

Safety Fact Sheet

Balconies and Balcony Railings, Stairs and Balustrades



Description:

A balcony is a platform above ground level that projects from the wall of a building. If it is more than 1m above ground level it is surrounded by a railing. A balcony railing or handrail is a guard or barrier that is made of two horizontal bars connected by supporting vertical posts.

Stairs are a set of steps usually bordered on one or both sides by a balustrade which is a railing designed to act as a barrier.

Potential Hazards:

Entrapment

- Children may get their head, arms or legs caught in the space between vertical railing posts.

Falls

- Babies may fall through vertical railing bars if the gaps are too wide.
- Children may trip on steps or doorframes leading to the balcony and fall on the hard surface of the balcony floor.
- Children may fall off the balcony or staircase if they are able to climb over the balcony railing or balustrade. Railings may serve as ladders if they contain horizontal bars on the frame. Objects such as pot plants placed next to railings may also be used as ladders to climb up on.
- Children may fall down a flight of stairs if they trip while playing on stairs.

Injuries:

Of all children presenting to The Children's Hospital at Westmead Emergency Department in 2004, falls were the leading cause of injury, accounting for 53% of injuries seen. Of these fall injuries, 10% involved falls from balconies and down stairs. Injuries from falls, even from very low heights, can be serious; "40 percent of fatal falls, among children under 15 years of age in Australia, were from heights less than 3 feet (91.44cm)".¹

Law or Australian Standard:

The law (Building Code of Australia Part 3.9) states that handrails be installed on balconies, porches, pathways etc which are 1 metre or more above the floor or ground level. To provide a barrier, railings must be no less than 1 metre in height themselves. They must be non-climbable and have gaps between vertical posts no wider than 12.5cm. For stairs that measure less than 1 metre above the floor or ground level, handrails must be at least 86.5cm in height.

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Remember:

- Move furniture and pots away from balcony railings and balustrades to prevent children from climbing on them.
- Pack away light furniture that children could move and use to climb over railings.
- Ensure railing posts are vertical so that they can not be used as a ladder to climb over the railing.
- Ensure the spacing between vertical railing posts is no larger than 100mm.
- Check railings and balustrades regularly to ensure that they are in good working order.
- Supervise your children while they are on the balcony and keep doors leading to balconies closed to prevent access to them.
- Do not allow your children to play on stairs.
- Install stair gates at the top and bottom of stairs to prevent young children from gaining access to them.

¹ Culvenor, Dr J. (2002) Design of Childproof Barriers to Prevent Falls from a Height in Public Places. Annual International Occupational Ergonomics and Safety Conference