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Teaching Your Children Some Valuable Home Security Lessons

(Featured December 1, 2003)

Over the last few months we've taken a look at several issues surrounding personal and home security. Now, it's time to look at some ways that you can teach your children a few of the key steps to making your home—and their home—a safer place for everyone.

Remember to keep instruction simple and, based on their age, to empower your children to play an age-appropriate role in your home security plan. If you present it as a “chore,” children will behave accordingly, and many of them will fail to acquire the age-appropriate thought process needed to learn and practice home security on their own.

Pre-school age children

It never ceases to amaze me at the concepts and tasks a three, four, or five-year old child is capable of understanding and managing. At this age, children are like sponges; they absorb everything that's happening in the world around them. Yet, some concepts are clearly above the comprehension of small children. The concept of “security” is probably too advanced for most small children. But, safety is something children *can* understand.

For preschoolers, teach your children a few simple tasks such as how to lock and unlock any doors and windows that they may NEED to use to escape your home in the event of an emergency. I also recommend that, when your children are old enough to distinguish the numbers on the key pad of a phone, you'll want to teach them how to dial 9-1-1 in case of an emergency.

As a fire safety issue, children need to know how to unlock doors and windows as soon as they are able to physically perform those tasks. As with many simple tasks, you can help children take an interest in door and window locks by making it into a game. Show your child how to physically unlock a window, for example, and then let the child perform the same task. Praise your child for “trying,” regardless of how successful he or she is on the first few attempts. Then, as the child begins to become more and more proficient, add to the game by seeing how long it takes the child to unlock the window. By timing the child, you are teaching the child to remain focused on the task—even in the face of pressure. In the event of a fire or other emergency, this game may pay big dividends. A child who can quickly unlock and open a window—especially under pressure—is more likely to respond appropriately in the event of a fire, for example. I recommend playing this game on a daily basis until the task becomes “second nature” for the child. Then, I recommend playing the game once or twice a month to help the child maintain adequate proficiency.

IMPORTANT SAFETY NOTE: Always limit your instruction to ground-floor doors and windows or to those where the child has the intellectual

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maturity and physical skills to escape on his or her own. You obviously would not, for example, want a small child to open and crawl out of a second floor or higher window if there's no safe way for the child to reach the ground. From where I'm sitting, I can't make a specific recommendation. Knowing the child, you must use your best judgment.

Once a child understands how to unlock and lock windows and doors, you can make it a part of their daily routine by asking them to "check" the windows in their room each night. This can be a part of their normal bedtime routine—along with brushing their teeth. Make sure, however, that you don't frighten the child about the purpose for this important task. If you tell the child that he or she is checking the doors and windows to keep "bad guys" out of the house, you may scare the child to the point that he or she is afraid of being near the doors and windows—something that creates additional safety risks; for example, the child may be so afraid of the "bad guys" that he or she would be afraid to open a window, even to escape a fire.

It's also a good idea to show your child photographs of police officers and firefighters—especially firefighters in full protective gear with self-contained breathing apparatus. In the event of a fire, you'll want your small children to recognize a firefighter. Without this visual cue, some children may be afraid of a firefighter and may hide inside a burning home. And, unless parents provide their children with instructions on how to escape a fire and conduct regular fire drills, small children may be frightened by the trauma of a fire and may hide in a closet or underneath a bed, for example.

You'll obviously have to use your judgment about when to teach your child to use the phone to call 9-1-1. Again, children at this age are like sponges. They take their cues from the important adults in their lives—from the people they love and trust. First, you'll need to make sure your child knows how to use the phone—e.g., how to lift the handset, dial a number, and wait to hear the ring at the other end. If your child is competent in these areas, you can have a serious conversation about dialing 9-1-1 to report an emergency. The most important issue is to clearly define the reasons for dialing 9-1-1. Your child will remember every word you say, so be specific and, at this age, keep the examples simple. For example, instruct your child to dial 9-1-1:

- If there's a fire.
- If someone gets hurt and there's not a healthy adult available to help.
- If you ask the child to dial 9-1-1.

As reinforcement, you may want to create simple scenarios to go over with your child on a weekly basis. For example, you might ask your child: "What are some reasons for dialing 9-1-1? When your child answers, you might follow up on each reason the child gives by asking, "What if grandma was here when that happened?" Or, "What if you were at someone else's house when that happened?" But, remember to keep the scenarios simple. At this point, you're simply helping your child begin to discern the major reasons for calling for help.

Don't forget: at this age you should focus on the task and not the conceptual risk that's driving the task. And, remember to practice the task regularly so the child becomes and remains proficient at it.

