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TIP-OVERS: PREVENTABLE TRAGEDIES

Falling furniture and TVs are a real hazard, particularly for young children. Experts say it doesn't have to be that way.

By Tricia L. Nadolny
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The cell reception at her West Chester home had been spotty. So after watching her three oldest children get onto the school bus at the end of her driveway, Jackie Collas dialed Verizon and asked about boosting the signal. It had been a harsh winter, and she worried about being able to reach 911 in an emergency.

After hanging up on that morning last February, she went to check on Curren, her 2-year-old.

She found him trapped and motionless beneath his overturned, five-drawer dresser. For how long, Collas couldn't know. The mother began CPR, and was still trying to revive him when the paramedics arrived.

It was not until after the funeral that she learned Curren had no vital signs when they took over, that there had been

no way to save him. That has left her with one heartbreaking regret.

Sitting beside his bed, the unwashed sheets still full with his smell, she wishes she had stopped lifesaving efforts that day, taken him in her arms, and rocked him one last time.

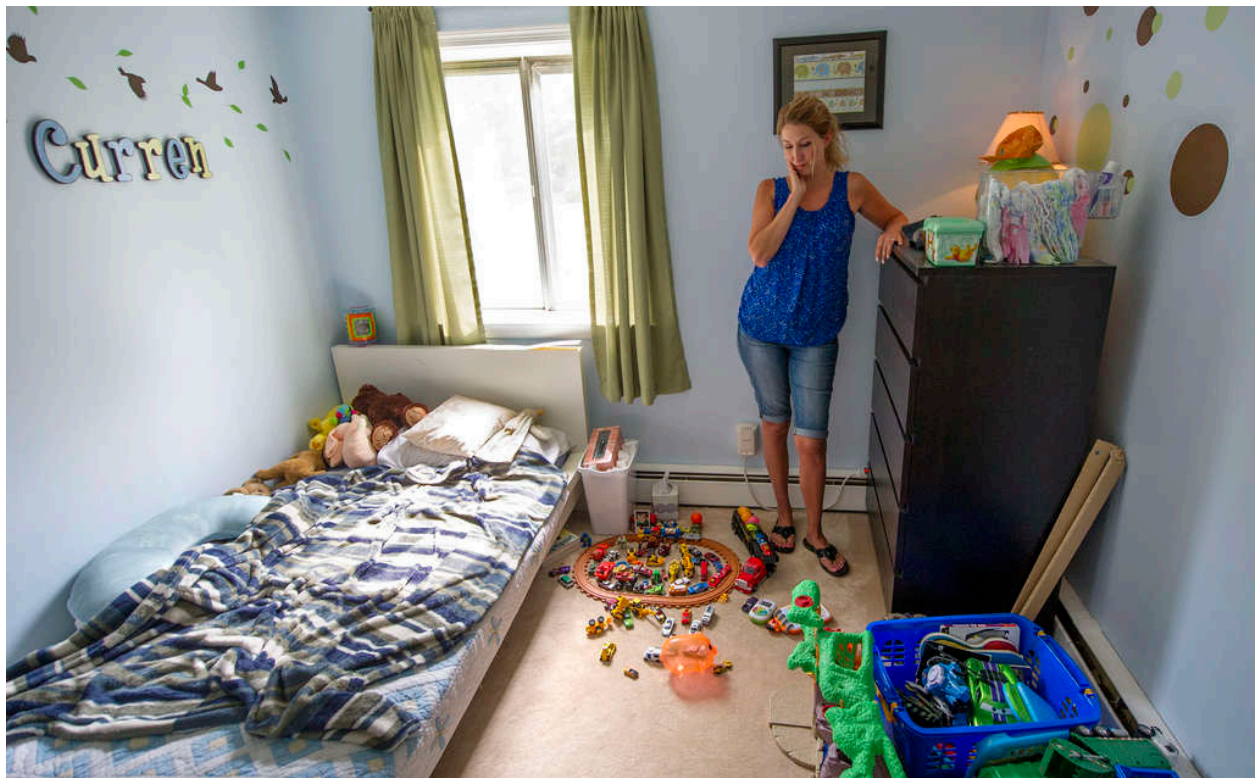
"I would have held him a little longer," she says. "While he was warm."



What happened with that toppled dresser is called a tip-over, a name that marks the very second when a commonplace, unthreatening item becomes lethal.

A television or dresser or bookcase, disturbed in some way, leans off balance, past its center of gravity and . . . tips.

About four times an hour, on average — 38,000 times a year — the scenario sends someone in the United States to an emergency room. More than half are children, many under 5 years old and



brimming with a curiosity to clasp a TV or climb drawers like stairs.

In 2011, the last year for which reliable data are available, tip-overs killed 49 children nationwide — 21 more than the year before, hospital data gathered by the Consumer Product Safety Commission show.

Sometimes these accidents are loud, with shattering glass and splintering wood. Others are dreadfully quiet because the child's body muffles the impact.

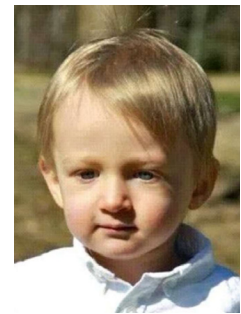
In the aftermath, parents say their guilt can be immediate — perhaps one reason so few deaths lead to lawsuits. But some say their regrets aren't from having ignored a warning. They had never heard of tip-overs until one killed their child.

