

Crib bumper safety debate leads to new designs

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For decades, crib bumpers offered new moms and dads almost as much comfort as their newborns were supposed to enjoy in their padded surroundings.

Nervous new parents could envision snatching a few hours of worry-free sleep, secure in the knowledge that these cushioned pads would keep their babies from banging their heads on a wooden headboard or prevent them from getting a limb caught between the crib slats.

It helped, too, that most crib bumper sets looked so adorable in the store display, featuring jungle-animal menageries, fairy tale scenes or pastel color-schemes that an expectant parent could easily imagine turning into the nursery's central motif.

In the past few years, however, safety concerns have begun to trump the



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decorating ones, with crib bumpers being viewed as controversial as they are cozy-looking.

Fearing that babies could suffocate after worming their way into a gap between the mattress and bumper, or re-breathe their own carbon dioxide by having their mouths and noses pressed up against the fabric, a number of safety groups and pediatricians are recommending bumper-free cribs.

Uses thin mesh

A few entrepreneurs have responded to such concerns by offering alternatives to the standard four-sided-cushion bumper design. One called, Breathable Bumpers, is made of a thin mesh material that isn't as padded as regular bumpers but prevents arms and legs from being wedged between slats.

Dale and Susan Waters, the Minnesota couple who patented the product in 2002, say they did so because they kept awakening to the screams of their own infant daughter and

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finding her leg trapped between the bars. "We tried the approach our pediatrician recommended, which was to have nothing in the crib, and it didn't work for us," said Dale Waters. "We thought parents needed an alternative."

Another option is Wonder Bumpers, a set of individual pads that zipper around each crib slat. While not preventing limb entanglement, the pads will cushion the hard wood surface that a child can bump into, said Georgia Fiebrich, co-founder of Go Mama Go Designs, the San Antonio company that designed them.

Fiebrich thinks more bumper variations will soon find their way to the marketplace. "We really feel like the standard crib bumper, its day is done," she said.

The alternatives, however, have yet to win over New Jersey-based safety groups like Keeping Babies Safe and the CJ Foundation for SIDS, which both urge parents to put their babies in an empty crib, stripped of anything except an extra-tight fitted sheet.

Remove hazards

"The crib is the one place where you leave your baby unsupervised for a long period of time so you want it be free of anything that



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can be a suffocation or entanglement hazard," said Joyce Davis, president of Keeping Babies Safe.

Davis points out that bumpers were first added to cribs to prevent babies from sliding between the slats. But modern cribs have smaller spaces between the bars to prevent such occurrences.

Along with "Back to Sleep" — the slogan adopted to alert parents that putting a baby to sleep face down can lead to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) — another new sleep mantra has become "Bare Is Best," with the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Consumer Product Safety Commission urging parents to keep cribs free of blankets, pillows, stuffed animals or soft bedding.

Bumper debate

Whether bumpers should be listed among the items that ought to be banished from the crib remains an open debate, however.

In December, the CPSC began what will be its

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second investigation of their safety.

Previously, the federal agency's scientists sided with an industry group — the Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association — in deciding that a group of infant suffocation deaths under review couldn't be definitively attributed to bumpers rather than blankets, pillows or other bedding that were also in the cribs.

The new study is expected to be completed in a few months, and safety groups are hoping the CPSC will issue a ban.

While parents might worry about a bump on the head or a limb trapped between two slats, Linda McNeil Tantawi, executive director of the Hackensack University Medical Center-affiliated CJ Foundation, said these are relatively minor injury concerns compared to what she sees as a significant suffocation risk.

"It really is mostly a matter of aesthetics," Tantawi said. "People are used to seeing the bumpers in stores or in magazines featuring celebrities' nurseries so they think that they belong on a crib. People also have the false assumption that if they are sold, then they must be safe."

While safety groups have been urging baby furniture retailers to stop displaying cribs



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with bumpers, many retailers are waiting to see what the CPSC decides.

In March 2009, Babies "R" Us responded to the concerns about bumpers by requiring that its stores carry only bumpers made of a firm material no more than 1 inch thick, with four separate panels that contain ties on the top and bottom that are no more than 9 inches long, said spokeswoman Katie Reczek.

Doreen Mahon, co-owner of Lakeland Baby & Teen Furniture in Wayne, said she hears a mix of concerns and comments from parents about the bumpers she sells, which include the Wonder Bumpers brand. Some are more aware of the safety advisories and choose not to buy, while others want some padding because a barren crib doesn't conform to their traditional view of a cozy nursery.

"To them it's like a shoe without a sock," Mahon said. "It's a comfort thing."

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