

Keeping Children Safe

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

Keeping children safe can be a challenge even for the best parents. When my wife's cousin married, more than a decade ago, she and her groom rented what everyone considered to be a little "dollhouse." The structure, originally built as a tenant farmer's residence, was freshly refurbished by the owner. Walls had been stripped to the studs and new sheetrock had been hung. The plumbing, wiring, windows, doors, carpeting, and fixtures all had been replaced. The newlyweds proudly invited friends and family to visit their first home.

A little more than a year later a baby girl was welcomed into this loving home. As their infant grew into a toddler, however, the young couple became concerned about her health. Medical tests revealed unusually high amounts of lead in her bloodstream. Suspicion immediately fell upon the little house that the couple had come to love.

Investigators from the Department of Health initially were stumped. The paint was fresh; the windows were vinyl. The usual suspects in lead contamination simply weren't apparent. But then they checked the carpeting—and the ground around the house. Years before, farmers in the region had used a lead-based pesticide to kill the tobacco hornworm. Residue of this pesticide persisted in the soil around the house, was tracked in on people's shoes, and was ground into the carpets where the baby crawled and played.

The bad news is that my wife's cousin and her husband had to find a new home; the good news is that their little girl now is a fully recovered middle-school student. Their experience, however, is a reminder that dangers to children may lurk even—or especially—at home.

Shortly after we received the report on the source of the lead contamination in her cousin's house, I said to my wife, "Our own house is built on a former tobacco farm!" (At the time, we lived in Maryland.) I immediately tried—with little success—to learn whether lead-based pesticides had been used there too. Finally, we decided to adopt a cautious approach and, from that day until now, have become "Japanese." That is, outdoor shoes now come off whenever we enter our home. This practice gives us one less thing to worry about when our four grandchildren have their toys spread out on our carpets and floors.

Concerns about keeping children safe extend beyond our family circle. Thanks to the vision of PCDC's Child Development Coordinator Heidi Condrey, we have begun a makeover of the infant and toddler rooms at our Eighteenth Street Smart Start Learning Center. When the renovations are complete, the carpet in the infant room will have been replaced by resilient flooring, and a no-shoes (or disposable booties) rule will apply for all who enter that room. Along with other upgrades and improvements to this area of our building, we underscore our commitment to keep the children who've been entrusted to our care as safe and healthy as possible.

That commitment goes beyond the provision of a safe environment. Every April, we mark Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Month. With eighty reports of child abuse and neglect last year in King William County alone, it's clear that children are endangered by more than pesticide-contaminated carpets. That's the bad news. The good news is that help is available, as close as a telephone or computer keyboard. Call 1-800-CHILDREN (800-244-5373) or visit www.preventchildabuseva.org to access vital and confidential information about keeping children safe. For more information about the dangers of lead, call 1-800-424-LEAD or visit www.epa.gov/lead. If you'd like a free refrigerator magnet with the reminder, "In loving hands, kids blossom," please stop by our administrative office, 702 Main Street, in West Point. Join us in our commitment to keep children safe!

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