Experts say it's unclear why deaths are rising, but many believe consumers buying flatscreen televisions are putting their old, bulky sets on furniture never intended to carry the weight.

Manufacturers have worked to curb

“I want to think I had my turn, this tragedy happened, and now everything will be fine. But I can't say that.”

Jackie Collas, Curren's mother, above, stands in the boy's bedroom in West Chester, next to the dresser that fell on him.

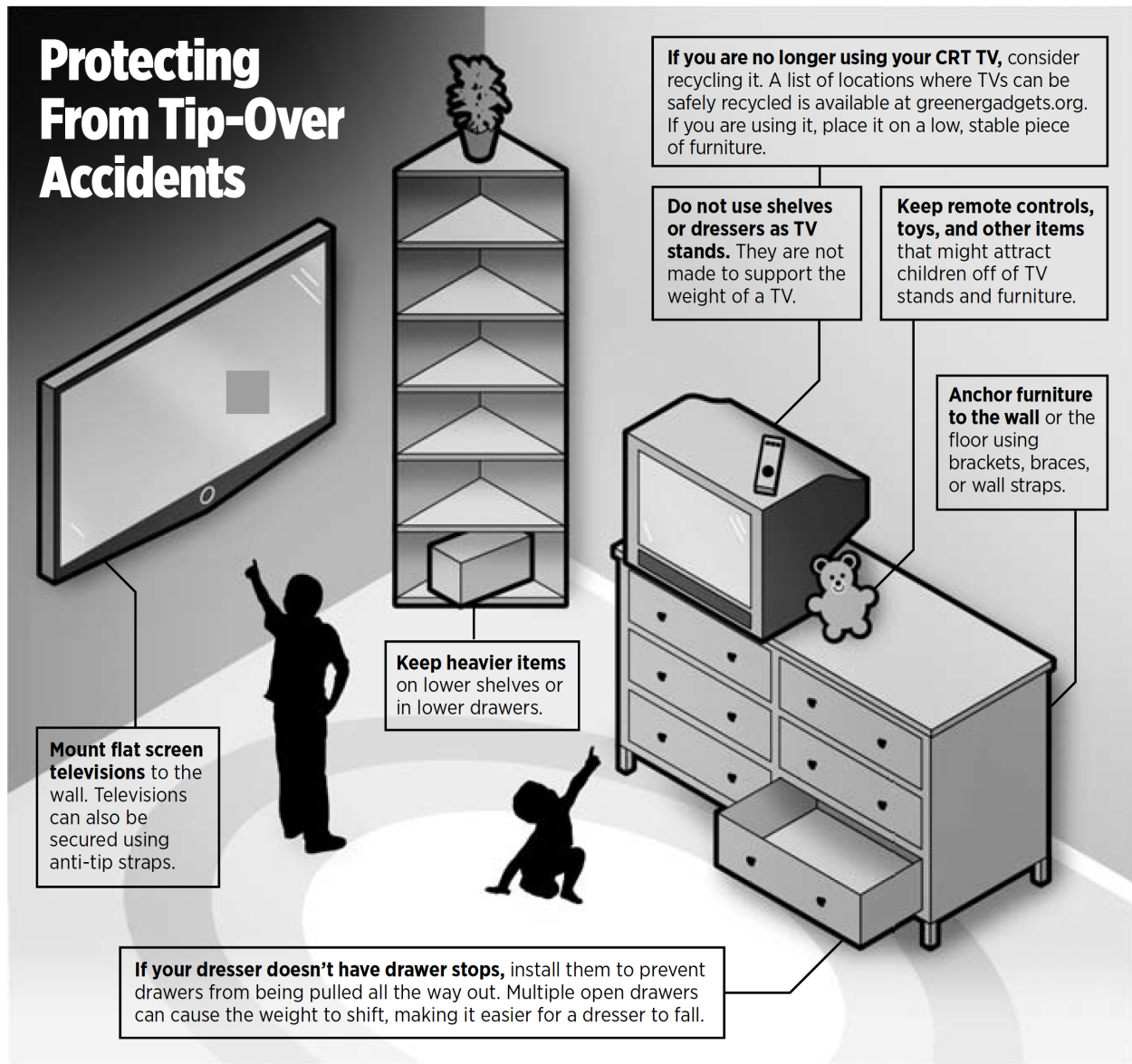


Curren Collas, who died in a tip-over accident at 2 years old.

the danger with voluntary standards they help craft — while balancing safety, product efficiency, and corporate profits. The process can be arduous. For instance, a change to an industry stability standard that makes it harder for some dressers to topple was delayed a year and a half, in part because one company objected, according to several people involved in the process.

Experts say tip-overs are almost

Protecting From Tip-Over Accidents



SOURCE: Consumer Product Safety Commission, Safe Kids Worldwide, Child Injury Prevention Alliance

ROBERT WEST/Staff Artist

entirely preventable, with more awareness, regulation, innovation, and commitment from manufacturers.

