

FACT SHEET

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PARENTS: DON'T LET YOUR CHILDREN BURN

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In the time it takes to read the next few paragraphs, several homes in this country will catch fire. A residence burns every 45 seconds, adding up to 1,900 fires a day and almost 700,000 a year. Almost 7,000 persons die in these fires and at least a fourth of the victims are children under 14 years of age.

Most children are pathetically helpless to save themselves in a fire. Through lack of knowledge and practice, they make deadly mistakes, such as rushing into smoke-filled hallways or down burning stairways when they might escape through a window. Some do not even attempt to escape. They wander in bewilderment or panic. Many hide in closets or under beds, waiting in vain for someone to rescue them. Many are later found dead by firemen.

The tragedy is that youngsters could get out alive if parents would take a few minutes to teach them how. Schools routinely hold fire drills. Yet, fire drills at home are seldom thought of, much less done on a regular basis. A child is about 200 times more likely to be caught in fire at home than at school.

The child who has practiced what to do in case of fire is much less susceptible to panic and has a better chance of surviving, fire authorities agree. This has been proved by thousands of fire-drill trained pupils who have safely escaped from burning schools.

A home fire drill could be done much like a classroom exercise, or you could capitalize on your child's

imagination. Drills conducted as "let's be a fireman" game may stimulate more interest and impress the information more firmly in the child's mind.

Below are six home fire drills designed to teach children and their parents how to survive a fire. After trying each fire drill during daylight hours, try another test drill shortly after your children go to bed by using a pre-arranged signal like "FIRE!" Following these fire drills is a final "rookie" examination to determine whether your children qualify as "firemen."

Family Fire Drills

1. *Meet the Fire Chief.* In this drill, the entire family, called the "fire department staff," gets together to make escape plans. A "fire chief" is elected to draw a rough diagram of the house. He asks the other "firemen" the help map out two separate escape routes from every room in the house. There must be a main route and, in case that is blocked, an alternate route. Pay special attention to escapes from bedrooms where fire is most likely to trap you. Don't rely much on stairways because these often are flooded with heat and deadly smoke, making passage impossible.

Your best escape route is through a window, perhaps one that opens onto a garage deck or porch roof. Even if you can't get to the ground from there, you usually can wait safely in the fresh air for rescue. You could use a sturdy trellis or commercially available fire-escape ladder, either portable or permanently installed. A knotted rope might work for athletic youngsters if they go down hand over hand instead of sliding.

Decide who will help very young children or the elderly in the family and where you will meet after the escape. This will prevent the risk of going inside to check on someone who is already safe. Youngsters may be instructed to go to a neighbor's home which

can serve as a place to meet and a place to call for help away from the location of the fire. A youngster may want to draw his own copy of the fire-escape plans and regulations to put on a bulletin board in his room.

2. *Don the Gas Masks.* This drill teaches children about poisonous gases which are the real killers in fires.

Pretend the house is filling with smoke and that you must get out as quickly as possible. In all the drills, stress immediate escape. Yell "Smoke!" and have the children, wherever they are — in bedrooms, living room, kitchen — grab a pillow or several thicknesses of fluffy material such as a towel and place it over their mouths and noses. The cloth won't filter out poisonous gases in smoke but it will relieve some of the irritating effects of inhaling smoke. Then have the children move as fast as they can, keeping close to the floor where the air is best. They should know to avoid deep breaths.

Emphasize the fact that smoke, not flames, is the No. 1 killer in fire. It contains large quantities of carbon monoxide and a dozen or so other poisonous gases from burning materials. By far the majority of fire victims are asphyxiated by smoke gases long before flames ever touch them. At times poisonous smoke can knock you unconscious after two or three breaths and can kill you in a few minutes. Heat causes smoke to rise, making upper floors where bedrooms are located the greatest fire traps. Be sure children know that wherever there is smoke, there is potential death — and that they should get to fresh air fast.

3. *Hot Door, Cold Door.* As a part of "basic training," firemen learn the dangers of opening a door in a fire. Your child must know this, too. Teach him never to open a bedroom door if he suspects fire.

Instead, he should apply this test:

Put a hand on the door panel and knob. If either is warm, do not open the door, for heat and gases on the other side are ready to burst in. One lungful of superheated air can fell a person instantly. Leave the door closed and escape another way.

If the door doesn't feel warm, brace against it, open it a crack and be ready to slam it should smoke or heat rush in. If all is clear, proceed through the door with caution.

Make sure your young firemen practice this routine until they have it down pat. As a fire drill is being announced, slip a sign under the closed door reading "hot" or "cold" while youngsters react appropriately. Also make it a nightly ritual to close bedroom doors unless this practice would prevent setting off a fire detector located in a hallway. Tests have shown that behind a closed door your survival time is 5 to 11 minutes. With the door open, the survival time is only 2 minutes. Ideally each bedroom should contain an audible fire detector.

4. *Get Out Fast.* This one teaches youngsters the importance of quick escape. A child's first impulse in fires should always be to "get out," although the blaze may be small, for it can become an inferno in minutes.

