

# HOME & FAMILY

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**Cranky Consumer** / By Ethan Smith

## Baby-Proofers Size Up Hazards

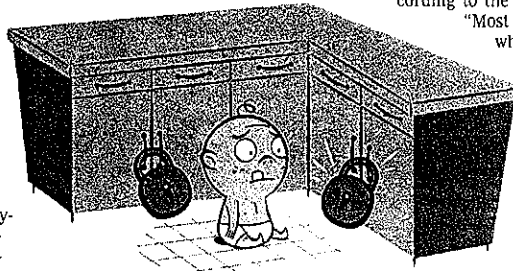
**EVERY NEW PARENT** soon finds out that infants can get into a world of trouble around the house in unimaginable ways. The chance that this could result in serious injury has spawned a growing field of in-home consulting, called baby-proofing.

In 1991, when Steve Weinstein started Royal Baby Safety Corp. of Summit, N.J., he says, the term "baby-proofing" was unfamiliar to most people, who "either thought it was a photography business or some kind of birth control." Now, as chairman of the International Association for Child Safety Inc., Mr. Weinstein presides over a trade organization with over 130 members, mostly in the U.S.

Baby-proofers typically spend an hour evaluating a home, for which they charge a fee of anywhere from \$35 to \$95 or more. After drawing up a plan—which could be a handwritten list of suggested fixes or a computer-generated printout several pages long—the baby-proofer will typically apply some of the initial fee toward any additional work.

To find out just what's involved in hiring a baby-proofing consultant, we had five new or expectant parents try out the service in their areas. Our goal was to find out if the advice was practical and specific—or if it played to parental fears by conjuring up every conceivable freak accident. Overall, we found the consultants to be knowledgeable, and we generally didn't feel pressured into buying and installing the vast array of baby-proofing products now on the market.

In fact, some of the recommenda-



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tions didn't involve spending any money. Most of the consultants we met with suggested a few simple steps like moving furniture slightly to mask electrical cords, rather than taking costlier measures like buying special conduits babies can't bite through.

Few who visited our test homes used scare tactics. However, the telephone operator at one baby-proofing service did ominously warn that she had seen "horrific burns" on babies who had bitten electrical cords, adding that boys were especially prone to such behavior.

And our baby-proofers had varying approaches to parenting: Seeing a front hallway with low staircases at either end, one baby-proofer recommended putting gates at the top of each set of stairs, saying a toddler "needs a place to run around." Another who came to the same house, on the other hand, encouraged the parents to use a barrier on the baby's room to keep him from entering the hallway in question unaccompanied until he was old enough to negotiate the stairs.

In 1999, the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission estimated that 2.5 million children a year were injured or killed in "often preventable" household accidents. (Happily, fewer than 0.1% of that total were deaths, according to the Home Safety Council.)

"Most injuries probably happen when the baby is crawling and learning to walk," says Mr. Weinstein. He says the top three baby-proofing priorities should be safety gates at the top and bottom of stairs; latches on kitchen and bathroom cabinets; and electrical outlet covers. Nor is all safety equipment created equal.

Mr. Weinstein calls pressure-mounted gates, for instance, "a big no-no" for stairways. "The gate will pop out and then the baby and the gate will go down the stairs like a bobsled." And he calls the kind of electrical-outlet covers that simply slide into the socket—rather than actually covering it—ineffective and a choking hazard.

When hiring a baby-proofer, say experts in the field, you should find out how long they have been in business, contact references, and ask about their insurance coverage. Liability policies carried by many contractors, for instance, don't cover "completed operations"—meaning once the job is done, the insurer's coverage ends. Ideally, a baby-proofer's coverage should include both completed operations as well as errors and omissions.

—Jesse Drucker, Kelly Graeme, David Hamilton and Ron Lieber contributed to this article.

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CONSULTANT	FEE	MAIN CONCERNS	KEY RECOMMENDATIONS	COMMENTS
<b>HomeStep</b> Siyosset, N.Y.	\$75 for initial consultation, (can be applied toward purchases).	Low banister looking over a two-story drop; swing-out windows.	Plexiglas to add height to banister; gate to section off the recessed window area. Estimate: \$540 (installed).	Consultant was thorough and well-informed. He didn't force unnecessary equipment on us. Most of the advice was standard, but he offered a choice of different types of stair gates. He used a radiation detector to check the microwave.
<b>BabySafe</b> Huntington Station, N.Y.	Quoted \$75 (un-collected so far).	Balcony with railings that a baby could slip through.	Plexiglas (estimate: \$650 installed) or netting (\$160 installed) for the balcony.	Efficient, thorough and knowledgeable, but we wish they were able to install exterior window guards too.
<b>PrepareFirst Inc.</b> Atlanta	\$95 for consultation (typically two hours) with President Rob Carter.	Tall bookcases; tippy tables and lamps; exposed fireplace; accessible litter box.	Straps to anchor bookcases; hidden hardware to secure tables and lamps; Plexiglas to cover fireplace; chain lock on door so cat, but not child, can get to litter box. Estimate: \$203 (installed).	Mr. Carter did a thorough inspection using a custom computer program. Most of the advice was practical and involved using basic hardware instead of baby-proofing products. He surveyed earlier attempts at babyproofing.
<b>Home Safety Services Inc.</b> Foster City, Calif.	\$90 per hour; \$80 if installation proceeds.	Low windows; free-standing bookcases and dressers.	Latches on sliding-window tracks; suggested securing some furniture against climbing and earthquakes. Estimate: \$150 (installed).	The representative, a former builder and real-estate inspector, was well-informed. No hard sell, and he showed samples of items even after it was clear we weren't likely to pay him for installation.
<b>Wonder Years Babyproofing</b> North Hollywood, Calif.	\$35 (can be applied toward further work done).	Two half-flights of stairs; wobbly bookcases; tangle of cables.	Install gates at top and bottom of stairs; rearrange furniture to hide cables; use cleats on blind cords; purchase new desk to hide cables. Estimate: \$775 (installed)	David Spigelman, who heads the family-run service, kept his pitch low-key. He gave advice on steps we could take that wouldn't require his own products or labor, such as swapping tools kept in lower cabinets with linens in higher cupboards.