"We can build TVs that won't tip over. We can build bookshelves that won't tip over. We can do a lot more than we're doing," says Gary Smith, director of the injury research and policy center at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. "But we don't have the political will to do it. And there isn't the public outrage."

A crash, then questions

Soon after he and his wife bought their

Huntingdon Valley home in 2005, Bob Lambert set out to freshen the bedroom they chose for their 3-year-old daughter, Katie. He shimmied two tall wardrobes left by the last owner from the wall and coated the space in a soft blush paint.

The pink bedroom.

That's what they would call it in the police report.

On Jan. 21, 2005, workers laid carpet and pushed the wardrobes back, resting them on the new tack strip that lined the perimeter of the room beneath the carpet. It ever so slightly tilted the units forward.



Joe Mohorovic has made tip-over safety a priority in his job at the Consumer Product Safety Commission. He keeps a photo of Shane Siefert, a 2-year-old who died in a tip-over accident, and has a toy car similar to one of Shane's in his office. DOUG KAPUSTIN / For The Inquirer

As Katie played, her mother heard the crash of a 200-pound wardrobe falling onto her daughter.

Within months of Katie's death, the parents formed a nonprofit. They spoke to then-U.S. Rep. Allyson Schwartz, who twice introduced bills in Katie's name that would have required many manufacturers to provide tip restraints with products. In 2007, they sued IKEA.

They said the wardrobe was prone to tip, with doors that were each three times heavier than the back panel. The unit came with metal brackets to attach it to the wall, which the previous homeowner had not used, but they were "woefully inadequate" to correct the imbalance, the suit alleged.

The Lamberts' lawyer argued IKEA had known of the danger of tip-overs without recalling unsafe products.



Katie Lambert was 3 when she was killed when a 200-pound wardrobe fell on her in her Huntingdon Valley home.

IKEA, which has its North American headquarters in Conshohocken, countered, saying the product had safety features that had been ignored. The Lamberts' case was the only known one in which the since-discontinued item tipped, the lawyers said.

Then, in mid-2008, both sides stopped fighting.

IKEA agreed to settle for \$2.3 million, according to court documents filed in Philadelphia.

The figure was reached in part through questions that hang raw and unanswered about how Katie's life would have been lived. But there was another agonizing question about how she died.

Did she suffer?

The police concluded Katie had likely died on impact. An expert hired by the Lamberts looked one moment earlier, plotting from when the wardrobe tipped to when it hit her.

If she was standing, 0.67 seconds.

If she was sitting, 0.74 seconds.

If she was lying, 0.82 seconds.

"It is also my opinion," their expert wrote, "that, for a brief instant, Katie Lambert experienced a consuming terror and dread and likely physical pain as this large wardrobe item collapsed upon and enveloped her."

Standards, but voluntary

Some companies embraced tip restraints early. IKEA began developing them in 1993 and now includes them with all clothing storage units. A common kind tethers furniture to walls with a strap.

Including restraints with products became part of the furniture industry's voluntary stability standard in 2009. That test requires that a unit won't tip when a drawer is extended and 50 pounds, simulating the weight of a child, is added.

It's one of 12,000 standards under the purview of ASTM International, a Conshohocken nonprofit that gathers stakeholders to create guidelines for everything from the makings of a moon-bounce to what constitutes a 600-thread-count sheet. Anyone can take part: manufacturers, consumer advocates, parents. Compliance with most standards is voluntary. But thousands of products are still tested; many retailers won't carry

items unless they comply.

Regulation through mandatory standards has waned. In 1981, as the Reagan administration slashed the Consumer Product Safety Commission's budget and staff, Congress limited the agency's ability to mandate standards. It can still do so, but that often comes after years of gauging the effectiveness of a voluntary standard, a point the agency says it hasn't met with tip-overs.

While some worry voluntary standards favor manufacturers, they can improve safety.

In the early 1990s, for example, free-standing infant walkers were causing nearly 23,000 injuries per year, most from children falling down stairs. Prevention focused largely on urging parents to close the basement door or use gates. Then in the mid-1990s, manufacturers made stationary activity centers as an alternative and the ASTM standard was updated to require the walker to be wider than the average doorway or the feet to lock if one moved over a ledge.

The result: From 1994 to 2001, injuries dropped 78 percent.

"We designed the problem out of existence," Smith says.

Warnings and a prayer

The hum of a power saw cuts above country music down the hall, where workers are laying a light, laminate floor. Heather Poole wanted the beige carpet gone before the baby, her second, was born.

"I couldn't hear if something fell again," she says, sitting in the cozy, pink nursery of her El Mirage, Ariz., ranch.

There was carpet in her son Brayden's room on Dec. 31, 2011, when the 3-year-



Heather Poole with a photo of her son, Brayden. Three years after his death, she posts Facebook articles about tip-overs along with a short prayer. NICK OZA / For The Inquirer

old was put to bed with his favorite movie, *Cars*, playing on the large television perched atop his bureau.

Poole, 28, can't know what happened. But she knows Brayden was independent, like her. She says he probably pulled on the dresser trying to restart the movie. As the TV fell, her boyfriend heard nothing from the living room. The mother found her son's body when she returned from work.

After, she tried counseling but stopped. She's not sure others understand her pain, or the anger she feels when her warnings are met with excuses.

"There's the people who tell you they can't afford to put a hole in their wall. And I want to punch them in the face," Poole says. "I'm just like, You can't afford to put a hole in your wall? *That's* a good excuse."

On Facebook, she posts news stories telling of injuries and deaths and adds a short prayer. *RIP little one.*

She fantasizes about buying the televisions at Goodwill and tossing them. Instead, she walks the thrift shop's aisles and nestles a card with Brayden's picture and her website into the corner of each screen.

“There’s the people who tell you they can’t afford to put a hole in their wall. And I want to punch them in the face. I’m just like, You can’t afford to put a hole in your wall? That’s a good excuse.

Heather Poole, whose 3-year-old son, Brayden, died when a TV fell on him

‘The one hope’

There is an ongoing debate within the industries most affected by tip-overs on whether manufacturers could do more to prevent injuries.

At his Senate confirmation hearing last April, Joe Mohorovic, one of four commissioners at the Consumer Product Safety Commission, said some television manufacturers seem blind to the hazard and “thwart the efforts of a diligent parent endeavoring to create a safe environment for children.” His frustrations, he later explained in an interview, came from trying to secure his TV with a strap but getting little help when he asked the manufacturer how to do so.

Others believe the industry’s voluntary stability standard, drafted by Underwriters Laboratories, an Illinois company similar to ASTM, should be revisited. It hasn’t been updated markedly since 2004 and doesn’t require TVs to be sold with safety devices.

John Drengenberg, consumer safety

director for Underwriters Laboratories, says that isn’t feasible because manufacturers can’t plan for all the wall types found in homes.

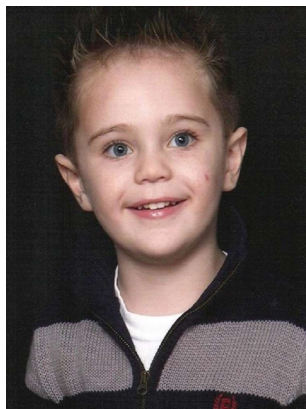
In a report released last week, the Consumer Product Safety Commission says both flatscreens and CRT TVs pose a serious threat but found in some cases older TVs have the potential to strike a child with a force six times greater than a flatscreen the same size.

The problem of those dangerous CRT TVs being placed on unstable furniture won’t go away through a change in the standard, Drengenberg says.

“The one hope that we can have is that the older TVs will disappear and malfunction,” he says. “And then we’d be back to not having those things on rickety shelves.”

The ASTM standard, which covers dressers and similar pieces of furniture, does require that units come with safety devices. Some on the organization’s furniture safety committee, though, stress furniture should be as stable as possible without those tip restraints because consumers might not attach them.

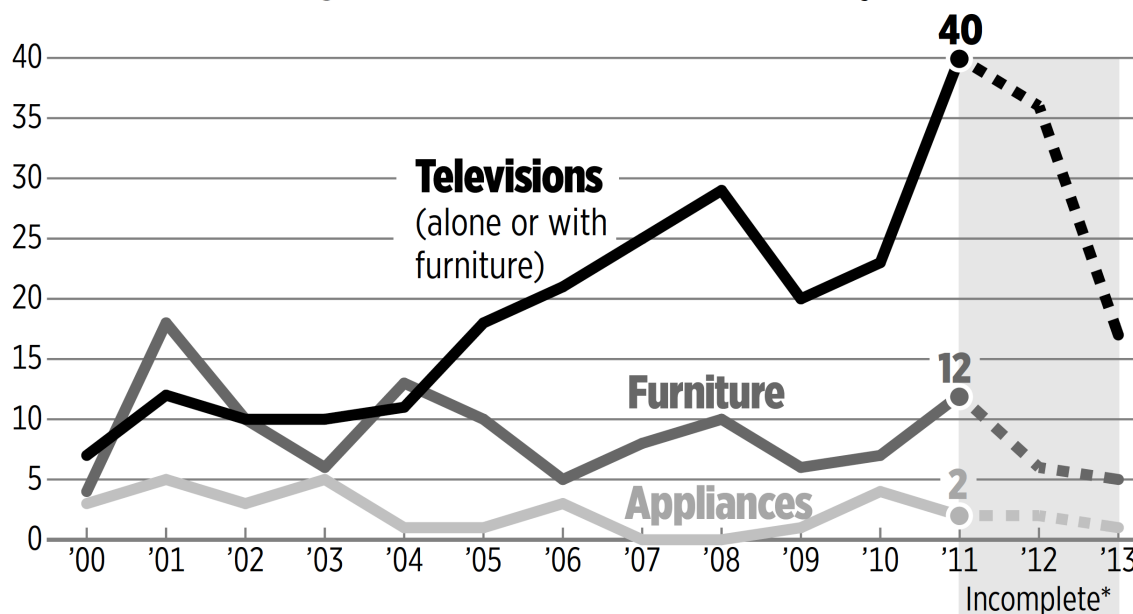
In early 2013, the group approved a change many believed would do just that, making it harder for a unit to topple by clarifying for dresser-makers how far a drawer had to be pulled out before adding the 50-pound weight. The change didn’t become official until October. Several members say that’s in part because Ashley Furniture, the world’s largest home furniture manufacturer,



Brayden Rodgers, 3, died when a television fell on him. Now his mother tries to get the word out to others about the dangers.

