

Kids Can Be Key to Family Fire Safety

Teaching and motivating children to insist on fire safety practices, such as installing alarms and developing escape plans, may in turn motivate families to take action. That's one of several important findings of Fireproof Children/Prevention First's recent **National Smoke Alarm Evaluation**.

Between 2004 and 2005, Fireproof Children/Prevention First distributed 20,883 smoke alarms and vocal smoke alarms in nine states and Puerto Rico, through *Prevention First Fire Safety for Preschool Children and Families*, an initiative funded through a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. These smoke alarms primarily went to families in low-income areas who were inadequately protected. The following year an additional FEMA grant, along with underwriting from Ultralife Batteries, Inc. and SignalONE Safety, Inc. (makers of the KidSmart® Vocal Smoke Alarm), allowed us to evaluate the outcomes of this smoke alarm distribution.

While national surveys report close to 80% of low-income families have working alarms, these surveys are based on householder self-reports and may overestimate the actual number of working alarms. Fireproof Children/Prevention First has for years worked with Head Start programs serving low-income families. These Head Start programs encouraged us to add smoke alarm distribution to *Prevention First Preschool*, estimating that the majority of the families they served had no working alarms.

In an extensive follow-up of this smoke alarm distribution, we found the majority of these homes (72%) still had the smoke alarms installed and operational a full year after installation. The placement and operational status of the alarms in our evaluation were all confirmed by visual inspection by fire service personnel.

The evaluation yielded another encouraging finding: 57% of the respondents indicated they had an exit plan. This percentage differs only slightly from national statistics (NFPA), which found that 66% of families asked in a phone survey had an exit plan. Again, the national statistics are based on telephone reports and may overestimate the number of families with workable plans. Our results were based on face-to-face interviews in the home, and the plans were reviewed by fire service personnel.

While the National Smoke Alarm Evaluation focused on the installation of smoke alarms, it also suggests a relationship between safety education at school and family fire safety practices at home. Respondents were asked if they recalled their children bringing home fire safety materials from school, and their answers were then compared to their reported fire safety practices.

Families who recalled seeing fire safety materials were more likely to report having an exit plan and meeting place, testing their smoke alarms in the past month, and practicing their escape plan within the past six months.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that children themselves can be an important link between fire safety education and home safety by acting as motivators. For example, one mother said her son kept nagging her to get the donated smoke alarm off the kitchen table and put it on the wall. She said to get him to be quiet she installed the alarm. Her son had been part of several fire safety education programs within the Head Start program.

It may be that educating and motivating children to insist on key fire safety practices, such as installing alarms and developing and practicing exit plans, is as important or more important than the specific materials sent home.

Given the critical need to increase the number of working smoke alarms in low-income households, results from this National Smoke Alarm Evaluation are encouraging. First, community agencies which are committed to solving the problem can make a significant impact on the percentage of families in their communities who are protected by smoke alarms. Second, the distribution of safety education material--especially through the children--can have an impact on family fire safety behavior, encouraging families to develop and practice a workable exit plan.

The National Smoke Alarm Evaluation was directed by Fireproof Children/Prevention First's evaluation specialist, who hired local evaluation assistants in each community, and provided training for the evaluation assistants and the local fire service personnel who accompanied them on home visits. Each home visit included an Alarm Check List, Family Safety Survey, and Home Composition Survey.

Fireproof Children/Prevention First would like to thank the 258 families who allowed us into their homes to conduct this study. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of:

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If you would like to receive a copy of the full evaluation report, contact Carolyn Kourofsky: carolynkourofsky@fireproofchildren.com