

play safe! be safe!®



***play safe!* in Action: Omaha Teens Teach Younger Children to Stay Safe**

Captain David Mann stands in front of a teenage boy, waiting for him to say what may be the most important words of the boy's young life.

The boy looks Mann straight in the eye to say: "I am a fire stopper."

Mann, who is Public Education Officer for Omaha Fire & Rescue, presents this newest graduate of the department's Juvenile Fire Starter Program with a *play safe! be safe!*® kit, along with a final assignment. Like each of his fellow graduates, the boy will go through the kit with his parents, then find a daycare center in his neighborhood and present the kit and its fire-safety lessons.

"If you want someone to really internalize lessons, you have them teach it," says Mann. "Not only is the fire behavior that brought them here not repeated, but they actually go out and help keep younger kids safe."

Mann's program runs every month, all year long. Last year 79 children and teens, from three to 18 years old, were referred. Classes are held for children in three age groups, each with age-appropriate lessons. Only the oldest group receives the *play safe!* kits upon graduation.

Participants are referred because they have started a fire and need education about the risks and consequences of fire. For many, education is enough. Others need more support, and get it through a network of community services. The program's success rate is nearly 100%, with only one child ever having to be referred again in the past four years.

Referrals have greatly increased since the creation of Project Harmony 18 months ago, a coalition of Omaha's child-related health and human services agencies. Their referrals for intervention include children who set a fire that wasn't reported to the fire department. Mann also receives calls from concerned parents, grandparents, teachers and other caregivers, as well as referrals through his own department.

From lucky find to essential tool

When Mann joined the Public Education Bureau in late 2008 and moved into his office, he found a dozen *play safe!* kits as part of the department's materials. With several visits to preschools already scheduled, he went to www.playsafebesafe.com and quickly learned how to use the kits.

"The best thing about the kit is its simplicity," says Mann. "The teacher's manual is so well done, and the website lets you try out the activities."

Those first kits "disappeared in a heartbeat" as he gave them to the preschools he visited. Then, a child-set fire in the community killed two children. One good thing emerged from this tragedy: Safe Kids Omaha, based at Children's Hospital & Medical

Center, secured one of the Rapid Response Fire Grants available for communities which had a fatality in a child-set fire. Mann was able to get another 40 kits.

Like fire departments nationwide, Omaha Fire & Rescue must make the most of a limited budget. Mann advises his fellow fire-safety educators to prove the need for public education.

"You don't get anywhere just saying 'we want this,' you have to show them," he says. "Along with fire response time and suppression, public education played a role in the fact that Omaha went 14 months without a civilian fire fatality."

Partnering with Safe Kids and the Children's Hospital has also helped to leverage resources. These partners not only provided some monetary support but helped convince city authorities of the importance and effectiveness of Mann's program. That kind of credibility recently helped him get a meeting with city finance officials, who asked what he most needed for the program.

"*play safe!* is always at the front of my mind, and we'd given those first 40 kits to preschools and daycares, so what we needed most was another 40 kits."

"It doesn't get any simpler"

Sometimes when he places that *play safe!* kit and final assignment into the hands of a teen, Mann will hear "But I don't know how to teach!"

"I'll say 'Do you know how to read?' and hand him a story board card," says Mann. "They can read the back of the card; it's that simple. I encourage the families to call with any questions, but I rarely need to sit down with them and go through it. They understand it, and they just go do it."

That's pretty much what he tells colleagues in the fire service about the *play safe!* kit: "Use it. It doesn't get any simpler, it's all-inclusive, and it works."
