

Question: "I'm starting to shop for a crib, and I'm wondering about crib safety standards. How do I know I'm buying a safe crib?"

Little babies mean big baby gear purchases — and a crib may be the biggest one you'll make right now, both in size and expense. And it'll take some big consideration, too. Your baby will be clocking a lot of hours in that crib until he or she graduates to a bed, so you'll want it to be just right — right style, right size, and right color. Most of all, you'll want the crib to be as safe as can be.

Fortunately, if you'll be bringing a new one home, you've got the government on your (and your baby's) side when it comes to crib safety. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) made crib safety a top priority in 2011, setting strict standards for both manufacturers and retailers. These requirements include stronger mattress supports and crib slats, extremely durable crib hardware, and rigorous safety testing. Also, the CPSC put an end to manufacturing and selling dangerous drop-side cribs, which have caused an overwhelming amount of accidents and recalls. Though you'll still want to take any crib you're considering through the checklist below, the CPSC standards should make crib safety assessment a lot simpler.

On the other hand, if your heart's set on an older crib — like that antique in Aunt Anna's attic — you'll need to determine yourself whether it's a safe crib or not. If a hand-me-down crib doesn't pass muster (or it's just plain musty), take a pass.

Here's how to make sure you're buying a safe crib:

- The slats and corner posts of a crib should be no more than 2 3/8 inches apart (yes, it's fine to whip out the ruler while you're shopping for your baby). Wider slats pose an entrapment danger.
- Corner posts should be flush with the end panels (or no more than 1/16 inches higher). Is that heirloom outfitted with fancy finials or natty knobs? Saw them off (and sand down the rough edges).
- In a safe crib, the hardware — bolts, screws, and the like — should be firmly secured, with no sharp edges or rough areas and no spots that can pinch or otherwise injure your beautiful babe. The crib's wood should be free of cracks or splits. (And the entire crib — sides, slats, and all — should be very sturdy with tight joints.)
- Consider more than the color when it comes to crib paint. The paint on older cribs may contain lead, which poses a serious health risk to babies and young children. If you have a hunch that your prospect's paint is lead-based, have it stripped and start from scratch with a high-quality, lead-free enamel (check the paint label to make sure your choice is safe as a nursery item). For a natural nursery, stick to non-toxic paint with low or no volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Any crib that has peeling or cracked paint (even lead-free) should also be refinished.
- Make sure the mattress fits snugly against the inside of the crib. To ensure crib safety, try the two-finger test: If you can fit more than two fingers — Mom's, not Dad's if he has big hands — between the mattress and the crib, the mattress isn't a good fit. (The harder it is for you to make the bed, the better for your baby.) Standard-sized mattresses for a full-sized crib should be at least 27 1/4 inches by 51 3/8 inches and no more than six inches

thick. (Also, if the mattress is new, pull off that plastic.) Make sure, too, that the mattress itself is firm.

- Make sure never to put plush toys or soft bedding in the crib with your baby (even the adorable pillow and comforter that comes with the crib bedding set) because they can pose a suffocation hazard. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also strongly advises against using bumper pads — they increase the risk of SIDS and other crib-deaths. If you do decide to go against the AAP's recommendations, skip the padded kind and use thin, breathable ones that fit firmly around the whole crib. Then take down the bumpers as soon as your baby can stand, so your little one won't use them to climb out.
- Lastly, stay away from these crib models: those with headboards and footboards with pretty decorative cutouts, which are prohibited by the CPSC, and in light of the latest crib safety standards, be sure to pass on a hand-me-down drop-side crib.