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Dangers Lurk Closer to Home

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If parents of young children were asked to name their biggest fears, these three would probably top the list, if only because they are so terrifying, so cataclysmic — and so widely publicized when they occur.

But they seldom do. The biggest threats to children's health and well-being are often right under parents' noses, present in activities so mundane that caregivers are desensitized to their risk, like bathing, swimming or riding in a car.

“What really stands in the way of kids surviving into adulthood and being healthy so they can accomplish their dreams are accidents — unintentional injuries,” said Ileana Arias, director of the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). “Injuries are the No. 1 killer of kids.”

Accidents and unintentional injuries — mostly a result of drownings and motor vehicle accidents — kill more than 4,000 children ages 1 to 14 annually in the United States, according to the C.D.C. That number also includes deaths caused by fire and burn injuries, pedestrian accidents and suffocation; poisoning accounts for just 1.3 percent of accidental deaths of children in this age group.

Though cancer is the second leading cause of death among young children, it causes far fewer deaths than accidents or unintentional injuries, with 1,377 children ages 1 to 14 dying of cancer annually, C.D.C. figures show.

Children are far more likely to be affected by other less lethal but more common chronic illnesses, like [asthma](#) (9 percent of children under 18); [obesity](#) (16 percent of children 2 to 19); and [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#) (7 percent of children 3 to 17).

[Autism](#), which receives a lot of attention in the news media, affects fewer than 1 percent of children, according to a national report on the prevalence of autism in 8-year-olds

issued last year by the C.D.C., which found a mean rate of 6.7 cases of autism per 1,000 8-year-olds.

Children are often victims of crimes, but not necessarily of the sort that keep parents awake at night, said David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the [University of New Hampshire](#) in Durham and the author of “Childhood Victimization: Violence, Crime and Abuse in the Lives of Young People.”

“Assaults by other children are the most common, and if you factor in sibling assaults, more than half of all kids are victimized each year,” he said. “Some people say, ‘You can’t count that.’ But children are intimidated and hurt by their siblings.”

Although parents worry about strangers kidnapping or sexually molesting their children, these kinds of crimes are rare, he said, noting that it is family members and close acquaintances who commit most serious crimes against children. “Children face substantial risks, but there is misplaced [anxiety](#),” he said, attributing it to a natural tendency to trust people who are known and part of the community.

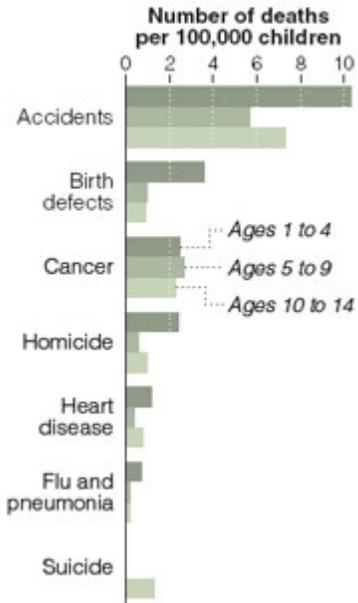
According to one Department of Justice study, about 115 child kidnappings each year fit the stereotype of stranger abductions — that is, someone who does not know or barely knows the child; who holds the child overnight or takes him or her 50 miles or more away from home; and who kills the child, demands ransom or plans to keep the child permanently. It is teenage girls, not young children, who are most likely to be the targets of a stranger kidnapping and sexual assault, Dr. Finkelhor noted. Teenagers in general are two to three times as likely as adults to be victims of a conventional rape, robbery or aggravated assault, according to the Justice Department’s National Crime Victimization Survey, derived from interviews with about 100,000 citizens each year (the survey does not include children under 12).

The message for parents is to take all available precautions to prevent accidents and injuries, Dr. Arias of the C.D.C. said. That means enforcing car seat use for children until age 8, regardless of weight and height, and keeping them in the back seat until they are 10 or 12, depending on their size, she said.

Bicycle helmets should be worn for skateboarding and biking, she said. A recent study in Ontario, Canada, found that bicycle-related death rates for children 1 to 15 years dropped 52 percent after enforcement of a helmet law started in 1995.

Where the Risks Are

Some of the leading causes of death for children under 15.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention