

Creating A Child-Friendly Home Office

by Brette McWhorter Sember



Within the past decade, we've experienced an explosion in the number of offices being established within the home.

Home offices are wonderful because they allow us to work while still being with our families. Given their easy accessibility, the home office is bound to be visited frequently by your children.

Many parents spend time and effort childproofing kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, and living rooms while overlooking the danger a home office poses to children. Just think of the electrical wires, cords, outlets, and pinching drawers that fill your home office. With some basic precautions, you can make your home office a place that is not only safe, but welcoming to all members of your family, regardless of their age.

- Begin by dealing with all of the cords and wires that are snaking around your office. Tuck them securely behind desks and cabinets. Use cord gatherers and cord shorteners to secure them together or cord clips to run them along a baseboard to an outlet.
- Purchase covers for your computer monitor, keyboard, tower, and printer. Cover everything when you are done. Out of sight is out of mind for those with exploring fingers. Lift your keyboard up on top of your monitor and close the sliding door on your tower if you have one. Purchase safety straps to secure your computer equipment to the tabletop so it cannot be pulled off.
- Buy file cabinets that have locks and keep your drawers locked at all times. Getting a finger shut in a heavy metal drawer can cause serious damage to small fingers. Another danger that exists with file cabinets is the danger of having them tip over on a child. Secure anything taller than a two drawer file cabinet to the wall with tip-resistant furniture brackets. Bookcases can be especially dangerous because their shelves just cry out to be climbed on. Secure these to the wall as well.
- If you have an office chair with casters, be careful when rolling across the floor. Small fingers and toes can easily be run over. Using a plastic floor pad can make your chair roll easier and make it more difficult

for a child to wiggle a finger underneath a caster on carpeting without you realizing it. Make it a rule that the children should not play on the floor pad.

❑ Cover all open outlets with outlet covers. Purchase power strip safety covers. Wind up any cords for window blinds and secure them out of reach to prevent strangling. Consider using a plastic container with a snap-on lid as a garbage can if you routinely throw away staples, paper clips, and other objects a child could swallow or be harmed by. Keep paper shredders in a closet or out of reach. Never leave them plugged in.

❑ Get a desk with locking drawers or install child proof locking mechanisms on the drawers. Secure the drawers and cupboards of computer desks as well. Keep all pens, pencils, paper clips, and staplers inside the desk or up on a shelf. If you are unable to secure your drawers, keep these items in small plastic containers with lids. Place all your CDs and disks in boxes out of reach and keep all important papers in the file cabinet. An errant toddler with a pen can cause incredible damage.

❑ Keep your answering machine up on a shelf out of reach. After use, put your telephone next to it. Phone cords are choking hazards, so be sure to keep the cord out of reach.

❑ Securely mount bulletin boards where they cannot be reached by a child. Keep extra tacks in a plastic box in a drawer and not on the bulletin board where they can easily fall to the floor. Place document sorting systems out of reach on top of file cabinets or shelves.

❑ Designate a special area of your office as child friendly. Place a basket of books and toys on the floor. Add a small child-size table and chair if you have room.

❑ Add some crayons and coloring books and maybe a small chalkboard on the wall. Keep a special box of age-appropriate toys in the closet to pull out for use when you absolutely have to talk on the phone or get some pressing work done. Hide an emergency box of animal crackers in a drawer as a last resort. A few throw pillows and blanket on the floor will make a comfy reading spot as well as great possibilities for tents.

Childproofing devices are available at most hardware stores, baby centers, and toy stores as well as from online specialty stores like the Safety Zone (www.safetyzone.com). With a little effort, your home office can be a place where your children are welcome, safe, and entertained and you can accomplish a lot.

Home-Office Security

How safe are Americans' home offices? Pretty safe, it seems. In response to a America's Safest Home Office Contest, which asked about the safety practices of today's more than 30 million at-home workers, the variety of ideas submitted reveal that many Americans protect their home offices from threats virtual, real, and potential.

The winners' examples show how creating a "blanket" of protection can make a home office - and the home itself - a safer place to work and live. Tom Stamer, a writer from Philadelphia, continually updates his computer antivirus protection, works from a home with an alarm system, and a home office with a locking office door. He carries insurance on his laptop, and stores all his important papers in a fireproof box. Because he has a young daughter ambling about, Stamer's workspace also is childproofed.

Hal Meyer, a corporate financial consultant in Cameron Park, Calif., uses many of the same safety procedures as Stamer. He also uses safe design measures - like an ergonomic chair with rollers, a floor mat for safe and easy mobility, an air purifier, and cooling fans for his laptop and monitors.

Along with battery back-up for the computer, wires and cables tucked or taped to prevent tripping or entanglement, and double-locked storm windows to prevent break in, possibly the best protection in the Minneapolis home office of Runner-Up Sister Vida Barr is the location of her office. Based on the third floor, the workspace is accessible only by stairs - and cannot be viewed from the outside. Even then, Barr, who runs a virtual assistant service, has an intercom to screen anyone who knocks at her door (call this an efficiency tool as well). And all her office equipment is insured with a rider on her residential policy.

"Home offices must take their security seriously," says Jeff Zbar, Chief Home Officer.com with Fort Lauderdale-based home office consultancy Goin' SOHO!. "It doesn't have to be costly or difficult to be effective. A little inspiration and thought can make a home office a safe office."

Why is home-office safety and security important? Two out of three U.S. businesses start in the home. More than 10 million Americans are self-employed from home, and almost 27 million people telecommute - or work from home for a boss somewhere else. Millions more heads of household handle confidential family finances from home. By 2004, the U.S. should have some 46.3 million home offices, reports International Data Corporation.

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