Deaths From Tip-Over Accidents

At least 430 deaths have been attributed to tip-over accidents from 2000 to 2013, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. About two-thirds involved falling televisions, or televisions falling with the furniture on which they rested.



* Figures from 2011 to 2013 are incomplete because of the lapse in time in accident reporting to the Consumer Product Safety Commission

filed an appeal contending the group didn't follow proper procedure to enact the change.

"They are using any tactics they can because they're really, really against it," says Rachel Weintraub, an ASTM member and the legislative director at the Consumer Federation of America.

"You look at [Ashley's appeal] and you say: Really?" says Gary Bell, an ASTM member and consultant with decades of experience in product safety and liability. "You can't have it your way, so you're looking for little things that are going to sidetrack the issue here?"

Ashley Furniture representatives say the company was not stonewalling the change in the standard but was trying to

clarify what it feared were ambiguities that might confuse some furniture-makers or lead them to ignore the voluntary guidance.

The employees spoke with The Inquirer in a conference call but, citing company policy, declined to be identified by name. They say Ashley has included restraints with its furniture since 2007 and, through its role with the standards association, has been an industry leader in improving product safety.

"The easiest position to be in within the furniture industry is a quiet nonparticipiant," says one Ashley official. "We're very proud that our participation is heard and that our participation is felt and that some of our participation is doc-

umented.”

Bill Perdue, head of regulatory affairs for the American Home Furnishings Alliance and the ASTM committee chairman, says the standard in place during the delay was already “aggressive.”

That’s beside the point to Nancy Cowles, an ASTM member and head of the Chicago nonprofit Kids in Danger. She says people bought furniture that could have been safer, and furniture “stays around for a long time.”

“We will be seeing injuries from this delay happening years from now or decades from now,” she says.

It’s only the latest time the committee has been hung up on a proposed change. When the group considered adding the tip restraint, a handful of manufacturers objected, says Tom Lowery, a former Ethan Allen executive who was chairman of the committee at the time.

He says they were worried about the cost — roughly \$1 per unit.

A battle over blame

Every day, Vitaliy and Marina Buzadzhi are reminded of what they lost. Each moment their son Jacob has missed is visible through his twin, Isaac.

On Nov. 28, 2007, their mother left the 11-month-old boys in their Tulsa, Okla., bedroom. When she returned from the bathroom, the dresser was crushing Jacob.

A few feet away, Isaac played quietly on the floor.

For weeks after, Isaac would look for the brother who had been like his shadow until slowly he forgot his twin had existed. Seven years later, the memory of Isaac searching for his brother still overwhelms the 33-year-old Vitaliy Buzadzhi.

“He was going through some kind of pain or sadness on his own,” he says.

The parents told him about Jacob when he was older.

The two bought the dresser, a four-drawer model made by the California company Million Dollar Baby, at a department store. Three years after it fell on Jacob, the same model tipped onto and killed a 1-year-old California girl. The families filed lawsuits, and Million Dollar Baby settled both, paying an undisclosed amount to the Buzadzhis and \$1 million to the other parents, according to their lawyers.

In 2013, Million Dollar Baby recalled 18,000 dressers. The company did not respond to repeated inquiries seeking comment.

The Buzadzhis’ attorney, Michael Carr, says he has spoken with two other families who lost a child in a tip-over. Reliving it was difficult, and they decided against filing suit, he says. Others, he believes, won’t ever consider it.

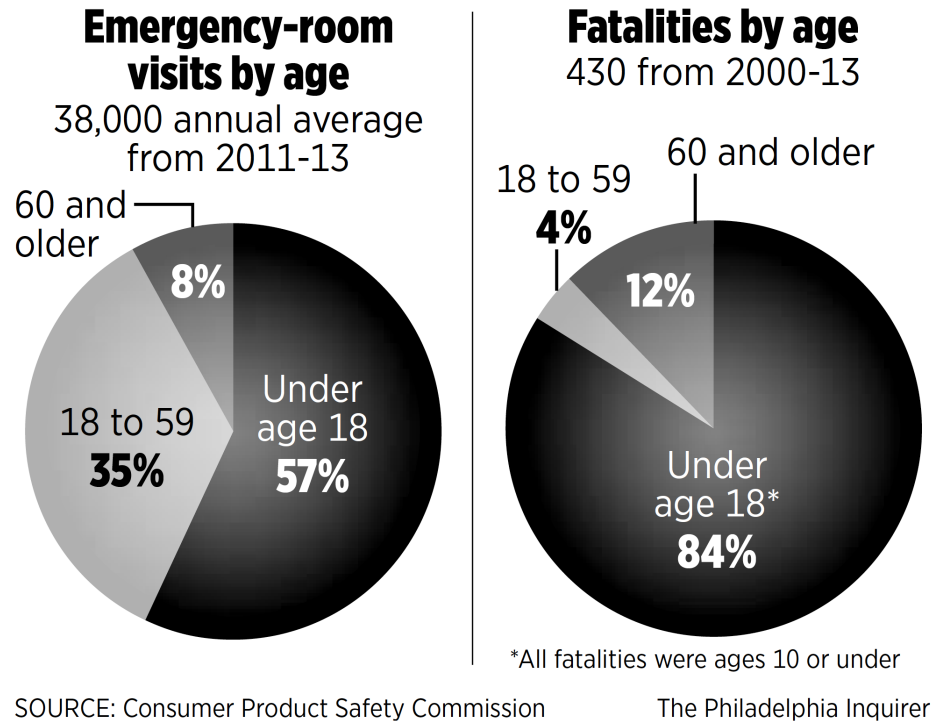
“They’re not thinking about a manufacturer in China being responsible,” he says. “They’re thinking about what they didn’t do.”

