



Nancy Chegus of St. Albert (Alta.) United replaced her Sunday school's tippy chairs and tables with safer furniture.

## Better safe than sorry

How to accident-proof your Sunday school and keep children and youth out of harm's way

BY JOCELYN BELL

**S**usan Clairmont is still troubled by "what ifs." It was a hot Labour Day Sunday two years ago, when Clairmont, her husband, Jay Robb, and their children, Mae, 4, and Jack, 1, attended a baptism at a Hamilton church.

Not a regular churchgoer, Clairmont was nervous about sending Mae to Sunday school because she didn't know the supervisors.

Mae, however, was keen. As they entered the church gymnasium, Clairmont reviewed the rules with her daughter: No going outside, no going to the bathroom with a stranger, and no going on the stage.

"I never thought to tell her, 'Don't let a piano fall on you,'" Clairmont says.

But just as Clairmont returned to the gymnasium after the service, Mae walked up to a piano that was perched on a dolly, played a few notes and somehow toppled the whole instrument.

Mae backed up as quickly as she could, but the piano caught her foot, crushing bones, muscles and blood vessels. The emergency room orthope-

dic surgeon later compared the degree of crushing to an industrial accident.

After months of treatment, Mae made a full recovery, and her parents — who barely received an apology from the church — decided not to sue. But that doesn't stop Clairmont from wondering: what if Mae hadn't backed up? What if the piano had landed higher on her body? What if it had been one-year-old Jack at the keyboard?

While this incident didn't happen at a United Church, it could happen in any setting where safety procedures are left to chance. As your Sunday school year gets under way, here are some other "what ifs" to think about — and to prevent.

### Put safety first

A walk-through of your Sunday school is the first step to preventing accidents. And when you do it, try to imagine yourself at kid height, with kid temptations.

"What are the risks within the rooms? Are there places where kids can climb and potentially fall and hurt themselves?" asks Bev Oag, duty of care staffperson for the General Council. If

there were a fire, how would children be evacuated? "We have an obligation to conduct fire drills," she adds.

Safety concerns prompted Nancy Chegus, designated lay minister for Christian development at St. Albert (Alta.) United, to make some changes to her Sunday school a few years ago. She threw away old wooden chairs and tables that were splintered and "too tippy," replacing them with sturdier furniture. She also got rid of an old rocking horse with springs on the side — an accident waiting to happen.

Of course, accidents do happen, and having one or several first aid kits can help mitigate the damage. Keep them accessible, suggests Rick Gunn, minister for children, youth and young adults at Bedford (N.S.) United, and make one person responsible for keeping them stocked and up to standard.

### Keep it clean

Cleanliness may not be next to godliness, but careful attention to hygiene can help keep kids healthy.

When Chegus replaced the furniture, she also replaced the toys. "Churches are notorious for collecting people's old toys. We started throwing them out. Plush toys in particular can collect germs. They're hard to clean." They also tore up the old carpets and replaced them with flooring that's easily washed.

Gunn notes that many children suf-