

The Tasmania Fire Service School Fire Education Program

Fire is part of everyday life. For everything from the backyard barbecue to the power that drives our automobiles, fire is an essential tool. Yet fire is also a danger. Every year hundreds of people are touched by the destructive power of fire. Too often, the destruction is triggered or amplified by ignorance. When people fail to understand fire hazards, when they panic during an emergency, they not only risk their own life; often their irrational behaviour can place other lives in danger.

The School Fire Education–Tasmania Program was designed to address this problem. It was initiated in the belief that it is not enough to just promote general awareness of fire and its hazards. We need to increase specific knowledge levels to change response behaviours. To do that we need to educate our children to protect themselves from fire and burns. Periodically, coronial reports highlight this fact, and further studies of statistics indicate that it is either the aged or the very young groups of our society that are the most likely fire victims.

This information made it apparent to the Tasmania Fire Service that a structured fire education program should be formulated and implemented. This was reinforced by community groups and the Education Department, which indicated that whilst it would cooperate fully, the resources and training to deliver a fire safety component was neither available nor budgeted for.

It was recognised that for decades firefighters have been involved with school visits and teaching fire safety to children throughout Tasmania, but there was no formal structure to their teaching methods. Firefighters each had their own interpretation of what was relevant and what children should know, all with good intent and purpose. Although this approach was certainly better than no approach at all, it was not structured in a way that would ensure all school children received the same important fire safety messages.

Children are a precious resource that need to be protected from the trauma and dangers that fire can present, and certainly the importance of teaching children fire safety is not contested. Whilst the Tasmania Fire Service School Fire Ed Program does not deliver anything new to primary school

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children it is certainly more structured than the 'old ways', providing easy to follow lesson plans with the relative resources required to deliver the message effectively. This ensures that every primary school child receives the same information. The program encourages parents to take an active role in their child's fire safety education with tasks sent home to be completed and returned to the instructor for comment and marking.

The Tasmania Fire Service has four full time School Fire Education Instructors, who are trained professional firefighters, to

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deliver the program. One instructor is located at Devonport (North West Region), one at Launceston (Northern Region) and two Instructors are located in Hobart (Southern Region). Each Instructor is responsible for making contact biennially with the schools in their respective areas.

The program is directly aimed at children in Prep Grade through to Grade 6. However, children attending kindergarten do receive a limited amount of exposure to the program. Instructors visit kindergarten children and demonstrate to them what a firefighter looks like in his turnout gear and breathing apparatus. The objective is to teach them not to be scared of this 'Darth Vader' like creature coming through the smoke to rescue them.

Prep Grade

Prep Grade children receive two lessons lasting for approximately 30–40 minutes

duration. Lesson One involves the instructors introducing themselves to the class telling them where they work, how long they have been a firefighter etc. The children are assured that they may never have a fire, but just in case, they are there to show them what to do should they ever be involved in one.

Prep children are encouraged to dress up in purpose-made turnout gear with the Instructor. At this stage the protective clothing a firefighter wears to fires is explained. This is turned into a game with the children racing to beat the instructors to finish putting their turnout gear on.

Fires can be a very frightening experience for children. When most children are frightened they tend to hide from the danger. The Instructor encourages children not to hide if they are trapped in a fire but to yell out to raise attention to where they are trapped. Children are given the opportunity to see what a firefighter looks like when wearing breathing apparatus and are encouraged to touch and feel the mask and listen to the noises the firefighter makes when they breathe with the mask on.

Children are taught the effects of smoke on humans and shown that smoke rises and good air can be found down close to the floor. At this stage the Instructor teaches children to crawl low in smoke, turning this section into a game by getting the children to crawl under some chairs or a stick.

The second lesson involves participation in Stop, Drop and Roll activities and encourages children to keep at least one big step away from heaters. The instructor shows children how to Stop, Drop and Roll and explains why they must never run if their clothes catch fire, why rolling on the fire extinguishes it. A catchy song called Stop Drop and Roll is introduced at this stage to encourage the children to participate and practice the actions.

Information on burns is taught to children and dispels the 'butter, ice and ointment' fallacies. The message is that if they receive minor skin burns then running the effected area under cold water for around 10 minutes is the correct action to take.

At the completion of each lesson the children are given homework, which in turn encourages their parents to participate in the valuable lessons taught to the child.

Grades 1–4

Grades 1–4 receive five lessons. The information is similar to that taught to Prep but additional information is introduced and more in-depth explanations given to the older children. A simplified version of the structure of the Fire Service is explained. Children are also shown the different functions a modern Fire Service performs, such as rescue, building inspections, fire investigation and our public education roles.

