

Your Health

By Dr Paul Roumeliotis

Bunk Beds Can Be Dangerous

In response to the recent tragic bunk bed related death of a 6 year-old girl, I wanted to let you know about bunk beds and their dangers. Bunk beds on the surface seem like a neat, fun and space-saving idea. However, bunk beds have resulted in thousands of hospital visits in children less than 15 years of age. Most injuries resulting when children fall from the beds are minor, although serious head injuries do occur. For these reasons many experts recommend not using bunk beds at all. Aside from falls, there are several ways that children can become injured:

Guardrail spacing

On some beds, the space between the guardrail and mattress or the frame and mattress is large enough to allow a young child to slip through. Tragically, deaths have occurred when children became suspended by the head in these spaces and strangled.

Bunk bed without rails on both sides

Most bunk beds are used with one side located against a wall. Deaths have occurred when very young children rolled off the bed and became entrapped between the wall and the side of the bed not having a guardrail.

Dislodgement of mattress foundation

The mattress foundation on some bunk beds merely rests on small ledges attached to the bedframe. They can dislodge or move, particularly if a child underneath the bunk pushes or kicks upwards on the mattress. Suffocation deaths have occurred when mattress foundations fell on children sleeping in the lower bunk.

Wrong mattress size

Bunk beds and mattresses come in two lengths; regular and extra long (5 inches or 127 mm longer than regular). When a regular length mattress is used for an extra long bed, there can be a 5-inch opening between the mattress and headboard or footboard. Strangulation deaths have occurred when children fell through openings created between the mattress and headboard or footboard when a regular length mattress was used in an extra long bed frame.

Children under 6 years of age should not sleep in the upper bunk. For older children, here are some safety tips from the Consumer Product Safety Commission:

- Always use securely placed (screwed or bolted) guardrails on the upper bunk - on both sides.
- The space between bed frame and bottom of guard rails should be no more than 3 1/2 inches (89 mm).
- Guardrails should extend at least 5 inches (127 mm) above the mattress.
- The ladder should be well secured to the bed frame so kids will not slip while climbing.
- Make sure that the mattress correctly fits the bed.
- Be sure cross ties are under the mattress foundation of each bed and that they are secured in place.
- Teach children to use the ladder and not chairs or other pieces of furniture to climb into or out of the top bunk. Also, teach them that rough play is unsafe around and on beds and other furniture.
- A night light may help children see the ladder during the night.
- If spacing between guard rails and bed frames is more than 3 1/2 inches (89 mm), nail or screw another rail to close the space.
- Keep guardrails in good repair and securely in place, and replace loose or missing ladder rungs and loose or missing hardware immediately.

The best advice in general is always supervise young children.

Dr. Paul Roumeliotis is the Medical Officer of Health for the Eastern Ontario Health Unit and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, McGill University. © Dr. Paul Roumeliotis