Fire most often strikes at night while children are asleep. The most important drill you can give is this: Have them lie on their beds and then sound the alarm. Time them to see how long it takes to reach the meeting place outside the house. At first, let them escape the simplest way. Then make them go through obstacles, such as "smoke" and the "hot" door. Block off stairways with a string so they know to use an alternate route. Be sure they practice going out a window. If they use a rope ladder, have them throw it out the window and actually climb down. If they are to wait on a roof until someone comes with a ladder, make them wait while you get the ladder. They must behave exactly as they would during a real fire.

5. *Call the Fire Engines.* Teach your child exactly how to call the fire department; his quick action could save his life, and maybe your house. However, impress on him that if he discovers fire, he should do things in this order:

First, alert all in the house so they can begin their escape. Second, call the fire department if it can still be done safely. Lives have been lost because someone paused to call the firemen when he should have fled. It is safer to call the fire department from a neighbor's home when possible. Have the children memorize the number of the fire department. Also, write out the number and place it permanently near the phone. Even small youngsters who can't dial long numbers at least can learn to dial "O" for the operator in an emergency.

When practicing, place a strip of tape over the receiver buttons so you can dial without letting the call go through. Have your youngster dial and give this information: "Our house is on fire at (address). The name is (head of household)." Then don't let them hang up immediately, but wait to be sure they were understood.

Should your party line be in use when you start to report a fire, interrupt and say "Excuse me, my name is _____. I must report a fire emergency — please hang up." State laws require that you hang up on a party line immediately when told the line is needed for an emergency call. An emergency is defined as a situation in which property or human life is in jeopardy and the prompt summoning of aid is essential.

6. *Man the Hoses.* This drill teaches some principles of fire fighting. Although a child will never fight fire extensively, his quick action could save his life or your house.

Stage a small paper or wood fire in the backyard — in a box, barbecue pit or trash burner — where you can control it. Show youngsters how to put it out with a bucket of water or a hose. A coarse spray nozzle is better than a steady stream. Make sure that each family member knows how to operate a fire extinguisher, an item every household should have. A practice session is worth the cost of a refill. An extinguisher is useless unless you know how to work it.

Warn children never to throw water on an electrical fire because of the shock hazard or on a grease fire because it may spatter, spreading the flames. Only an extinguisher especially designed for electrical fires will work on electricity. To squelch small grease fires, put a lid on the flaming pan or throw on several handfuls of baking soda (never flour; it may explode). For wood, paper and cloth, the surest extinguishing agent is water. Some households keep a coiled hose stored under sinks that is attached to an extra under-sink water outlet for quick use in emergencies.

Teach children what to do if their clothing catches on fire. Let them pretend they are on fire and have them roll up in a blanket, rug, large towel or the

nearest thing available to smother the flames. Emphasize that they should never run if clothes are burning because the breeze fans the flames, increasing the fire's intensity.

Fire Quiz

To determine whether your children qualify as "firemen," put them through the recommended "fire drills" in this series and then give them the paper-and-pencil test that follows.

You can read the questions to the test while they mark the answers. Don't accept a score of less than 80. When they pass, give them a toy fireman's badge, fire truck or other reward, symbolizing their new status and achievement.

Another worthy project would be a family visit to the local fire department. Available firemen will show their equipment to visitors.

Children will also need periodic "refresher courses" and much practice to make escape from fire an automatic response.

TRUE OR FALSE

- True_____ False_____ 1. If you awaken in the night and smell smoke, you should run and open the bedroom door to see where it is coming from.
- True_____ False_____ 2. Smoke contains poisonous gases and can kill you if you breathe much of it.
- True_____ False_____ 3. When phoning the fire department, say "Our house is on fire!" and hang up quickly.
- True_____ False_____ 4. If there is a fire in your house, you first should go directly to the phone and call the fire department.
- True_____ False_____ 5. If there is a grease fire in the oven or skillet you should throw water on it.
- True_____ False_____ 6. In a fire, stairways are usually filled with smoke and heat.
- True_____ False_____ 7. If your clothes catch on fire, you should run for help.
- True_____ False_____ 8. You should always get out of a burning building even if the fire is small.
- True_____ False_____ 9. If a closed door feels warm to your hand, it means that the flames and smoke are on the other side and you should not open the door.
- True_____ False_____ 10. You should never go inside buildings that are on fire.

The correct answers are listed below.

ANSWERS: 1. (F) Never open the door without first placing your hand on the panel and knob to determine if they are warm. 2. (T) 3. (F) State your name and address and if possible wait until the fire department repeats the address before you hang up. 4. (F) First get everyone out and then notify the fire department if you have time to do so safely. 5. (F) Water will splatter the flames. Instead, toss on baking soda or cover the skillet with a lid to smother the fire. 6. (T) 7. (F) Never run when your clothes are on fire. Roll up in a rug or blanket or roll on the floor to smother the fire. 8. (T) 9. (T) 10. (T).

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