Smith, the Ohio doctor, says many are stuck shifting blame rather than finding common ground on tip-overs. He sees it as part of a wider problem in how society addresses injuries: as less worthy of resources than other public-health crises. If meningitis were killing dozens of children a year, there would be outrage and coordinated action, he says.

Educational efforts are being made. On Saturday, the Consumer Electronics Association and Safe Kids Worldwide planned National TV Safety Day, using the Super Bowl, a day when families gather around their televisions, to remind of the danger those sets present. In coming months, the Consumer Product Safety Commission will roll out a

A Higher Risk for Children

Children are involved in slightly more than half of all tip-over accidents involving an emergency-room visit, but have a far higher proportion of fatal accidents.



\$400,000 TV, print, and radio campaign called Anchor It, aimed at raising awareness and unifying parents, foundations, nonprofits, and companies engaged in tip-over prevention.

Safety advocates say raising awareness is essential but only part of the equation. Other ideas are bubbling.

Congress could require manufacturers to include tip restraints, as Allyson Schwartz tried with the unsuccessful bills named after Katie Lambert. There could be mandatory standards. Or voluntary ones rooted in more lifelike situations, such as a child pulling out several dresser drawers rather than one.

Retailers could hold buyback programs to get old TVs out of homes faster. Hotel

chains could commit to anchoring TVs, and day-care centers could be required to do the same.

More stores could stock tip restraints on shelves, not just online as many do now. Employees could be trained to tell customers about the deadly potential.

Those with a platform — doctors, manufacturers, public agencies, and others — could use it to make tip restraints as commonplace as seat belts and smoke detectors.

“It’s a matter of having the will to make this a priority,” Smith says. “And if we do that, if we make this a priority, we will see the injuries go down. There’s no doubt about it.”

Recalls and recollections

Jackie Collas says she and her husband, Jake, had never heard of a tip-over before their IKEA dresser fell on Curren. The 31-year-old mother says the company knew about the threat and could have made the product, part of its Malm line, safer.

An IKEA spokeswoman says that its products are rigorously tested but that Malm dressers, if not secured as the instructions direct, can become unstable. She says two children have died from falling Malm dressers, in both cases when restraints appear not to have been used. The company says it is investigating Curren's death.

Collas hopes it issues a recall and says every day she feels the burden to warn others of what she missed. Her awareness of how quickly a child can be taken is still unsettling, bringing fear she will lose another of her own. That worry has only grown since October, when she got the unexpected news she is pregnant.

"I want to think I had my turn, this

tragedy happened, and now everything will be fine," she says. "But I can't say that."

She wonders how she will take Curren's name down from the wall above his bed, still holding to his lingering touches on her home. The toy Cadillac with cherry bucket seats he tucked in the entryway baseboard heater. The turkey sandwich in the freezer he helped her husband make for lunch the night before dying. The voicemail.

It was left July 5, 2013, at 4:51 p.m. She had forgotten about it until a quiet morning in November when

she was deleting old messages. Curren's voice came through the speaker.

"Mommy, mom, mama, mama, mama, mom."

"Say I love you," Jake tells him, but he babbles only soft gibberish over the chimes of a toy.

"Say bye-bye," Jake says.

"Mama. Bye-bye."



Twin brothers Jacob (left) and Isaac Buzadzhi. For weeks after Jacob's death in 2007, Isaac would look for his brother. That memory still deeply pains their father.

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Repairs for 27M dressers

IKEA, regulators cite “tip-over” deaths of 2 children.

By **Tricia L. Nadolny**
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Citing the deaths of two children, including a West Chester boy killed when his dresser toppled onto him, IKEA and federal regulators Wednesday announced a recall affecting 27 million units and said the company would distribute new anchor kits to tether the furniture to the wall.

In a statement issued with the Consumer Products Safety Commission, IKEA said that it had received 14 reports of dressers from its popular MALM line tipping over and that four resulted in injuries.

One victim was 2-year-old Curren Collas of West Chester, whose February 2014 death was chronicled earlier this year by The Inquirer. That story also examined the arduous process of setting safety standards for furniture-makers, and cited parents and medical and safety experts who have been working to raise awareness about what they say is a growing danger.

Furniture tip-overs – most often from unsecured dressers and televisions – lead to more than 38,000

emergency-room visits in the United States each year, according to the safety commission.

IKEA’s move Wednesday was part of what the Swedish home-furnishing giant said was a campaign “to raise awareness of this important home safety issue.”



Curren Collas, 2, of West Chester, was killed in 2014.

It prompted praise but also a call for furniture-makers to do more.

