

Consumers: EU to set new safety standards for sleeping products for newborns and young children

New safety standards for children's sleeping items - including duvets, baby sleeping bags and cot mattresses - which should help to prevent many cot – related accidents, were given a green light today by EU Member States. The vote took place in the General Product Safety Committee in Brussels. Cot-related accidents are responsible for more childhood deaths every year than any other child-care product¹. According to the European Injury Database, between 2005-2007, 17 000 accidents involving children from 0 to 4years in the EU happened in the cot. Despite the frequency of serious and sometimes fatal accidents caused by cot mattresses, cot bumpers, suspended baby beds, children's duvets and baby sleeping bags, currently there are no EU safety standards for these products. The proposed new standards will reduce the risk of accidents from, for example, choking on loose parts, entrapment of an infant due to bad mattress design or asphyxiation accidents from cords or loops. Other necessary standards, such as stability and design requirements to reduce the risk of falls and injuries from suspended beds for babies, will also be introduced. The proposed safety requirements are now subject to a three month scrutiny period in the European Parliament and the Council, and they will then go to the College of Commissioners for a formal decision before being sent to the European Standardisation bodies.

EU Consumer Affairs Commissioner Meglena Kuneva, said, "It is for each parent or carer to judge how best to manage the safety of their children. Our concern is that parents who choose to use these products should not have to worry about their safety. We must be vigilant on behalf of our most vulnerable consumers. Instructions must be very clear, products must really be as safe as we can make them and must withstand all necessary safety tests."

The current situation:

The standards voted on today are part of a broader drive by the Commission and Member States to update a wide range of safety standards for children's products in the EU. There is extensive evidence worldwide that nursery products are responsible for a very high number of accidents and injuries in early childhood. For example, in the USA in 2007, emergency departments treated an estimated 62 000 children under the age of five for injuries associated with nursery products. In 2007-2008, the European Commission carried out a study, following consultations with Member States, which identified the most high-risk nursery products for which there are either no safety standards or for which the existing standard does not cover all the risks. The 5 products which were the subject of today's vote were among the products identified in this study.

¹ US Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), 2009

The problems with children's sleeping articles

The main risks associated with these products are as follows:

Cot mattresses. The main risks are entrapment and flammability. For example, entrapment of the of the baby due to design problems e.g. inappropriate size - the mattress is too small and leaves gaps where the child can get trapped or suffocate. Also risks due to failure to meet flammability requirements.

Sleeping bags for babies and cot bumpers. Main risks are linked to strangulation, suffocation and choking, due to cords, loops, detachable parts or filling materials coming loose.

Children's duvets. Main risks linked to suffocation and hyperthermia. Without suitable safety information, these might contribute to the incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) because of overheating and asphyxia.

Suspended baby beds. Main risks are suffocation, entrapment and injury, due to bad design – in particular instability or lack of structural integrity (for suspended beds).

The Context

Every day, newborns sleep for an average of 16 hours, and at 3-5 years children still sleep for 11-13 hours a day. Babies and young children spend at least half a day or more in a sleep environment during their first five years of life. Products in the sleep environment must be safe, because that is where babies and young children are most commonly left unattended for long periods.

The proposals

The new EU standards will introduce new safety requirements aimed at improving the overall safety of these products. For example, cot mattresses will have to be designed in a way that minimises the risks of entrapment or asphyxia by ensuring there are no gaps between the mattress and the cot bases, and that children in the bed cannot lift the mattress easily. Baby sleeping bags, children's duvets and cot bumpers will not be allowed to have cords, loops, small detachable parts or sharp edges that could lead to strangulation, suffocation or other injuries. Warnings and instructions will have to contain clear messages on any specific risks linked to each product, and hygiene requirements are also included. See MEMO/09/473.

What next

The Commission's proposal will be examined by the European Parliament and the Council (3-month scrutiny period) and then to the College of Commissioners for a formal decision. A mandate then goes to CEN (the European Standardisation Committee) to start work on new product standards, which can take up to 2 years.

Link to the study:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/safety/projects/ongoing-projects_en.htm#project_results.

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