

Canada bans baby walkers

CAUSE 1,000 INJURIES EACH YEAR IN COUNTRY

Major retailers stopped selling them in 1989, but small vendors have kept them in stock

ANDY RIGA
THE GAZETTE

Melly's parents thought she was safe because they were nearby and had installed a gate at the top of the stairs. But as the eight-month-old girl scooted around the kitchen in a wheeled baby walker, she yanked on the cord of a kettle, splashing her face and body with scalding water.

The girl, who suffered severe burns nearly a year ago, was front and centre last year when the Montreal Children's Hospital launched an appeal to outlaw walkers, the cause of about 1,000 injuries to Canadian kids each year, mostly involving babies under one toppling down stairs.

Yesterday, officials at the hospital and other child-safety advocates got their long-held wish when Health Canada banned the sale, advertisement or importation of baby walkers in Canada.

Canada is the first country to impose such a ban, said Health Minister Pierre Pettigrew.

The rule applies to new walkers and second-hand ones sold at garage sales or flea markets. Offenders are liable to fines of up to \$1 million or two years in jail.

Walkers, for children five to 14 months, typically feature fabric seats with leg openings, allowing the child's feet to touch the floor. A baby in one can move one metre in a second, according to Safe Kids Canada, an injury prevention program.

Canada's big retailers agreed to stop selling them in 1989 but Canadian kids still use them, thanks to garage sales, small retailers and purchases in nearby U.S. states, said Health Canada spokesperson Carole Saindon.

Debbie Friedman, head of the Montreal Children's Hospital

trauma program, hailed the ban. "Too many children are being injured," and falls can cause serious head injuries and brain damage, she said. "They may be convenient for parents and the kids may like them, but they give a false sense of security."

A 2002 survey of 1,200 Canadian pediatricians found 7.1 per cent had treated one or more children under 18 months old for injuries associated with baby walkers in the previous year.

Walkers still pose a danger because of hand-me-downs, uninformal garage-sale vendors and stores, including online ones, based in the U.S., where the devices are legal, Friedman noted.

Dr. Robyn Walker, president of the Canadian Paediatric Society, praised Health Canada but said a public-education campaign is needed to warn of the dangers of wheeled walkers. He urged parents to replace them with activity centres without wheels.

"We haven't sold baby walkers at Toys R Us in Canada for 15 years," said Debbie Mondell, a Toys R Us spokesperson. "And I don't know of another Canadian retailer that does."

In the U.S., most new walkers are too wide to fit through a doorway and have gripping mechanisms to stop them from going over the edge of a step.

Those restrictions aren't good enough, Friedman said. Even with them in place, baby walkers cause about 7,000 injuries every year, says the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Since 1973, walkers have been involved in 23 deaths in the U.S.

For more on keeping kids safe, visit www.safekidscanada.ca

ariga@thegazette.canada.com



COURTESY OF TOYS R US
The Exersaucer, an activity



COURTESY OF TOYS R US (U.S.A.)
The Tiny Steps walker