

Teaching Preschoolers to be Fire Safe



Children at risk


Tragically, children five years of age and younger are more than twice as likely to die in fires as are older children and adults. Most fire fatalities involving preschool children fall into four categories.

- Fires that preschool children start.
- Fires started by heating or electrical systems equipment.
- Fires caused by the careless use of smoking materials.
- Fires that are set intentionally (arson fires).

Preschool and kindergarten teachers and parents can make an important difference by teaching fire safety in a way that young children can understand.

It's a proven fact that providing these lessons early can save lives.

To work, a preschool fire safety program should involve both the children and their parents. Through the activities described in this brochure, young children can encourage the adults in their households to be aware of home fire hazards and to know what to do if there is a fire.




Match and lighter safety

Each year, many fires are started by children playing with matches or lighters. Young children should learn that matches and lighters can get hot and hurt children and that they are for grown-ups only.

Matches and lighters are tools, not toys. The message should be clear: Children should not touch matches or lighters. If they find them, they should tell a grown-up.

Get the message to parents. Use only child-resistant lighters and store matches and lighters up high, preferably in a locked cabinet. Tell parents to remind guests who smoke to keep their matches and lighters with them while visiting.



Escaping from a fire

It's not uncommon for fire fighters to discover the bodies of children hiding in closets or under beds. In many cases, young children die in fires because they try to hide from smoke and flames. When talking with children about what to do in a fire, emphasize that they cannot hide from fire but that they can escape.

Children need to learn that a smoke detector warns them of danger from fire and that when they hear the warning sound, they should get out of the building.

At home and at school, children should know a proper fire escape plan. Hold frequent fire drills and encourage children and their parents to have a similar fire escape plan at home.

An escape plan should include knowing two ways out of every room (in case a primary exit is blocked by smoke or flames) and being familiar with every possible exit from the home. Encourage families to decide on a meeting place outside where everyone in the household can gather after they've escaped so parents will know if anyone has been left inside. Children should learn the phrase, "Get out and stay out." Never go back into a burning building.



Crawl low under smoke

Teach preschoolers to use a different exit if they encounter smoke or flames during their escape from a fire. If they must escape through smoke, they should crawl on their hands and knees, keeping their heads about a foot (30 centimeters) above the floor. The air will be cleaner there.



Stop, drop, and roll

Even young children can learn this simple maneuver that could save their lives if their clothing catches fire. "Stop, drop, and roll" is easy and fun to practice in the classroom.

Stop where you are - don't run.

Drop to the ground.

Roll -- cover your face with your hands and **roll over and over** to smother the flames.



Activities for preschoolers

Identifying toys versus tools

Have children collect pictures from magazines of things that are safe to play with -- such as bikes and balls -- and things that are not -- such as matches, lighters, and power tools. Put the cut-out pictures into a box, draw them out one at a time, and have the children say if the item is safe or unsafe for children.

Crawling under smoke

Practice crawling under smoke as part of a fire drill. Have adults assist by stretching out a bedsheet two feet above the floor to represent the "pretend" smoke at some point along the exit route. Have the children find an alternative escape route or crawl under the sheet to an exit.

Thinking ahead

Have the children act out what they would do in specific fire situations. Possible scenarios: "Pretend you wake up and there's smoke in your bedroom" (crawl low under the smoke to the exit), or "Pretend you're helping in the kitchen and your sleeve catches fire" (stop, drop, and roll).

Taking the message home

Encourage young children to take the fire safety message home by asking them to talk with their families about home fire escape plans. Make fire safety information part of meetings with parents. Send information home on child-resistant lighters and the importance of smoke detectors, fire escape plans, meeting places, and smoke alarms.





According to the National Fire Protection Association, a home fire is reported to a fire department in the United States every 1-1/2 minutes, and someone dies in a home fire every 2-1/2 hours. The American Red Cross responds to more than 68,000 disasters each year, the majority of which are single-family fires.

The Red Cross recommends taking the following preventive measures to help minimize the chance and effects of fire:

- **Be careful with candles** - Keep candles away from combustible materials. Don't leave children unattended in a room with lit candles. Keep candles, matches and lighters out of the reach of children. Never display lighted candles in windows or near exits.
- **Inspect fireplaces and wood stoves** - Have your chimney connections and flues inspected by a professional and cleaned if necessary prior to the start of every heating season. Use a sturdy screen when burning fires. Burn only wood-never burn paper, including discarded gift wrap, or pine boughs. Do not hang holiday decorations from or on your fireplace if you plan to use it as a heat source.
- **Check smoke detectors** - Make sure detectors are working properly and that new batteries are installed.
- **Be aware of overuse of electrical outlets** - Don't overload your electrical outlets. Be careful of extension cords that present hazardous walkways.
- **Have one or more working fire extinguishers in your home** - Get training from the fire department in how to use them.
- **Consider installing an automatic fire sprinkler system in your home.** Statistics from the National Fire Protection Association show that automated fire sprinkler systems typically reduce chances of dying in a fire and reduce the average property loss by one-half to two-thirds where they are used.