Elementary school-age children

By the time a child is in elementary school, he or she is old enough to understand that some people do bad things—they steal things, for example, or hit or kick other people. Explain that: "We don't want anyone like that to sneak inside our house when we're away from home. Notice I used the example of "when we're away from home." Even a 6, 7, or 8-year-old child could become overly obsessed by the

fear that a stranger might get inside the house at night while the child is asleep. This fear can lead to a whole range of other issues and problems. And, even though this possibility genuinely exists, I recommend being careful to avoid creating this unnecessary fear for your child. So, focus on teaching the child to help keep the house secure while you're away from home.

Also, elementary school-age children are beginning to define their role in the world as "responsible" members of the family. Hence, children at this age are drawn to anything that gives them responsibility. I recommend focusing on the same tasks as with the preschoolers, but changing the "game" that you play. For example, you might consider giving your child an allowance based on doing his or her job of checking all the doors and windows to make sure they are locked at night—in preparation for bedtime. Where the younger child is taught to check the windows in his or her own room, this (elementary-school) age group is given responsibility for checking ALL the doors and windows throughout the house. Praise the child for being proactive and for performing this task promptly and effectively each night. And, if you've promised to pay the child an allowance for performing this important task, make sure you do pay the child and discuss how much you appreciate the child handling this important task every evening.

Children at this age are also old enough to practice actual emergency evacuations—a fire drill, for example. I recommend discussing the family emergency evacuation plan at least once per month, and conducting a family fire drill two to three times per year. The key is to help your child think through the escape process:

- ALWAYS feel of a door before opening it. If it's too hot to touch, the fire is too close to use that door as an exit, and you'll need to use an alternate exit.
- Exit the house as quickly as possible through the nearest available "safe" exit.
- While you are exiting, stay low to the ground to avoid inhaling smoke.
- DO NOT stop to call 9-1-1 on the way out of a burning building. Instead, call from a neighbor's house.
- Move quickly to a prearranged rendezvous point.
- NEVER go back inside a burning building ... NEVER! (This is a particularly important point to emphasize with children who may be compelled to go back inside a burning house to rescue a pet or stuffed animal.)

Elementary school-age children are also old enough to learn about "a stranger at the front door." Teach your child that he or she should never answer the door alone—that a parent or other responsible adult should always be present when the child answers the door.

Remember: at this age you give the child responsibility for a task that affects everyone in the family—and not just the child. Make sure to reward and, at a minimum, to praise the child for handling this important responsibility.

Adolescents

Adolescents are old enough to read and hear about crime and to understand that criminals sometimes break into houses or attack people in their homes. You can begin training your adolescents to help with the more "adult" functions of your home security routine—tasks such as turning on outside lighting at dusk, as well as closing blinds, curtains, and other window coverings to prevent outsiders from looking inside your house at night.

If your child has a key to your house, teach your child to be cautious when coming and going alone—to make sure nobody is watching your adolescent when he or she is unlocking the door to get inside. Also stress to your adolescent the importance of keeping doors and windows locked when they're at home—even during daylight hours and even if other people are with them inside the house. This simple habit is one of the most important frontline security tasks available to help prevent unwanted visitors from entering your house.

As with an elementary-age child, an adolescent should never answer the door when he or she is at home alone—unless the visitor is someone you have approved as being “safe.”

Older Teenagers

With regard to home security, older teenagers are basically adults who haven't yet broken their bonds and “left the nest.” You certainly won't benefit by playing games with them to drill them on home security issues. I suggest treating them with the dignity and respect of an adult, and occasionally asking for their input and advice on home security measures. For example, you might ask your teenager to look your house over inside and out and see if he or she notices anything a burglar or intruder might see as a weakness.

Encourage teenagers to “come and go” in pairs—especially when it's dark outside, and to help you be on the lookout for anything around your house or in your neighborhood that looks suspicious or out of the ordinary.

Bottom Line

As with their physical and emotional development, each child will respond differently to home security issues based on his or her life experiences, personality, and the cues that you provide through your behavior. Always work with a child's strengths to provide suggestions and guidance that help the child behave in a way that keeps him or her safe, and contributes to the safety of your entire household. Children typically respond better to encouragement and praise than to domination and fear. Giving a child respect and responsibility is much more likely to produce the desired result than threatening a child for failing to comply with “your rules.”

Foster an environment that gives your preschooler, elementary school-age child, adolescent, or older teenager a chance to be a valued and respected part of your family team, and your child is likely to respond in a way that genuinely does improve the level of safety and security for everyone.

Article Posted on: 2003-11-23 16:46:54.0 - It has been viewed 253 times

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