“We know that industry can make more stable furniture,” Elliot F. Kaye, the safety commission chairman, said in an interview. “We know it’s not expensive. What’s been lacking is a will to genuinely solve the problem.”

Children, apt to climb on furniture, are especially susceptible to tip-overs. In 2011, the last year for which reliable data are available, tip-overs killed 49 children nationwide – 21 more than the year before, hospital data gathered by the safety



Jackie Collas last year in the bedroom where her son died. On Wednesday, she voiced hope others will be safe. CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer

commission show.

Experts are unsure what is causing the spike. But they worry that consumers buying flat-screen televisions have placed their old sets on unsuitable furniture such as dressers, creating a volatile mix.

Furniture manufacturers have worked to address the threat with a voluntary industry standard that requires clothing units to come with warning labels and a tip restraint – usually an anchor that the buyer must tether to a wall.

The unit is also expected to be stable on its own, and the standard requires that dressers won't tip when a drawer is extended and a 50-pound weight, simulating the weight of a child, is added.

The committee that drafts the standard – composed of industry, safety advocates, and parents of children killed by tip-overs – has considered, but not adopted, more stringent standards. And some

IKEA Action

Consumers can receive free wallanchoring kits at IKEA retail stores, by calling 888- 966-4532, or by visiting IKEA-USA.com/saferhomestogether

members have expressed frustration with the pace of the revision process.

Kaye said Wednesday that he thinks the latest version of the standard – instituted in October after a year-and-a-half of delays – could be improved. He said he is considering whether the commission should press for a mandatory standard but said that would be a lengthy process.

“Industry can solve this problem now,” he said.

Gary Smith, president of the Child Injury Prevention Alliance in Columbus, Ohio, echoed Kaye's comments, saying that once a product is in homes, the chance of it being repaired is slim.

Only 14 percent of all children's products recalled in 2013 were successfully corrected or destroyed, according to a May report from Kids in Danger, a nonprofit focused on product safety.

“Certainly the step that IKEA is making is a good one,” Smith said. “But in many ways it’s too late.”

Bill Perdue, the chair of the standards committee, said the group takes its role seriously. He said the current standard is thorough.

“We’ve always stated one death is too many,” said Perdue, vice president of regulatory affairs at the American Home Furnishings Alliance. “However, if a tip restraint isn’t installed and is misused it can cause problems.”

In the two deaths cited by IKEA, the dressers had not been secured before they toppled.

Collas’ mother, Jackie Collas, has filed a lawsuit against IKEA, saying the dresser was defective. She has previously said she hoped IKEA would recall its MALM dresser.

In a statement released Wednesday through her attorney, Collas expressed relief at the news.

“I am incredibly happy to know this information is out there,” she said. “And that other families will be spared this heartache.”

Four months after her son’s death, a 23-month-old boy in Snohomish, Wash., died after becoming trapped beneath a three-drawer MALM dresser. That unit was less than three feet tall, according to the company.

IKEA said it was aware of three other deaths from tip-overs of its chests and dressers since 1989. But it has maintained its products are extensively tested and its dressers are safe when “permanently attached to the wall, in accordance with the warnings and instructions.”

The company, whose U.S. operations are based in Conshohocken, said it was offering tip restraints on 27 million dressers, seven million of them from

the MALM line.

The units – including the three- and four-drawer chests and two styles of six-drawer chests – went on the market in 2002 and range in price from about \$80 to \$200.

The company is not offering to take back or replace the dressers, and an IKEA spokeswoman Wednesday described the action as a repair program, not a recall. The Consumer Product Safety Commission uses *recall* as an umbrella term that applies to repair, replacement, or warning programs.

In a statement, Patty Lobell, IKEA’s U.S. commercial manager, said the company was “committed to helping raise the awareness of this serious home safety issue and to continue to provide consumers with the tools and knowledge they need to prevent these accidents.”

IKEA for years has provided tip restraints with its products. But safety advocates and manufacturers worry that consumers routinely don’t bother installing the restraints provided by many furniture companies.

Lisa Siefert, a Chicago mother whose 2-year-old son, Shane, was killed in 2011 when his dresser fell on him during his nap time, said she was still surprised by how few parents know of the risk. Wednesday’s announcement will only raise awareness, she said.

“I know what these families have gone through and my heart goes out to them,” Siefert said of the cases involving IKEA. “It’s too late for us. But it’s not too late for others.”

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Despite recall, tip-over worries go on

An industry veteran assailed IKEA.
Independent testing offered no comfort.

By Tricia L. Nadolny
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Less than a month after IKEA recalled millions of dressers, acknowledging that two toddlers died after its units crashed onto them, a longtime furniture-industry executive wrote to federal regulators.

IKEA had been “blatantly negligent,” John Wilborne said, and was ignoring the safety standards others routinely follow.

“As a grandparent I am worried that this company is still selling these dangerous products,” Wilborne, compliance director at Virginia-based Hooker Furniture, told Consumer Products Safety Commission officials. “These products should be deemed a substantial product hazard.”

The letter, obtained by The Inquirer, reflects what has been bubbling for months behind the scenes: a concern among furniture-industry insiders that despite the deaths and the July recall, IKEA continues to sell dressers that too easily can become unstable and injure children.

