

Real Hidden Dangers The Tragic Need to Prevent Furniture Tip-Over

By Christine Tarlecki

keeping your child safe is the most important thing a parent can do. Parents strive to do so in all situations – at school, on vacations, at the supermarket, at the mall, etc. The one place where parents might be able to relax a bit is in the home, right? Tragically, that is not always the case. The home can be a dangerous place, especially when you consider a danger that parents are becoming more aware of – furniture tip-over.

Judy and Bob Lambert, of Jenkintown, Pa., lost their 3-year-old daughter, Katie Elise, in January 2005, when an unsecured wardrobe cabinet in their home tipped and fell onto Katie, crushing and killing her.

This tragic story seems to be repeating itself as more and more accidents of this magnitude are happening. Judy and Bob have made it their mission to inform and educate parents about the possibility of furniture tip-over by starting The Katie Elise Lambert Foundation (www.katieeliselambert.org) and are working on getting legislation passed to ask furniture manufacturers to include warnings on their products.

“We began the foundation after Katie was killed,” says Judy. “We found from our own amateur research on the computer there was not much information about unsecured furniture and furniture tip-over. We decided to try to raise awareness on furniture tip-over through a Web site and the foundation to try to educate the public on those hazards,” she says. “We have an 11-member voluntary board, with people that have helped us through the years. For the past few years we have participated in local safety fairs, NBC ConsumerFest, and have spoken at local schools. We try to get our name out there and provide a lot of information – not just on furniture safety but on safety in general and other issues for parents. We’ve included a safety checklist on our Web site, for additional help. We want to go any place where we have a chance to try to touch just one person.”

Any freestanding piece of furniture has the potential for tipping, whether it is a high-end piece or something you put together yourself. Any piece can tip. If a child can pull out a drawer or hang on a door, that can cause front heaviness and can cause a piece to tip, Judy says.

“One of the greatest dangers now are televisions. Just this past month we received an e-mail from a family whose daughter was killed from a falling television. It seems every month someone is being killed by television tip-over. They are placed on stands and [when the TV falls off the stand] it is like a torpedo falling down,” Judy says.

Parents can make their homes safer by becoming aware of the dangers of the furniture. There are items available on the market to anchor furniture and make it more secure, using a tip-over kit, or L-brackets and hardware from companies like Hangman products. If the furniture is properly bolted and secured, then the chance of tip-over is greatly reduced.

“Many parents feel that if their furniture is a high-end piece, it probably won’t tip, it’s stable. But I try to let them know that, yes, it can. If a child is hanging on it or wants to climb it, that item will come down on top of the child. It doesn’t matter if it is an expensive or low-end piece – all freestanding furniture has the potential to

tip,” Judy says.

Some manufacturers do include the tethers and the kit – such as some IKEA pieces – but the Lamberts and their foundation would like the furniture to include a warning label. “My husband has put together many pieces of furniture where it has taken hours to complete, and the very last thing in the instructions is to tether the furniture, but they don’t tell you why,” Judy says. “We’d like the tethering part to come first, and a warning label somewhere on the furniture saying it can tip. After putting something together for six hours, you are too tired to secure it to the wall.”

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Judy also receives letters from families and friends who have lost children this tragic way. “We recently received a letter from the neighbor of a family who lost their daughter. They found us on the Internet, and asked what to do. My husband and I wrote to them. The family will not be ready to talk; we advise to just let them grieve. If and when they want to speak, tell them you are here for them. We want to be there, too – we have a yahoo group to touch other who have lost children this way, and to let them know we are there for each other. And the parents are not alone...unfortunately, this happens way too often.”

To keep this from happening, the Lamberts and their

foundation have embarked on a new endeavor to let the world know how important this is. Currently there are no laws to govern furniture safety, and they are trying to pass H.R. 4266, a bill that will.

U.S. Rep. Allyson Schwartz, D-PA, introduced a bill on April 27, 2005, called The Katie Elise and Meghan Agnes Act (Meghan Agnes Beck was 3 years old when a falling dresser killed her), which would require furniture manufacturers to include tethering devices and warning labels with certain pieces of furniture. The bill died sitting in committee, so Congresswoman Schwartz reintroduced it on December 4, 2007.

“Right now we are trying to get more co-sponsors involved in the bill. It puts a lot of the responsibility back on the consumer safety commission to provide information,” Judy says.

“The bill in Congress has to be designed to work along with furniture tip-over committee at ASTM International, which sets safety standards in every industry. Members of the committee, leaders in the manufacturing field decide how to test the furniture – i.e. tip-over, what kind of warnings are applied and used domestically. We want this passed as a law so the government and the consumer products safety commission has to regulate the industry itself as a whole,” Bob Lambert says.

The question remains, though, who has the responsibility to help keep children safe?

“I think it is the furniture manufacturers’ responsibility to at least provide warnings to parents that it can tip,” says Judy. “I think it really has to be their responsibility. A plastic bag comes with a warning label that it could suffocate; I think the furniture manufacturers could put a warning label in the front drawer saying, ‘Hey! This can tip,’ and leave the rest up to the parents. We can’t make them anchor their furniture but we can at least provide the education to them. I do think it is everyone’s responsibility, but it needs to start with the manufactures to [begin] the education,” she says.

Christine Tarlecki is a freelance writer from Mont Clare, Pa.

How to Make Your Home Furniture Safe

Secure ALL furniture with shelves, drawers, and doors to the walls (into a stud if possible) with an appropriate device. It doesn’t matter how tall or short, heavy, stable, or well made it is. Be sure that what you use can hold the weight of a fully loaded piece of furniture. You can use any of the following:

- Hagman Products Anti-Tip Kit
- Safety First Furniture Wall Straps
- Mommy’s Helper Furniture Safety Brackets
- Kidco’s Anti-tip furniture straps
- Quake Hold TV strap, computer strap, big screen TV strap, and appliance strap
- Parent Unit’s Safety straps, topple stops (great for TV’s/computer monitors)
- “L” brackets
- Earthquake cables

Secure ALL TV’s to the wall and/or to the table/entertainment center on which it sits. Also secure computer monitors. (see above list)

Place TV sets and computer monitors on low, stable units as far back as possible, then secure them to the wall and/or to the surface on which it sits.

Do not place anything on top of the TV.

Place heavy items on the lowest shelf and in the lowest drawer, putting progressively lighter items in drawers from the bottom up.

Place any items that may be of interest to a child within easy reach so they are not enticed to climb for it or reach for it.

Do not place items you do not want your child to have within their sight but out of their reach (or even out of sight but out of their reach if they know where you put it) as they are likely to try to climb or reach for it. Remote controls and toys/games/videos/DVDs are items kids frequently reach for on top of TV’s.

Don’t assume simply telling your child not to climb/reach is enough, it isn’t.

Don’t assume your child will remember the dangers even if you’ve told them to be careful. Play is the work of children.

Don’t assume it can’t happen to you, it can, and in a heartbeat.

Don’t assume your child is too old. Every child under 10 needs to be protected.

Do it right, do it now. The next child saved could be yours.

Even if your furniture and TV’s are secured, check the safety straps frequently to be sure they are still secure. They can come loose or plastic cable ties and parts can break over time, especially if exposed to sunlight or increased pressure.

Courtesy www.meghanshope.org and www.katieeliselambert.org.