The Risk of Using Desks and Chairs Instead of a Step Stool – School Safety Meeting Kit



WHAT’S AT STAKE

We’ve all been there. Reaching for something just a little too high, a little too far out of reach. It’s tempting to use a desk or chair for that extra reach, but this common shortcut is dangerous. Using these items as substitutes for step stools can lead to serious injuries – not just minor bumps, but falls, sprains, and fractures. In a busy school environment, teachers, custodians, and students are constantly reaching for items, creating numerous opportunities for improper climbing. While it might seem like a small risk individually, the cumulative effect across the school increases the chance of accidents. Understanding these dangers is crucial for creating a safer environment and preventing unnecessary injuries. We want our school to be a place of learning, not avoidable accidents.

WHAT’S THE DANGER

Using desks and chairs as makeshift step stools might seem convenient, but they are not designed for climbing. They lack the stability and safety features of a proper step stool, making them incredibly hazardous. Let’s break down the specific dangers involved in this practice:

Falls: This is the most obvious and significant danger. Desks and chairs are inherently unstable when used for climbing. Think about it: chairs with wheels or swivel bases are just asking to tip over, while desks can rock or shift, especially on uneven surfaces. This instability dramatically increases the risk of falls, which can result in a wide range of injuries, from minor sprains and strains to more severe fractures, head injuries, and even concussions. Studies show that even falling from relatively low heights can cause significant harm. According to the National Safety Council, falls are one of the leading causes of unintentional injuries in the United States.

Awkward Postures and Overreaching: Using desks and chairs for climbing often leads to awkward postures and overreaching. In an attempt to reach something high, individuals might stretch, lean, or contort their bodies in unnatural

ways. This can lead to muscle strains, back injuries, and other musculoskeletal problems. These injuries can be painful and debilitating, and require significant time for recovery. It’s simply not worth the risk.

Tipping and Sliding: Even if the desk or chair doesn’t break, it can still tip or slide out from under the person climbing. This is especially true on smooth floors or if the desk or chair has wheels. The sudden loss of support can cause a fall and potential injuries. This hazard is compounded if the person is carrying something while climbing, further throwing off their balance.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

So, what can we do to prevent these kinds of incidents? The best way to protect yourself from the dangers of using desks and chairs as step stools is simple: don’t do it. Here are some specific things we can all do:

Ensuring Proper Equipment Availability

The most effective preventative measure is ensuring proper equipment is available. If a task requires reaching something at a height higher than your standing reachability, a proper step stool or ladder should always be used. If such equipment is not readily available, it should be requested. This proactive approach eliminates the temptation to use unsafe alternatives.

Using Step Stools Correctly

When using a step stool, always place it on a firm, level surface. Forget rugs, uneven floors, or anything wobbly – you need solid, flat ground. Ensure the step stool is fully opened and locked before climbing. Never stand on the top step or the pail shelf, as these are not designed for standing and can be unstable. Maintain three points of contact with the step stool at all times – either two hands and one foot, or two feet and one hand. This provides stability and reduces the risk of falling.

Avoiding Overreaching

If you can’t comfortably reach something while on the step stool, climb down and reposition it closer to the item. Never lean or stretch excessively, as this can cause you to lose your balance and fall.

Maintaining a Safe Work Area

It’s also important to be mindful of the surrounding environment. Ensure there is adequate clearance around the step stool and that there are no obstacles that could cause you to trip or fall. Be aware of other people in the area and take precautions to avoid bumping into them or causing them to trip.

What to Do If an Incident Occurs

Despite our best efforts, accidents can still happen. If a student falls from a desk or chair in your classroom, here’s what you should do:

- **First things first, assess the situation:** Don’t move the student unless they’re in immediate danger (like if they’re in the path of something else falling). Check if they’re conscious and look for any obvious injuries. Are

they responding? Are there any visible signs of pain or bleeding?

- **Get help immediately:** Don’t hesitate. Send another student to get a supervisor, the school nurse, or another designated staff member right away. If the injury looks serious – like a potential head injury, broken bone, or if the student is unconscious – call emergency services (911 or your local emergency number) yourself. It’s always better to be safe than sorry.
- **If you know first aid, use it:** If you’re trained in first aid, do what you can to help until professional help arrives.
- **Make sure it’s documented:** Once the immediate situation is under control, it’s really important to fill out an incident report. This paperwork might seem like a hassle, but it’s crucial for understanding what happened and preventing similar accidents in the future.

FINAL WORD

Using desks and chairs as makeshift climbing aids is a dangerous habit that can lead to serious injuries. Remember, taking a few extra moments to use a proper step stool or ladder is always worth it to protect your health and well-being. Don’t take shortcuts when it comes to safety.