On Friday, a day after a meeting in which regulators and manufacturers clashed over a proposal

to strengthen the industry’s voluntary stability standard, IKEA acknowledged for the first time that it doesn’t believe its dressers have to comply.

In a response to questions from The Inquirer, the company would not say whether it had tested or made design changes to the two MALM dressers involved in the 2014 deaths of a 23-month-old Washington boy and 2-year-old Curren Collas of West Chester.

In recent weeks, The Inquirer bought each dresser at IKEA’s Philadelphia store and had them tested by an independent lab.

Both failed even the least onerous stability test: When their unloaded drawers were extended, they craned, then crashed forward. Under the pressure of 50 pounds hung on one drawer — meant to represent the weight of a child — they toppled.

“It’s so quick,” said Bobby Puett of Diversified Testing Laboratories, which reviewed the dressers. “You put the weights on it. You have to have your hands up — [because] it’s coming down.”

A question of support

IKEA has sold at least seven million MALM dressers in the United States.



Bobby Puett, president of Diversified Testing Laboratories, watches as IKEA's MALM six-drawer dresser falls over during a test in Burlington, N.C. SARA D. DAVIS / For The Inquirer

In its July 22 announcement, issued along with the safety commission, the Swedish furnishings giant said it would offer new anchoring hardware for those and 20 million other dressers and would launch a public awareness campaign on tip-overs.

IKEA, which has its U.S. headquarters in Conshohocken, stopped short of asking customers who bought the dressers to return or replace them. It promoted the initiative as “a repair program,” avoiding the word *recall*.

(In August, the Canadian government issued its own recall of six million IKEA dressers.)

More than 75 children in the United States died in 2010 and 2011 when furniture, televisions, or appliances tipped onto them, according to federal data.

Many dresser manufacturers, including IKEA, provide restraints with their units, but advocates argue furniture should be stable on its own because consumers are unaware of the danger and often don't use the tethers.

Wilborne's Aug. 20 letter laid out in stark language the issues that insiders have been wrestling with for months, as regulators called for changes and criticized the industry for lacking the will to solve the problem.

Wilborne said it was the safety commission that had fallen short, by not ordering a full recall of the MALM dressers.

“To the general public (and some companies) it looks as if the commission did not support the

voluntary standard,” Wilborne wrote in the letter, sent to all of the agency’s commissioners, its chairman, and the head of the standards committee.

He said the lack of action by the regulators prompted discussion within the industry about why companies should feel obligated to comply with the standard – one that adds manufacturing costs – if others can simply ignore it. Wilborne also offered solutions – suggesting statutory changes that he said would give the commission legal precedent to “uphold and support” the voluntary standards.

When contacted by The Inquirer, Wilborne declined to comment on the letter. Others in the industry have also declined to publicly discuss the question of compliance by one of its largest and most influential retailers.

But the controversy was an undercurrent on Thursday, when the committee of furniture manufacturers, advocates, and federal regulators that oversees the standard met in Conshohocken. Engineers from the safety commission proposed an even higher stability limit on dressers – one that could mean costly design changes for manufacturers.

“We’re not the problem,” one executive protested. “The problem is, and where the focus needs to be, is how do you get companies to [comply]?”

Making progress?

Elliot Kaye, chairman of the safety commission, on Friday declined to say whether it had tested the MALM dressers. Industry veterans say such a step would have been commonplace.

Kaye said the agency will work to make sure consumers who requested additional anchoring hardware from IKEA receive it while ensuring “IKEA is living up to its commitment to work with us on more stable furniture designs.”

Then he again repeated a call for a tougher standard.

“Most important,” he said, “I expect makers of children’s and adult furniture to do their part by ending the finger-pointing and foot-dragging, and instead focus on ways they can make their own furniture more stable and make the performance

standard stronger.”

IKEA is working with federal regulators to find new designs that make its dressers more stable, according to spokeswoman Tracey Kelly.

In a written response to questions from The Inquirer, Kelly would not say whether the MALM dressers still being sold meet safety standards, or whether compliance is a goal.

She said that the company bases its design criteria on European standards, not American ones, and that IKEA dressers over a certain height are designed to be used only when anchored to the wall – which she said exempts the dressers from the stability standard.

She also said: “The safety of our customers is very important to IKEA.”

A quick test

The three-drawer MALM dresser retails for \$89.99; the six-drawer, for \$169. Both come in flat boxes, ready to assemble by the consumer, like much of the furniture sold by IKEA.

Testing them takes just a few minutes, according to Puett, from Diversified Testing in Burlington, N.C. During a 41-year career in the industry, he said, he has completed countless tests of the safety standard.

On the day he tested the six-drawer MALM, Puett first tested a dresser from another manufacturer. For that model, he said, the furniture maker had increased stability by adding a metal bar across the base.

“It sure passed the test,” Puett said.

As he prepared to test the MALM that afternoon, Puett said, he thought it looked “pretty sturdy” and deep enough to stay upright when challenged. Then he opened each of the drawers – and watched the furniture tumble forward. Puett said he was shocked.

“Most of the time when you pull all the drawers out, it just sits there,” he said. “I very seldom get one that fails when it’s just unloaded.”