Melbourne home-maker centre a survey of ten furniture stores revealed only one - IKEA - provided anchor kits with their products. 'All the other retailers just told me to 'go to Bunnings' to get tools to secure the furniture. None of them showed any understanding of the importance of anchoring', Gail added.

There's several things furniture sellers can do if they range goods such as bookshelves, tallboys and other chests of drawers:

- Demand anchoring devices, information and fitting directions be provided by their suppliers with their products
- Inform their customers of the tip-over dangers and the need to anchor (have information brochures available)

And until anchor kits are provided with the products by the manufacturers:

- Offer anchor kits for sale (or included in the furniture price)

Furniture industry and business associations can help show the way.

Having kits available in store will make it easier for customers and help families keep their homes safe.

Further information

Queensland's Office of Fair Trading has an excellent web page, with video featuring Dr Ruth Barker, explaining the tip-over hazard and how to prevent it.

The ACCC's Product Safety Australia website has a new consumer fact card. These cards could be printed and distributed at point of sale.

The US Consumer Product Safety Commission launched a campaign⁴ this month which includes a dedicated website www.anchorit.gov with video.

Injury data

The Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit (VISU), Monash University recorded 909 emergency department visits in Victoria during January 2006 - June 2014 for injuries related to furniture tip-overs. Of these injuries:

- half were to children four years old and under
- 80% of incidents occurred in the home.

The Queensland Injury Surveillance Unit, Mater Health Service identified 1,032 cases during 1999-2013 where a child under 5 years old was injured by furniture or appliances tipping over. Of these cases:

- the three most common furniture items were chairs, chest of drawers/tallboys and tables/benches/desks
- the most common electrical appliance by far was the television
- the three most commonly identified places the injuries happened were living/dining areas, bedrooms and family/rumpus rooms

USA injury data⁵ reveals 121 deaths and 38,000 injuries that required hospital treatment over a three year period. Of the US injuries, over 30% involved fractures or internal organ damage.

ACCC consumer awareness survey

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has just published a research report: Consumer Awareness of Furniture Stability Risks and Prevention⁶. It found some people were already aware of the risks and some had taken steps to anchor their furniture, but many were not.

More than a quarter of respondents had experienced a tip-over incident. While most resulted in a near miss or minor harm, 40 families reported their child had suffered moderate or severe injuries.

About Gail Greatorex

Gail Greatorex is a passionate advocate for product safety and good product design. Gail worked in consumer product safety with the Australian government for 25 years, mostly at the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. In 2012 she set up her own product safety advisory business. Throughout her career Gail has built her knowledge of safety principles, risk management, legal compliance and technical standards.

About Product Safety Solutions

Product Safety Solutions is Gail's business - assisting companies, associations, government agencies, and consumers in product safety and compliance. The business offers guidance in consumer safety standards and bans, product safety compliance, assessing and analysing product hazards, product recall issues, compliance undertakings and other remedies, product testing and certification, technical evidence, and similar business needs.

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¹ <http://www.productsafety.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/1013969>

² <http://gravelessons.com/2015/03/17/tipping-point/>

³ <https://www.qld.gov.au/law/your-rights/consumer-rights-complaints-and-scams/product-safety-for-consumers/safety-advice-and-warnings/furniture-and-fixtures/furniture-safety/>

⁴ <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/anchor-it-cpsc-launches-nations-largest-campaign-to-prevent-furniture-and-tv-tip-over-deaths-and-injuries-300094174.html>

⁵ <http://www.cpsc.gov//PageFiles/171154/InstabilityorTipoverReport2014Stamped.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.productsafety.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/1014173>