How to Create a Home Escape Plan

Have a home escape plan for your family in the event of a fire in the home. Remember to practice the plan on a regular basis to make sure everyone in the family is familiar with the plan.

Steps:

1. Explain to your family that you're going to create a home escape plan that could save you all in the event of a fire.
2. Get a piece of white paper and a pencil.
3. Draw a simple diagram of your house.
4. Go through the diagram carefully with family members and find two escape routes for every room in the house - the bedrooms in particular. Windows are included as escape routes. If living in an apartment, locate the fire exits and stairs.
5. Draw arrows on the escape plan, showing the ways out.
6. Make sure every family member is familiar with the exits chosen.
7. Decide on a place for family members to meet outside.
8. Stress the fact that family members should get themselves out in the event of a fire. Do not go running through the house looking for others. Go to a neighbor's home and call 911.
9. Practice opening windows, taking off screens and, if on a second story, using ladders. This is especially important for children, who can have trouble working window locks or collapsible ladders without practice.
10. Make sure there are no security bars on bedroom windows - or if there are, make sure they can be opened and closed easily.
11. Tape a copy of the home escape plan to the back of each bedroom door.

Tips:

- Lower your children down through a window before escaping yourself. They may be too scared to escape if you go first and then motion for them to come down.
- Keep bedroom doors closed at night and teach family members how to feel the door before opening it if the smoke detector goes off. To check for heat, place the back of your hand on the door, start at the bottom of the door and work up it as high as possible. Then place the back of your hand on the doorknob (metal conducts heat better than wood - if there's any heat outside the door, you should be able to feel it). If you don't feel heat, crack open the door, staying low, and check for smoke. If smoke is present, use your other way out.
- Set up a tour for your children at a local fire station to help them understand the importance of fire safety.
- Make sure there are working smoke detectors in every bedroom and in hallways outside the bedrooms.

How to Test Your Smoke Detector

Testing your smoke detector is as important as brushing your teeth. What's the use of a detector that doesn't work?

Steps:

1. Test your smoke detector once a month.
2. Press the test button on your detector and check that the device beeps or rings loudly.
3. Avoid lighting candles under the detector to see if the alarm goes off. Repeated use of smoke to activate detectors can cause them to fail when a real fire occurs.

Tips:

- If your detector runs on batteries, change them when you change your clocks - at the start and end of daylight-saving time.
- If your smoke detector starts chirping or beeping off and on, it's time to change the batteries.
- You may want to consider purchasing a combination smoke/carbon monoxide detector. These units cost more but are well worth it.

Warnings:

- If a smoke detector goes off, you literally have seconds to respond. There is absolutely no time to gather possessions, pets and possibly even each other. Your best response is to leave your home immediately, gather at your prearranged meeting place and call 911 from a neighbor's home.
- Avoid getting any paint or dust on your smoke detector.
- Make sure the smoke detector you choose has been tested by an independent testing laboratory.
- Replace all detectors after 10 years.

How to Teach a Child Exit Drills in the Home

Teaching a child fire exit drills in the home can save his life in the event of a fire. Do this once every six months so your child is comfortable with the escape procedures.

Steps:

1. Explain to your child what you're going to teach him. Tell him it's similar to fire drills in school, and that it's just as important to have fire drills at home.
2. Draw a simple diagram of your house and go over it carefully with your child.
3. Find two escape routes for every room. Take the child to each room and ask him how he would escape if there were a fire.
4. Practice opening windows, taking off screens and using ladders (if on a second story). Children must be able to open windows and window locks and use collapsible ladders if on a second story.
5. Make sure there are no security bars on bedroom windows - or if there are, that they can be opened and closed easily. You may even want to remove bars from your child's room.
6. Sleep with bedroom doors closed, and teach your child that if the smoke detector goes off, he should feel the door with the back of his hand before opening it.
7. Teach your child to place the back of his hand on the door to check for heat, starting at the bottom and working up. Then he should place the back of his hand on the doorknob; if there's any heat outside the door, he should be able to feel it.
8. Teach your child to crack open the door - if he doesn't feel heat, he should stay low and check for smoke. If smoke is present, he should use the other way out.
9. Choose a place for family members to reconvene outside.
10. Tell your child that once he has escaped, he must not go back in the house for any reason until firefighters have deemed the house safe for re-entry.

Tips:

- Lower your child down from a window before escaping yourself. He may be too scared to escape if you go first and then motion for him to come down.
- Make sure smoke detectors are mounted inside each bedroom in your home, as well as in the hallway outside the bedrooms.
- Test your smoke detectors regularly.

Warnings:

- If a smoke detector goes off, you literally have seconds to respond. There is absolutely no time to gather possessions, pets and possibly even each other. Your best response is to leave your home immediately, gather at your prearranged meeting place and call 911 from a neighbor's home.
- Never go back into the house once you've escaped from a fire.

