

At home

Security blankets are all the craze these days

We're scooping up baby monitors, smoke alarms, even last-resort 'escape parachutes.' But experts fear we may be focusing on the wrong things.

By Joyce Cohen
Special for USA TODAY

For a decade — ever since her newlywed daughter moved to a three-story house in London, with no way out but the stairs — Susan Bull has worried about fire. She worried even more upon the arrival of her grandchildren, now 7 and 3. "There's no escape," says Bull, of Kentfield, Calif. "The buildings are old and close together, and I am always nervous about the wiring. Or they might have a guest who smokes."

Last week, Bull took action and bought four LifeCenders. The LifeCender is billed as a "personal escape system" — a rope-and-harness contraption that propels people down the side of a building up to seven stories tall.

"At Christmastime, they are each getting a LifeCender instead of a cashmere sweater," says Bull. "It's an insurance policy. My husband and I will sleep better."

Home safety is big business, with ever more high-tech items joining the market: evacuation devices, smoke hoods and alarms of every kind.

High-end baby monitors include not just video screens but motion-sensing mattress pads that detect a baby's movement or lack of it. Just last month, RCA introduced the Alert Guard television, which displays emergency data transmitted by federal, state and local agencies. Even when the TV is off — as long as the electricity is working — it can be set to sound a chime when danger looms. Demand is so great that the sets are on back order.

But despite all the gadgetry, there is little evidence the home actually is becoming safer. About 20,000 Americans died from accidents at home in 1998, according to the most recent figures available from the Home Safety Council. Millions more suffered disabling injuries — and safety experts don't see accident rates declining.

"There are more products on the market and they are being used, but not as comprehensively and systematically as we would like," says Meri-K Appy, president of the Home Safety Council. She tells of children drowning after pool gates were propped open with a toy.

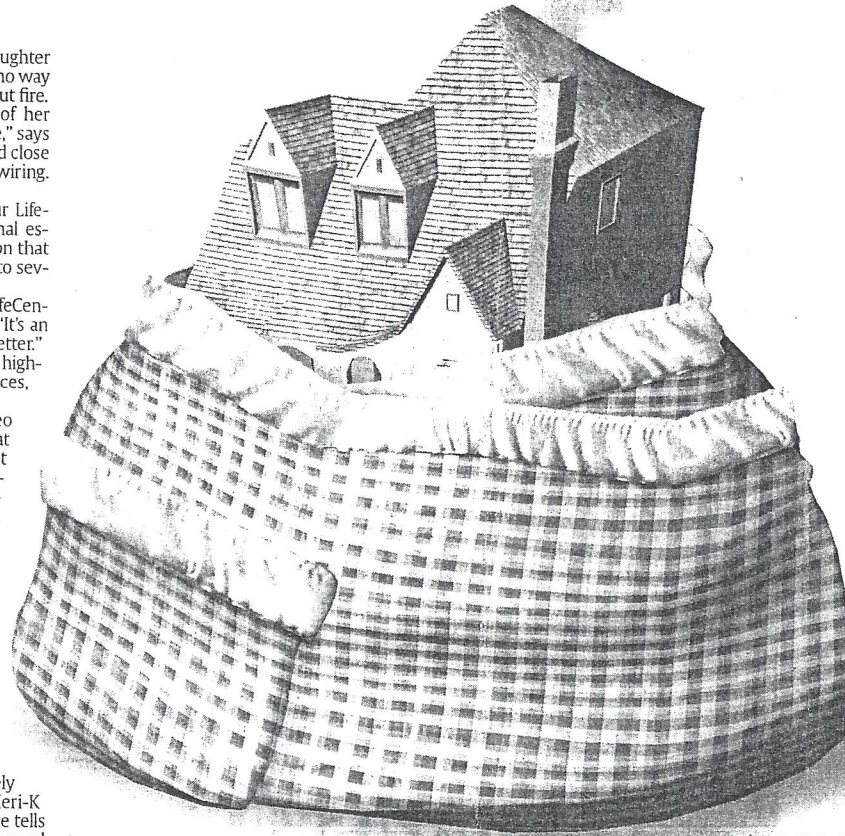
Safety experts also fear that people are focusing on the wrong things — rushing out to buy toxic-mold test kits or emergency generators — rather than being vigilant about things they can control.

"There's a tendency to latch onto the unusual threat" rather than the "commonplace, day-in and day-out occurrences," says Appy.

Take something frighteningly common — house fires. Smoke alarms play a huge role in helping people survive.

From 1975 to 1999, smoke alarm use soared from 10% to 95% of homes in the USA, according to the National Fire Protection Association. During those years, the number of deaths in house fires declined by half.

Still, there are unknown numbers of people who



By Karl Gelles, USA TODAY

don't use even such simple equipment the right way. They fail to replace the battery or they disable the alarm because it blares when they cook.

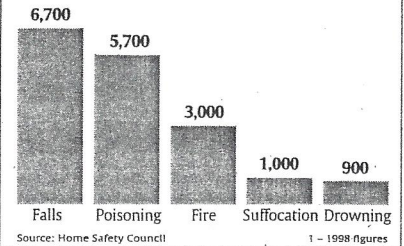
In a study last spring at Children's Hospital at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, N.Y., 90% of parents said they had a functional fire alarm at home — but researchers checked and found that only 58% did.

Relying on equipment isn't enough, says Appy — even when it is working. A smoke alarm might not rouse children from a deep sleep — or they might wake disoriented.

Kimberly Finkbeiner, who owns a childproofing business called Babyproofing Pittsburgh, has a particular beef with ill-used equipment. She points to pres-

Unsafe haven?

About 20,000 Americans die each year from accidents at home. Another 2 million seek medical help. The five most common fatal home injuries a year*:



By Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY

sure safety-gates used at the top of a staircase. Such gates might not hold if pushed.

"It gives a false sense of security, and they are more likely to be injured than if there is nothing there," she says.

Her business is fueled by first-time older parents with lots of disposable income. They are big worriers who will spare no expense, says Henry Coleman, who just opened Safety Depot (safetydepot.com), which also has a retail store in Chicago.

He knows: His wife, Hilary, is expecting a girl in January. "We are going to go overboard," he says.

Do they need to? Calmer and wiser now, their friends Henry and Jennifer Kowalski, of Downers Grove, Ill., think not. The Kowalskis were terrified before the birth of Peter, nearly 2. "The reading you do to prepare, all the books and parenting magazines, they scare you," says Henry Kowalski.

"If the baby monitor is too quiet, you wonder: Is the child still breathing?" Kowalski says. "But we ended up not using it. If the baby needed something, you'd hear him scream."

Certainly, people must find their own balance between prudence and paranoia. "What's overkill to one customer is not enough to another," says Finkbeiner. "It's all subjective."

Safer America, a retail store that sells survival gear, caters to those who err on the side of caution. It opened a year ago in downtown Manhattan, not far from the World Trade Center site.

Business spikes after bad news, says store executive Cyril Hourii. When the nation's terror alert was heightened in February, people lined up in the cold. Because of the big blackout in August, the store plans to stock emergency generators.

"If we are flexible and responsive to what happens in the news, we can be a viable business," Hourii says.

Still, much of the urgency roused by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks has subsided. Safer America is considering relocating uptown to better capture the corporate market and has dropped plans to open additional stores.

The equipment in stock includes several models of escape parachutes, for a "last-resort" scenario.

"These parachutes give you peace of mind," says Hourii. "But we have no evidence someone has used one."

"All the books and parenting magazines, they scare you. But we ended up not using (a monitor). If the baby needed something, you'd hear him scream."

— Henry Kowalski,
whose son, Peter, is almost 2