Grandparents Can Play Vital Role in Grandkids’ Health, Safety

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I still remember the first few years of my kids’ lives, when their health and safety were virtually always on my mind. I remember racing to stay one step ahead of their curiosity. I put away the breakables, plugged the electrical outlets, installed cabinet latches, and secured household poisons.

Now my children are grown, and I’m looking forward to (maybe) becoming a grandparent someday. And I realize that I’m going to have to start all over when it comes to child-proofing my home.

As a public health professional, I also realize there are other steps I can – and should – take to ensure the health and safety of my grandkids (if and when I have some). They go far beyond child-proofing.

Grandparents can play a key role in guiding their children’s children to live a long and healthy life. To start with, they can model a healthy lifestyle that includes physical activity and a nutritious diet.

If you’re a grandparent, or about to become one, there are other ways you can influence your grandkids’ well-being – whether you’re their primary caregiver or occasional host. These include sharing your family medical history, getting vaccinated, storing medicines properly, and updating your child-safety knowledge.

Share Family History

As the family patriarch or matriarch, you’re in a unique position to provide your grandchildren with important medical history information – about your own health and that of their parents, aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins.

A family medical history can help a person recognize whether they have a higher-than-usual chance of getting certain disorders, like heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, certain cancers, asthma, and diabetes. These health problems are influenced by a combination of genes, environment, and lifestyle. Family members often have many of these factors in common.

When a person knows their family medical history, they can take steps to reduce their risk of developing a disease. Their health-care provider can make more informed decisions about their medical care.
Family gatherings, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, can be a good time to talk about your family medical history. As appropriate for their age, be sure to let your grandkids know about:

- The age at which relatives have died, and the cause of death.
- Whether any rare conditions, like cystic fibrosis, bleeding diseases, or sickle cell disease, run in the family.
- Whether anyone in the family has or had long-term health problems, like heart, lung, or kidney disease.
- How relatives with illnesses were treated and whether they successfully got their conditions under control.

The Office of the Surgeon General has a tool called My Family Health Portrait that can help you organize and update a family health history. You can find it at https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/FHH/html/index.html

Get Vaccinated

You owe it to your infant grandchild to get a pertussis shot (Tdap) at least two weeks before you first cuddle that bundle of joy. You can also encourage mom to get the vaccine during her third trimester of pregnancy.

Pertussis, or whooping cough, spreads easily and can cause severe illness and even death. It’s especially dangerous for babies under 6 months old.

If you were vaccinated against whooping cough or had it as a child, that protection has likely worn off by now.

To learn more about the pertussis vaccine, visit www.cdc.gov/whoopingcough.

Store Medications Properly

Almost 40 percent of adults age 65 or older take five or more prescription medications. Often, we store these in daily pill organizers or bottles with easy-to-open, rather than child-resistant, caps. And we tend to keep them in plain sight so we remember to take them.

That most likely contributes to the fact that almost half of all child poisonings involving medicine occur when a child gets into a grandparent’s medication, according to Safe Kids Worldwide.

To keep your grandchild out of the emergency room:

- Move all medicines, vitamins, and other supplements out of children’s reach and sight.
- Keep purses, luggage, or coats that have medicines in them out of reach of grandchildren.
- Close medicine bottles tightly after every use.
- Properly dispose of old and unused medications. A free disposal station is located in the lobby of the Law Enforcement Center, 221 Breckenridge, in Helena. You can also stop by Lewis and Clark Public Health, 1930 Ninth Ave., to get a free medication disposal bag. You can use one to safely dispose of medicines at home.
Keep the Poison Control number handy: 1-800-222-1222.

For more tips, visit www.upandaway.org.

Update Your Knowledge

You raised your own kids, so you probably think you know what to do to keep your grandkids safe. But times change, and so does child-rearing advice. What worked for you may now be unacceptable.

For example:

- **Toss that bottle of ipecac.** You may have used this syrup to induce vomiting when your child swallowed something poisonous. But new studies show vomiting doesn’t really help. Plus, ipecac can be dangerous in certain cases. Instead, call Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222.

- **Put babies on their back to sleep.** In the old days, you may have learned to put your infant down to sleep on its stomach or side. That way it wouldn’t choke if it spit up, or so went the thinking at the time. But since 1992, pediatricians have recommended that babies sleep on their backs to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). The rate of SIDS has dropped by half as a result.

- **Use car seats correctly.** Technology has come a long way since you had small kids, and the rules are constantly changing. As of 2011, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that toddlers stay in rear-facing infant seats until they’re 2 years old or they reach the seat’s height and weight limits. Then they can move to a forward-facing car safety seat with a harness. Learn more about car seats at www.seatcheck.org.

- **Avoid hand-me-down cribs.** There have been significant changes in crib safety over the past 20 years. For example, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) recently prohibited the sale of drop-side cribs. Learn more on the CPSC website: www.cpsc.gov/Safety-Education/Safety-Education-Centers/cribs

Child-Proof the Home

If babies or toddlers are going to spend time at your place – and isn’t that part of the joy of being a grandparent? – you’ll still need to take basic child-proofing steps. If you need a reminder of what these are, check out these tips from the National Safety Council: www.nsc.org/learn/safety-knowledge/Pages/Childproofing-Your-Home.aspx

You might be surprised by all the new and effective gadgets on the market!