

Children and Electrical Outlets

Electrical outlets are usually installed at a height at or near a child's eye level, and a child's curiosity can draw them to explore, making electrical outlets a source of worry for many parents.

The chance of electrocution is small, but the results can be devastating. According to a 1994 estimate of electrocutions released by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), there were 890 deaths in 1984, decreasing to 560 in 1994. (These figures include all age groups and count only fatalities and not shocks and injuries.)

In another study conducted in 1997, the CPSC found:

- 86 percent of reported injuries involved children 1 to 4 years old
- The highest frequency of home electrical injuries occurred at mealtimes
- The most commonly used foreign objects inserted into outlets were keys and hairpins

This indicates that many home electrocution and shock injuries involve unsupervised children. There are simple measures that can be taken to avoid injury or death to a child.

Plastic outlet protectors

Most of us are familiar with plastic outlet protectors. The prongs fit directly into the outlet holes, preventing the insertion of foreign objects. But many parents say they feel a little uneasy about the effectiveness of these devices. A study of 37 children conducted in 1997 by the Biokinetics Research Laboratory of Temple University seems to confirm their reservations:

- 47 percent of 4-year-olds and 31 percent of 2-year-olds could remove protectors with a round, flat face and two prongs
- 47 percent of 4-year-olds and 18 percent of 2-year-olds could remove protectors with a 3/16-inch thick oval face and a tapered side
- 100 percent of 2- and 4-year-olds could remove protectors with a 1/16-inch thick oval face and a flat side



Child tamper-resistant outlets

A few electrical device manufacturers make electrical outlets that are intended to prevent a child from inserting something into the outlet holes. They look just like any other outlet, but behind the face of the receptacle are plastic shutters.

These shutters are designed to remain closed until a plug is inserted. When something is inserted into both vertical outlet holes at the same time, the interior plastic shutters open. Its safety is premised on the fact that most young children will not try to stick two objects into the two vertical outlet holes at the same time.

These outlets cost \$4 to \$6 each, as compared to \$1 to \$3 each for a typical electrical outlet receptacle. They require no additional labor to install than typical outlet receptacles. These outlets are available through your local electrical supply store or your electrician.

Child tamper-resistant outlet face covers

Electrical outlet receptacle covers have faces that swivel or slide over the outlet holes. Some are intended as replacement face covers; others install over existing outlet face covers.

The electrical outlet face covers cost anywhere from \$3 to \$6 each. Those that replace the existing outlet face cover can be bought from your local electrical supply store or your electrician. The after-market faceplate that fits over the existing outlet faceplate is sold through baby product magazines, discount stores and building supply stores.

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