Clutter Concerns and Prevention

Prepared by the Health & Safety Specialists at Child Care Aware® of North Dakota

Clutter is defined as filling or covering with scattered or disordered things that impede movement or negatively affect the conditions/effectiveness of your environment. Licensed child care programs are required to provide healthy and safe environments for children, which clutter directly impacts. While it is recommended for all areas/rooms of a home to be free from clutter, the following guidelines must be followed for the rooms/areas of a home that are used for child care (this includes rooms used for sleeping):

Health Concerns

- Clutter collects and attracts dust, which can trigger asthma and other respiratory problems. Surfaces must be free from thick layers of dust.
- Clutter in the bathroom and kitchen can lead to the growth of mold and mildew which can also trigger asthma and other respiratory problems.
- Clutter provides harborage for insects (ex. bed bugs) and rodents.
- Clutter prevents proper cleaning/sanitizing. Tables and countertops must be kept clear so they can be cleaned and sanitized before and after meals. Floors must be cleared daily so they can be vacuumed, swept, or washed.

Safety Concerns

- Clutter provides tripping hazards. Floors should be kept clear of clutter – except for toys that children play with throughout the day. Toys should be picked up after they are used. Licensing requires 35 square feet of usable space for each child. This space cannot be counted if it is full of clutter.
- Clutter can block fire exits. Fire exits must be kept clear of any clutter, including egress windows.
- Hallways and stairs must be clear of any items/clutter.
- Stacked towers of clutter can topple over onto children or encourage children to climb the clutter. It prevents children from being easily visualized/supervised and prevents children from being easily reached if they need assistance. It can slow down evacuation time in an emergency. No stacked towers of clutter can be greater than 18" due to possible fall hazard to an unprotected surface.
- Rooms used for sleeping – doors must be able to open completely; child(ren) must be easily visualized when the door is opened; direct path from door to child(ren) must be kept completely clear; nothing must be within reach of a child in a playpen/crib; no stacks of clutter are allowed near children sleeping or preparing to sleep.
- Clutter containing papers, fabric, boxes, etc. is a flammable hazard. All flammable materials must be kept 3 feet from a heat source and 2 feet from the ceiling. This includes piles of clutter on counters near stove tops, coffee makers, crockpots, toasters, etc. Space heaters must be placed on a stable surface and out of traffic to prevent tip-overs. Space heaters should be plugged directly into the wall outlet, not an extension cord or power strip.
- Fire code mandates that storage of combustible materials in buildings shall be orderly. Storage shall be separated from heaters or heating devices by distance or shielding so that ignition cannot occur.
- Electrical cords under the clutter can heat up, causing shorts or fires. Electrical cords must be kept uncovered.
- Heat registers and air vents cannot be blocked or covered.
- Entertainment equipment can overheat if it does not have room to "breathe". Entertainment equipment cannot be enclosed in a cabinet without proper openings and paper (or other combustibles) cannot be stored around the equipment.

Prevent Clutter

- Deal with things as they arrive.
- Sort through mail and papers daily over the garbage can or recycling bin; file what you need to keep.
- Store items where you use them and put them away when you are finished using them.
- Create homes for your belongings.
- Sort out drawers and cupboards periodically.
- Pick up toys after playing. * Use picture & word labels on containers and shelves so that children know where materials belong and to encourage children to participate in clean-up.
- Dust once a week.
- Organize all spaces.

Sources:
Fargo and West Fargo Fire Department, Fire Codes
ND Department of Health – Food & Lodging
Can Clutter Be a Safety Concern, OSHA, 2011.

Reasons to Get Rid of Clutter, eHow, Crickett Webber
Time to Be Clutter-Free, Occupational Health & Safety, 2007.
Home Electrical Safety Checklist, CPSC, Pub 513, July 2008