



by Karen Stephens

Teach Fire Safety During the Preschool Years

As adults, getting out of a house on fire comes as second nature. But children respond in just the opposite way. To escape fire, they often try to hide under a bed, in a closet, or behind furniture. They even hide from the firefighters trying to save them. When you look at things from a child's point of view, it's easier to understand their actions. First, most home fires start at night when everyone is sleeping. When awakened, kids are groggy and confused. Smoke fogs their vision, which is made even worse by coughing and watering eyes. Plus, fire is loud, blindingly bright, swift moving, and frightening.

When firefighters get into a home, they're in full protective gear, including face masks and oxygen tanks. They may have an ax or fire hose. Firefighters breathing into masks sound frightening, not all that different from Darth Vader of the movie "Star Wars." To further complicate things, a young child's logical thinking hasn't matured. To them, out of sight means out of harm's reach. They falsely believe that not seeing fire means it can't find them.

Those factors combine to put kids at greater risk of dying in a house fire than an adult. But parents, caregivers, and teachers can fight against those odds. By the time children reach age 2, they can be taught fire survival skills. Below I share ways to get you started. But don't overlook the services your local fire department provides. Fire specialists are eager to share resources for home or classroom use, such as fire safety videos and brochures. They can also advise you on customized home escape plans and where to place smoke alarms.

Be a Role Model for Prevention

Fires caused by cigarettes account for about half of all house fires. Tragically, among fatal house fires, 25% of the dead have been children. So, don't smoke, especially not in the home. If you choose to smoke, never smoke in bed, when you're sleepy on the couch, or when you're even mildly tipsy. Use deep, tip resistance ash trays. After smoking, (including after parties) check for butts that may slip between chair cushions and smolder for hours before fire erupts. Douse smoke butts with water before putting them in the trash — embers can eventually blaze there, too.

Don't leave small appliances (like toasters, irons, heating pads, curling irons) plugged in after use — that's the wisest course of action. But if you do intend to leave them plugged in and you tend to forget to turn them off, purchase new models with an automatic turn-off function.

Keep space heaters away from paper and curtains. Toss or repair small appliances that smell funny or have frayed electrical cords. Clean fireplace chimneys yearly. Never put metal in a microwave. Purchase lighters, for grill or fireplace, with child resistant features, and always keep them locked away or out of reach of kids. Never leave candles burning unattended.

Keep escape routes passable. Teach children to put toys away after play, especially toys in fire escape pathways that could cause tripping.

Be Prepared

Keep a fire extinguisher nearby, especially in the kitchen, garage, and near a fireplace or woodstove. Know how to use it. And remember — don't pour water onto a grease fire; smother it with a lid instead.

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Purchase smoke alarms, have them installed correctly and keep them well maintained. Install new batteries at least yearly, like when you set clocks forward or back for the time change. If anyone in your home is hearing impaired, purchase a smoke alarm that flashes a strobe light as well as sounds an alarm. Put a smoke alarm on each floor of your home, at the very least.

Create an Escape Plan

With your children, create a fire escape plan for your home or apartment. Draw your floor plan, and then from each room, decide on two ways to get out. Use markers or crayons to color-code escape paths with directional arrows. Practice it quarterly.

Select an outside meeting place where everyone will gather after escaping, such as a mailbox, lamppost, or specific tree. Elderly people, very young children, and people with some disabilities will need assistance, so decide ahead of time who will help them out. And if necessary, teach children how to use fire escape tools for upper floors (such as a hanging ladder or slide).

Teach Fire Safety Through Play

Children learn easiest through play activities. So use playtime as a way to reinforce fire safety concepts. For instance, children love to dress up as fire fighters with a hat, raincoat, boots, and a short length of garden hose. Pretend you have a fire and call for your child to rescue you and help put out the flames.

Kids also like pretend play using puppets or dolls to act out dramas. After your child uses blocks to build a home, apartment building, or farm setting, pretend a fire breaks out and help your child decide what the pretend people should do to escape. Casually suggest action scenarios, such as, "Oh, no, your farmer's overalls are on fire. What should he do?" or "Here's your play phone. Can you dial the emergency number?"

Visits to the fire station, watching videos, and reading children's books together also provide teachable moments for fire safety learning. Introduce such play occasionally throughout the year to help kids remember the survival skills they learn.

Fire Safety Concepts to Teach Children

- When fire erupts, get out of the house quickly and NEVER go back inside. Teach the reminder chant, "Don't hide — Go Outside!" Tell kids never to go back in for pets or toys.
- Escape a fire first, and then from a cell phone or a neighbor's phone, call the emergency number.
- Only use stairs for escape, never an elevator.
- Before opening a door, touch it with the back of your hand. Only proceed if it's normal temperature. If it's hot, don't open it.
- If a door is opened and fire erupts or smoke pours in, slam the door shut fast and try an alternate route.
- If neither exit is safe to use, close the door and wait for firefighters. Once kids are old enough, teach them to close windows and duct tape (or stuff with cloth) cracks around doors so smoke doesn't enter room. At the closed window, wave a flashlight and/or colored cloth so firefighters can see where help is needed.
- If an escape route is smoky, but passable, get down low and breathe the cleanest air that's 1 to 2 feet above the floor. That may require crawling down the escape route. Older kids can learn the chant, "Fall and Crawl."
- If clothes catch on fire, never run. "Stop, Drop, and Roll" to smother flames.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.