Again breathing apparatus and protective clothing are shown and worn by the instructor, who encourages the children to ask questions and touch the protective equipment to allay any fears they may have.

The action to take when phoning information about an emergency through is explained. Children are taught the number they have to ring (000), to convey what type of fire it is, the address of the emergency, if there is anyone hurt or trapped and to give their name and phone number.

As with all buildings, it is important to have some form of emergency procedure should an emergency occur; the family home being no different. Home Fire Escape Plans are explained and they are shown how to develop their own Plan taking into account a safe meeting place such as the letter box. They are taught to ring the Fire Service from a neighbour's house and never go back into a burning building. Home Fire Escape Plan handouts are given to the children to take home and, with the help of the family, they are encouraged to draw up their own family's escape plan.

The instructor explains the importance of smoke alarms and ask the class who has at least one smoke alarm installed in their home. This also assists us to measure our public education campaigns in relation to the number of homes with smoke alarms.

The action in the event of a fire is explained, children are encouraged to sleep with their door closed, to roll out of bed rather than sit up, the correct way to crawl to their door and to touch it with the back of their hand to ascertain if it is safe to open. Children are asked how many exits there are in their bedrooms; and it is explained that every room should have alternative exit such as a windows or a door.

Most family homes contain items that are hazardous, not only to children but their parents as well. Children are asked to identify the potential fire hazards in their own homes. Double adaptors, power boards, electric blankets and hazards in the kitchen, as well as flammable liquids, are discussed with the children.

An activity sheet is used to teach children to recognise how normal everyday items

can become dangerous when used incorrectly or complacently.

Possibly the most important lifesaving devices people install in their home is a smoke alarm. The School Fire Ed instructors reiterate the importance of smoke alarms and explain what approved types are, and their correct maintenance. A practical example of how they work is demonstrated.

Grades 5 and 6

The lessons for Grades 5 and 6 are enhanced to those previously taught, however, because of their age, more information can be given. Additional information is also taught to these grades.

The false perception people have of fire due to films such as *Backdraft* and similar films must be explained. Firefighters in

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these films enter buildings with little or no protection and it is a common misconception that people can in fact breathe smoke. It is explained to children that it is necessary for the 'stars' in these films to be seen, therefore not allowing them to wear breathing apparatus, helmets and in some instances no protective clothing. Additionally, children are made aware of how much smoke fires generate and that in these films there isn't a lot of smoke produced.

A video is shown to the children and at the end they are asked to identify all the faults. Most children are able to identify that the firefighters were not wearing breathing apparatus, they enter burning buildings with their turnout coats open, there is no smoke and that they enter burning buildings with uncharged hose lines.

At this age children can be taught a little bit about the theory of combustion. The fire triangle is used to show children how fires burn and how they can be extinguished. This lesson ties in with previous Stop Drop and Roll lessons.

The Grade 5s and 6s are introduced to the dangers bushfires can pose. The three major causes are explained. Bushfires are

started deliberately, through human carelessness and from nature. A video of the NSW bushfires of 1994 is shown to demonstrate the ferocity of bushfires.

To reduce the risk of the family home burning down should a bushfire threaten, pre-planning is vital. Part of this pre-planning is good housekeeping. Children are encouraged to help their parents clear vegetation from around their homes, remove leaves and sticks from guttering and to make sure their home has an alternative water supply.

As families prepare for the fire season they are encouraged to stay with their homes during a bushfire situation and to close all doors and windows until the fire front has passed.

As mentioned the lessons taught to these grades are very similar to previous lessons. As the child gets older and more responsible the information given to primary school children is increased. The program topics provides basic safety procedures and survival skills that we believe are necessary to enable students to prevent fire or assist them survive a fire situation.

Feedback from staff, students and parents indicates that the long-term benefits are of great value to the individuals and the community. Documented evidence supports this program. The skill, knowledge and actions of children who have been exposed to the program has prevented injury, and reduced the impact of fire in several incidents.

The School Education Program is now an integral component of the Community Education Unit of the Community Fire Safety Division.

Course material and parent–teacher evaluations are reviewed constantly to ensure that the program continues to achieve its objectives. We are conscious of the need to maintain, upgrade and continually develop the program to meet the needs of our changing society.

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Children have a unique association with 'Firemen' that no other emergency service can emulate, which certainly contributes to child response in relation to our fire safety education programs. The Tasmania Fire Service School Fire Education Program will continue to work toward reinforcing the bond between children, parents, school teachers and firefighters to protect life, property and the environment.