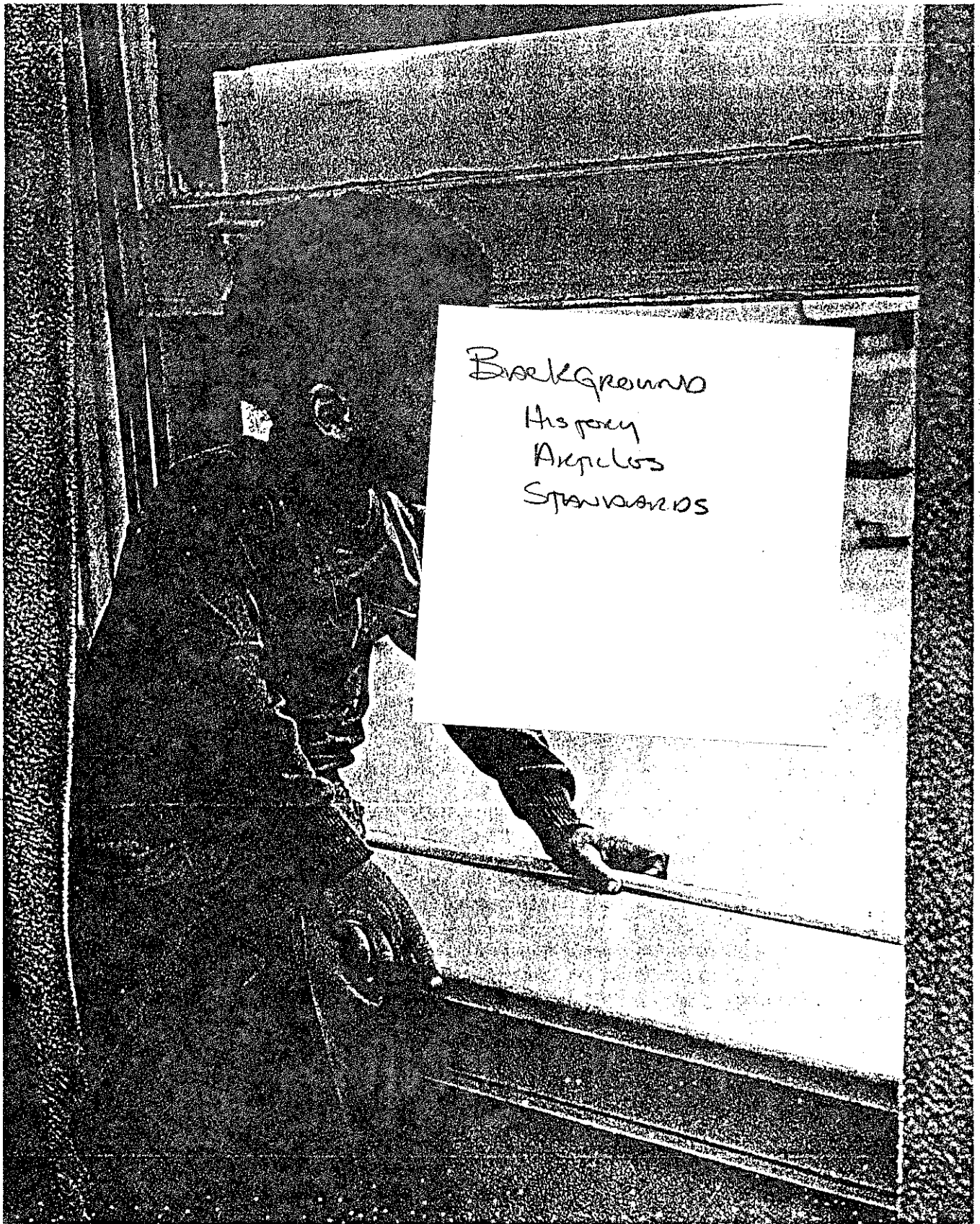


† OPEN INVITATION TO TRAGEDY



Background  
History  
Articles  
Standards

A NEIGHBOR's terrified voice on the phone said, "Your son is climbing on the windowsill!" The young mother in Newark, New Jersey, raced from the kitchen to the bedroom just in time to see her 2½-year-old son tumble out the open window and fall eight stories to his death on the pavement below.

Strangely, falls from windows are commonplace, especially to children under 5 years old, yet they receive little attention. *See histories*

A study of deaths from falls from heights (windows, fire escapes, roofs, stairs) in New York City from 1965 to 1969 found that in the four-year period 123 children under 15 died after falling from windows. Of these, 113 were children under 5 years old. The report states that during the summer months June through August 42 per cent of all accidental deaths to children in the 0-4 age group were caused by falls from heights, primarily windows. Such deaths in the toddler age group far exceeded the toll from the more publicized hazards of fire, poisoning, motor vehicles or drowning.

The problem is not limited to apartment buildings in urban areas. During the summer months, when homes of all types have windows open, this tragic accident is as likely to happen in a two-story suburban or rural home as in the city.

The New York study showed that the group of children who suffered the greatest number of fatal falls from windows was between 2 and 3 years old. This is the climbing and exploring age, when children have little fear of falling. The lure of a bright summer day leads toddlers to the window where they climb on radiators, sofas and almost any object that will give them access to the window.

*Little Sam Camp knows the dangers of open windows. In July, 1969, he fell three floors, landing on concrete pavement. Miraculously, he escaped with only bruises and a fractured jaw.*

A young Philadelphia boy, only 16 months old, even pushed a chair to his third-floor apartment window and climbed out. In an almost unbelievable twist of fortune, a man delivering bakery bread saw the youngster on the sill and ran beneath him holding out his hamper of bread. The young boy landed on the bread and then tumbled to the sidewalk, but was reported to be all right the next day.

