

## The Host Factor: Understanding Childhood Poisoning

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"A CHILD LEARNS BY DOING. HE GAINS experience by investigating the world around him. For his experiences to be constructive they must be conducted in an environment where hazards are kept to a minimum..."

It come to no suprise that children have long been considered to be the 'perfect host' in cases of poisoning. In fact poisoning involving common household substances, including medicines, a major cause of injuries among children.

In the United States, it has been reported that more than 12,000 deaths due to poisoning occur each year mostly involving children. Data from the American Association of Poison Control Centers indicated that more than half of the poison exposure cases are in the one to five age group.

This of course rises several other questions, namely, why did these poisonings occur? Is it due to lack of supervision or sheer parental neglect or carelessness. How can this be prevented?

It must be remembered that these poisonings do not just happen - they are allowed to happen and thus are preventable. Indeed a good majority of them can be avoided.

In a preliminary study conducted by the National Poison Centre, of the number of poisoning cases referred to a local hospital, about one-third were identified as being caused by household products. Surprisingly, more than 90% involved children in the one to 11 years age group, with about 80% being below 6 years of age.

It is natural for children to be curious and fearless, especially when they are under 5 years of age. They are too young to understand the significance of warning signs or to read labels, especially when it had not been explained to them. Many more would misread the labels and give different messages:

*WARNINGS: POISON* (actual label) become *WARGINNS: POSINO* (children's' interpretation).

In addition, a good majority are easily attracted and intrigued by products left within their reach; many more are quick to accidentally ingest them thinking that they are candies and the like. This can happen within matters of minutes or even seconds.

In fact, some children would 'search' for products stored under the kitchen sink, on shelves and tables and even in handbags.

Our findings indicated that places where childhood poisoning is more likely to occur are the kitchen (50%), toilets (20%) and bedrooms (10%). The exposure to a number of potential hazards tend to increase especially when parents and child-minders are busy with their own chores.

On "special" occasions - during house painting or repairs or even during auspicious times - the dangers are further compounded.

Children are put further at risk after ingestion of poisons because of their body's physiology which differs a great deal from that of an adult's.

For example, a child's liver - the organ responsible for detoxifying many hazardous substances found in the body - is not a developed as that of an adult's. This would mean that some of the substance ingested may not be as readily detoxified.

Similarly, the child's kidney - the organ that assists in facilitating the excretion of waste - is also not as fully developed. All these means that the poison ingested will remain for a much longer time in a child's body compared with an adult's. This could lead to more damage, and if not treated promptly, death.

The following clues can be used as a guideline to suspect that a child is being exposure to a poison.

- The child has a record of poisoning
- The child is between the age of one to five years. This is a high risk group because he/she likes to habitually put things into the mouth
- The child become sick unexpectedly, especially when he/she shows signs of convulsion without fever, or become unconscious without any apparent reason
- The child vomited without any reason
- The illness involves a number of body parts or organs without clear cause
- The child's breath gives an unusual odour or there are visible signs around the mouth and lips area - like dirt and stain, or even cracks and cuts

However, when the poisoning is intentional, it may be worthwhile to find out the underlying cause for such an occurrence. It could be a sign of a more serious problem affecting the life of the child.

The safest bet therefore would be to make the child's environment as safe as possible - be it the house, school and even the play area but also to pay due attention to his/her needs, emotionally or otherwise.

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