

## **Fire Safety Important for Families**

Missouri ranks just above the National average when looking at the percentage of deaths per capita that occur from fire related causes. In 2005 12.3% of deaths in America were fire related 12.6% here in Missouri. The 2005 data shows that fire killed more people that year than any other nature disaster, which is almost unbelievable considering that hurricane Katrina hit that same year. A recent e-mail from a friend made me aware that fire safety is something that I personally take for granted. We hear about hurricanes, tornados, and large natural disasters, but sometimes forgot that the little fires add up, injuring and/ or killing over 20,000 people per year.

As a parent it is important to educate your children and your entire family to keep them safe in the case of a fire. Statistics show that a child under the age of five is twice as likely to die in a residential fire as the rest of the population. As a parent that idea is very alarming, but also very real. As parents and caregivers it is important to help your family to be prepared by installing and maintaining working smoke alarms; safely storing lighters and matches out of children's reach and sight; and practicing a fire escape plan with the entire family, especially small children, which should include helping toddlers understand how to quickly respond in case of fire, and planning how adults can escape with babies.

### **Smoke Alarms**

Two-thirds of home fires that kill children occur in homes without a working smoke alarm. When fire breaks out, you have only seconds to escape its powerful heat, blinding smoke, and deadly gases. Families can increase their chances of surviving fire by installing and maintaining smoke alarms. Install and maintain smoke alarms on every level of your home and outside of sleeping areas. Test your smoke alarms monthly and replace the batteries at least once a year. If you keep the door of your baby's bedroom closed, keep a working smoke alarm in the room and use a baby monitor so you can hear when the alarm sounds. As soon as children are old enough to understand, familiarize them with the sound of the smoke alarm. Teach them that when one goes off, they must leave the home and go to the designated meeting place outside. Cut your family's chances of dying in a house fire in half by having a working smoke alarm.

### **Storing Matches and Lighters**

Matches, lighters, and other heat sources are the leading causes of fire deaths for children. Never underestimate your child's curiosity about fire, nor their ability to strike matches or start a lighter. Store matches and lighters out of children's reach and sight, preferably in a locked cabinet. Even those items that claim to be child proof are not always, instruct children to tell you when they find a match or lighter. Never use matches or lighters as amusement for your children. They may imitate your actions. Take extreme care with the storage of your matches and lighters. Your children are depending on you.

## **Escape Plan**

Children as young as three years old can follow a fire escape plan they have practiced often. Yet, many families don't have detailed escape plans, and those that do usually don't practice them. Practicing a fire escape plan and fire-safe behaviors on a regular basis can mean the difference between life and death. Draw a basic diagram of your home, marking all windows and doors, and plan two routes of escape out of each room. Consider various fire scenarios when creating your plan and develop actions for a safe escape. Plan for each member of your family, including babies and toddlers who may be unable to escape on their own. Keep exits clear of debris and toys. Keep your child's bedroom door closed. If a hallway fire occurs, a closed door may hinder the smoke from overpowering your baby or toddler, giving firefighters extra time for rescue. Teach children not to hide from firefighters. Their uniforms can be scary in times of crisis. Teach children that firefighters are there to help in an emergency. Take children for a tour at your local fire station so that they can see a firefighter in full gear. Teach your children how to crawl under the smoke to reduce smoke inhalation. Also, teach your children how to touch closed doors to see if they are hot before opening. If so, use an alternate escape route. Have a safe meeting place outside the home and teach children never to go back inside. Practicing fire-safe behaviors and knowing what to do in an emergency can give your family extra seconds to escape.

The information above was obtained from the United State Fire Administration. Their website, <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov>, has excellent information to help you and your family. It also includes an interactive page for children to learn even more about fire safety. Taking time for fire safety is important and can also serve as a family bonding experience. Look to fire safety as an opportunity to spend time with your children and in turn an opportunity to possibly save their lives. For more information on youth development please contact the University of Missouri Extension Office at 660-885-5556.