



Your Helpful Guide to Family Fire Safety

with Tips for Individuals with Autism and Other Disabilities

This guide will give you practical steps that work for all families, including those with children or adults on the autism spectrum or with other disabilities.



READ THIS FIRST

Fire moves FAST — a room can be overtaken in just 3 to 4 minutes, and smoke inhalation is often the primary cause of injury or death. Having a clear plan can save lives. Instead of panicking, you'll know exactly what to do. Read this guide, write your plan, and practice. **You got this.**

Don't put this planning off. Just tell yourself, "I'm doing this for my family."

Step 1: Walk Around Your House

Plan a quiet time to check alarms, especially if loud beeps may distress your child. If needed, test the alarms when your child is in another location, or have them wear noise-canceling headphones.

- Test each smoke detector by pressing the "test" button.
- Use your phone to record the alarm sound so you can use it later at a lower volume during practice.
- Make sure you have a fire extinguisher on every floor.
- If any alarms don't work, replace the batteries or the unit immediately. Do not put this off.
- Post emergency numbers somewhere in your house.

Make sure you know how to use a fire extinguisher! You can visit your local fire department – they offer fire extinguisher seminars that provide great information.



Keep Yourself Protected Around the Clock

Don't turn your smoke detectors off or disable them. Yes, false alarms can be annoying and can bother people and pets. But disabling them puts everyone's life at risk. ***It's just not worth it.***

Step 2: Plan Two Ways Out

Draw a simple map of your home showing two exits from each room and review with your family. Use photos or icons if that helps your child understand. Label a meeting place outside (safe distance, like the mailbox or neighbor's driveway).

- If windows may need breaking, keep a safety hammer nearby. You can buy one on Amazon or at big-box retailers.
- For multi-story homes, have a fire ladder available. Let family members touch it and practice deploying it, emphasizing it is for emergency use only.
- Fire blankets are also a good idea. They can extinguish small fires, and they can be used to wrap around people. You can buy them on Amazon or similar retailers.
- Think about sensory challenges: rough windowsills, bare feet outside. Talk about these during your practice—and practice them—so they don't come as a shock during an evacuation.



Step 3: Practice Regularly

Practice makes safety automatic. Aim for once a month if possible. Make it part of your routine with a fun name like “Safety Drill Saturday” or “Operation Get Out.”

- Use social stories, videos, or photo books to explain drills (see box below).
- Start with a recorded alarm at low volume; build up to the real alarm. There are also apps you can use that have different alarm sounds, so check that out.
- Assign roles: who will help each child, who will grab the “Go-Bag,” who will get the pets (if applicable), who will call 911.
- Always finish at the safe meeting place.
- **Reinforce: NO GOING BACK INSIDE FOR ANY REASON.**
 - Wait until an adult says it’s safe to go back in.
 - It’s natural to want to rescue pets or grab important belongings, but your life is the most important thing. Fire and smoke spread fast, and even a few seconds can be the difference between life and death. Let the trained firefighters handle the situation.



Picture Schedule of the Steps to Follow

Your child may benefit from a **picture schedule** to help explain fire-safety steps. This is a series of photos or drawings that shows them what to do, in what order. You can create one yourself or work with your child’s therapy or school team for support. Read the story to (and with!) your child several times. During the drill, you can see if the story was effective. If not, the story might need to be changed, or pictures might need to be added.

Step 3: Continued

Common Fears

“I don’t want to teach my child how to leave the house independently.”

Due to other safety reasons, you may not want your child to practice leaving the house independently. In that case, create and identify responsibilities for each family member, of how you will escort them out. The objective is to teach your child to respond to safety instructions quickly, such as, “There is a fire, we need to get out!”

“I’m afraid my child will go back in.”

People with autism may go back inside to access a favorite object because they do not understand the danger. Talk to them about never re-entering a home during a fire. Make that lesson part of every evacuation practice.

“My child struggles to communicate.”

If your child struggles with speech, teach alternative ways for them to call for help. For example, your child could learn to blow a whistle to call a firefighter to them during an emergency.

Possible Items to Buy

- If your child has a favorite calming item, consider buying a duplicate to put in the **Go-Bag (covered in Step 4)**
- Safety hammer to easily break a window
- Fire ladder
- Fire blankets (one per floor at least)
- A sticker to put on your child’s door – to let first responders know which room is your child’s



Step 4: Prepare Your Go-Bag

HAVE A BAG READY WITH:

- Contact list with family and friends phone numbers written out (in case your phone dies)
- Flashlight + batteries
- First aid kit
- Extra comfort item(s) for your child
- Phone charger + portable power bank
- Extra credit cards or cash
- Change of clothes, including jackets and sturdy shoes
- Moist towelettes
- Hand sanitizer
- Wrench or pliers to turn off utilities
- Whistle to signal for help
- Paper and pencil
- Bottled water
- Shelf-stable snacks
- N95 respirator masks or cloth face masks for each family member
- **Copy of important documents**
 - Birth certificates
 - Medical documents, including any diagnoses
 - Passports
 - Passwords or account information for important accounts
 - Any items you've received at the ESSC Safety Fairs, if you have them

GRAB AS YOU GO:

- Favorite comfort item(s) for your child
- Means of communication if someone in your party uses a specific communication device or tool
- Medication
- Glasses/contacts
- Retainers/mouthguards
- Pet food and water

IF TIME ALLOWS:

- Valuables that are easy to carry
- Family photos and irreplaceable items
- Computer and hard drives
- Chargers for laptops

Step 5: Connect With Helpers

First Responders

Visit local fire and police departments. Share a photo of your child, communication style, and any calming strategies. If possible, introduce your child to firefighters and their gear so it's familiar.

Neighbors

Tell trusted neighbors your fire plan, where your child's room is located, your meeting spot, and how to help if they see your child outside alone. Consider giving your trusted neighbor a key to your house. Also consider getting the cell phone numbers for your neighbors if you don't have them already.

Let everyone know about any characteristics specific to your child. For example, do they have a history of hiding in a "safe space" or putting on noise cancelling headphones?

Thank you to Kelly Bermingham for essential guidance and input in creating this plan.

Quick Reference Sheet:

Family Fire Plan

What to review during your family meeting.

1. Two exits from each room (draw a simple map of your house)

2. Meeting spot: _____

3. Assigned roles:

Name: _____ with take this action _____

Name: _____ with take this action _____

Name: _____ with take this action _____

Name: _____ with take this action _____

Name: _____ with take this action _____

4. Where are the emergency numbers posted?

5. Reminder: **NO RE-ENTRY AFTER EVACUATION**