*Fallen people*  
**Don't depend on screens**

Screens on an open window often give a false sense of security. Many are rusty and in poor condition and give way easily.

An 18-month-old boy in Providence, Rhode Island, was sitting on the back of a sofa, leaning backwards against a screen on an open window, when the screen ripped and he fell three stories to the dirt alongside the house. Fortunately, he was reported in good condition after the fall.

A 3-year-old Jersey City, New Jersey, girl was not as lucky. She climbed on a radiator and leaned against the screen, which gave way. She fell three stories and died from a broken neck.

Even if the wire is in good condition, screens that are hooked in place give inadequate protection. Hooks often are loose in the screw eyes, and toddlers can open them without difficulty. Full screens hinged at the top may be fastened with a spring latch that can be even easier to operate.

A 2-year-old Bay City, Michigan, boy, playing at the home of a baby sitter, fell from a second-story window after he unhooked an upstairs window screen.

A 16-month-old boy in Toledo, Ohio, was able to loosen the screen in a kitchen window, and he fell two stories to the sidewalk below. He died from a skull fracture.

An Indianapolis, Indiana, woman told FAMILY SAFETY that while she and her neighbor were hanging out their laundry she noticed her neighbor's 18-month-old daughter on the window sill of a second-floor apartment. Just as she started to warn the mother, both the baby and the screen came tumbling to the ground. Luckily, the baby landed in soft earth and survived.

Every year brings miraculous stories of children surviving long falls, especially if they land on soft ground instead of a hard surface. The flexibility of young children's bones and the fact that they are relatively relaxed in a fall also help explain why so many of them do survive.

A British consultant on falling accidents estimates that 1,000 children fall from windows in England every year, but that the mortality rate is only about one per cent. The New York City experience indicates that mortality in the United States probably is higher.

#### **Beds make falling easier**

A frequent mistake of parents is to leave children in a crib or on a bed next to an open window.

A Passaic, New Jersey, mother reported that every time she checked her year-old daughter, the baby was asleep on her bed. But apparently the youngster woke up, crawled over to an open window and fell out. Although she fell two stories, she was another of the fortunate ones to escape serious injury.

A 21-month-old boy from Plum Borough, Pennsylvania, also fell from his second-floor bedroom window when he was supposed to be taking a nap. He was put in his crib at 4:30 p.m. and an hour later his mother discovered the crib empty, the window screen pushed out and the boy lying in the yard. The boy died.

The window close to the floor

presents another situation which, like the bed, doesn't even require the child to climb.

In a Sheboygan, Wisconsin, apartment the kitchen window was only about a foot from the floor. Two-year-old Daniel soon found he could open the window. The screen gave way, and he fell two stories to a first-floor roof. He rolled off the roof and landed on the lawn about 15 feet below—without serious injury.

A common denominator in all of these accidents to young children is that they were unattended when they fell. Obviously, children can't be watched through nap time and every other moment of the day, but it can't be stressed enough that children at the toddling age *should never be left alone in a room with an unsecured window*, even if the window is screened.

In Normal, Illinois, a 3-year-old boy was reported playing alone in a second-floor bedroom when he fell from an open window.

A 26-month-old boy also fell from a second-floor bedroom of his house

in West Scranton, Pennsylvania, even though his mother and other children were home at the time. He suffered a head injury when he rolled 7 feet down a sloped roof and then fell 10 feet to a sidewalk.

A father in Denver left the bedroom for a moment after giving his 2-year-old a bath. The boy pushed out a screen and fell three stories to his death.

It can happen even faster than that. One father from San Jose, California, was in the same room with his 2-year-old son when he turned at a sound, saw the boy was missing, looked out the window and saw him on the ground below.

Although the sights and sounds of daylight activity make nap time especially hazardous, even leaving a child alone at night in a room with an open window is not without peril. A Wilmington, Delaware, father told how his 30-month-old son fell from a fourth-floor window: "We were asleep when it happened at about 6:40 a.m. He must have gone to the window and pushed against

the screen and it came out." The boy was taken to the hospital in critical condition.

### What you can do

There are several things you can do to keep the tragedy of a window fall from your home:

- If you must open windows in a room where a small child will be sleeping or playing, *open them not more than four or five inches*. If you fear the child can raise the window higher, you can secure it at the desired height with a "window burglar lock," available at hardware stores.

You can also create your own device, such as a piece of broomstick or wood placed between the top of the raised window and the top of the window frame.

- For windows that are opened with the turning of a handle, it is a good idea simply to remove the handle and screw it back on only when you need to adjust the window.

- Curtains or shades over a window during nap time and at night will help keep a curious child from being attracted to the scene outdoors.

- Be sure all screens are secure and in good repair, but don't depend on them.

- Never place a child's bed or crib next to a window.

- Avoid placing furniture under windows. If you can't avoid it, keep those windows closed.

- If you have a particularly active child, take special precautions. You can place a portable wooden safety gate across windows if you're certain your child can't undo the gate. Or, you can purchase adjustable window guards. *It must be noted, however, that windows should not be so barricaded that they can't be used as an escape route in case of fire.*

- Some sort of window protection is also recommended if your windows are close to the floor.

- Above all, **KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR TODDLER.** □



*She looks safe now, but leaving a child to "nap" on a bed next to an open window—screened or not—is hazardous.*