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Fire Safety Tips for Families

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Although Fire Prevention Week isn't until October, it's never too early to get the facts on fire safety.

Tom Hamed, Liberty Mutual Insurance property risk field manager and volunteer firefighter shares some tips on how we can keep our families safe from fire with PARADE.com.

What are the do's and don'ts if one discovers that their house is on fire?
Do – Alert everyone in the

home when a fire is discovered.

Do – Immediately start your fire escape plan and gather at your family meeting spot, outside and away from the home.

Do – Call 911 or your local emergency number from outside the home.

Do not – Assume everyone will hear the smoke alarms when they sound.

Do not – Take time to gather valuables or pets.

Do not – Go back into your home. Once out, stay out - until a firefighter says it's safe to go back inside.

How often do you feel fire drills should be conducted in a family's home?

We know our kids are having fire drills at school, yet only 28% of parents with children under the age of 12 say they have had a fire drill at home. You should practice your family fire escape plan at least twice a year (perhaps more frequently when you first create it, so that everyone becomes familiar with it). Practice your plan during the day and night. Most fatal fires occur at night, and escaping a home in the darkness is very different from during the light of day. Also, remind any guests about your safe family meeting place, outside and away from the home, if a fire does occur.

Why do you feel so many American households don't have a family escape plan?

Most people don't think a fire will happen to them, which is likely why more than one-in-three (38%) parents with children under the age of 12 say they have never created or discussed a fire escape plan with their families. Most of those parents (61%) simply say it hasn't occurred to them to do so.

At what age should parents educate their children about fire safety?

Children under age 5 have nearly twice the risk of dying in a fire as the rest of the population. Parents can start educating their children about fire safety with simple messages as early as the age of three years old and then add age-appropriate guidance as they get older.

What do you feel are the most common household mistakes that can lead to fires?

We all know the dangers of fire, but I'm not sure that people really know just how significantly families across America are impacted daily by fire.

Some facts that should startle you:

- Cooking is the primary cause of residential fires (Ahrens 2010). Frying is the leading cause, with 83% of the fires occurring within the first 15 minutes of cooking.
- Space heaters, whether portable or stationary, accounted for one-third (32%) of home heating fires and four out of five (82%) of home heating fire deaths. (Based on 2004-2008 averages)
- From 1990 to 2001 candle related home fires nearly tripled, and even today, candles are still the third leading cause of home fire injuries.
- Approximately 4 out of 10 home fire deaths occur in homes without smoke alarms (Ahrens 2009).

According to the recent Liberty Mutual survey, despite having children in the household, parents admit to doing a number of things that can create risk for home fires:

- 70% have left the clothes dryer running when not at home
- 26% have left food cooking on the stovetop unattended
- 22% have left a candle burning unattended
- 15% have disabled the smoke alarm while cooking

What advice do you have for parents for the upcoming July 4th holiday/barbecuing season?

The same rules for safe cooking indoor cooking apply to outdoors as well.

- Don't leave food cooking on the grill unattended.
- Maintain a three-foot safety zone around the grill for kids and pets to minimize the risk of burn injuries
- Whether it's a propane-fired or charcoal grill, keep it at least three feet away from the house, and don't use it on a balcony or under a porch or overhang. A fire I recently responded to started where the propane grill was up against the house and malfunctioned. The flames extended through a window on the first floor and spread up the walls past the second floor into the attic area, causing serious damage and making the home uninhabitable.

Lastly, what are a few tips that families can do to be prepared in case of a fire?

- Install smoke alarms in every bedroom, outside each sleeping area and on every level of the home, and test them every month. Change batteries at least once a year. Replace any smoke alarms that are at least 10 years old.
- Install and maintain a carbon monoxide alarm in a central location outside each sleeping area.
- Prepare and practice a fire escape plan – at least twice a year. Liberty Mutual's second annual National Family Fire Drill Day on October 1, 2011, is a great time to activate your family's fire safety plan.
- Visit www.BeFireSmart.com for additional resources and tips to help create an individualized fire escape plan to keep your family and home safe. The site provides parents with helpful hints on mapping out your own fire escape plan, information on the proper use of smoke alarms and fire extinguishers, and tips to prevent fires caused by everything from candles to clothes dryers. It's also a great web site to tour with your kids. Check out the fast, fun, and interactive games, and enjoy the downloadable coloring book that teaches the important lesson of never hiding from a firefighter during a fire."

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