

Building a Safety Conscious Future Generation with Safe Sitter®

By Debra J. Jarvis, Fire Chief, ret.

For years, adolescent babysitters have been “stepping in” for parents who are “stepping out.” And while many of these young people bring with them a love for and desire to care for children, few are prepared for the magnitude of responsibilities they assume. Fire and EMS Departments can not only greatly enhance community safety and public relations by offering the Safe Sitter® program, they can also create a future generation of more safety conscious adults and responsible parents.

As a former fire chief and 30 year veteran of the fire service, I have been especially impressed with the user-friendly format, the thoroughness and the community outreach potential of the Safe Sitter® curriculum. Not only does Safe Sitter® have the usual first aid components, it also provides training on behavior management that can help sitters identify and prevent situations that could lead to fires, injuries or other emergencies. One firefighter/paramedic that I spoke with about the program said that becoming a Safe Sitter® instructor had actually made them a better parent because they learned new, more positive ways to manage inappropriate behavior with their own children.

For over 25 years, Safe Sitter® has provided a pool of over 500,000 better prepared and safer sitters from coast to coast in the United States, as well as in England. They are a national nonprofit organization whose babysitter training program targets young people ages 11-13; one of the age groups often missed by our public safety education programs. In addition to fire and injury prevention, it teaches them business skills for running their own babysitting business including screening clients, setting rates, and learning how to set boundaries on what they can and cannot do for their clients.

Another firefighter I spoke with said that there was an additional benefit to their department becoming a teaching site that they hadn't expected. The first class they gave was exclusively for the children of firefighters and EMS personnel. From that class, they said there were several examples where the relationship between the firefighters and their own children improved because the kids learned to better appreciate what their parents did and why they sometimes missed holidays or were late. More importantly - it helped the children feel more connected with their parents because they too, could help save lives with what they had learned.

Safe Sitter® was founded by a nationally recognized pediatrician, Patricia A. Keener, M.D. who serves as their medical director. The babysitter training curriculum is based on the knowledge of risks for specific age groups and is developmentally appropriate for the intellectual and emotional abilities of 11-13 year olds. The program is a complete package that contains instructions on what and how to teach this age group and is updated regularly with current information. And since Safe Sitter® is a not-for-profit group focused solely on this curriculum, they have no competing priorities and serve as a permanent resource to help fire departments make the program a success in their respective communities.

Many Safe Sitter® graduates have been recognized for their life-saving skills performed during emergencies including the following:

- A 14-year-old Safe Sitter® graduate in Jupiter, FL remembered what she'd learned in Safe Sitter® when a fire broke out and she successfully got 8-year-old twins out of the house

before the arrival of the fire department. The house was totally destroyed but no lives were lost.

- A firefighter/paramedic in Liberty, MO credits Safe Sitter® with saving his own son's life. His younger son was choking on malted milk balls and his older brother, who had taken the Safe Sitter® course, remembered to stay calm and successfully used abdominal thrusts to relieve the obstruction.

The Safe Sitter® curriculum is a user-friendly, “ready-to-teach” program that offers the following benefits and opportunities to fire departments.

- Safe Sitter® reaches the 11 to 13-year-old age group that is often missed with many fire and EMS public education programs. These latch-key age children also supervise the very young who are often prone to accidental injury and fire setting.
- It is a long-term investment in reducing the number of emergency calls. Not only does it have the immediate benefit of providing a safer environment for children supervised by Safe Sitter® trained young people; it will also lead to more safety conscious adults as they grow older and become parents themselves.
- It is an excellent public relations and community outreach tool. Parents love the program and feel safer knowing their children are better prepared to take care of siblings and the children that they babysit. In addition, a Spanish version of the student Safe Sitter® guide will be available later in 2008.
- It provides additional opportunities for volunteer personnel to excel and be recognized since they often assume greater public education duties in combination departments. In addition, it can provide opportunities for citizen volunteers and/or spouses to become involved in the fire department by becoming instructors.
- It is a long-term investment in recruitment for career and volunteer Fire/EMS departments by creating additional opportunities for building positive relationships with future generations of potential firefighter, EMT and paramedic applicants.
- It will be a significant resource to help you address the National Fallen Firefighters' Life Safety Initiative #14 that calls for the fire service to *“Provide public education more resources and champion it as a critical fire and life safety program.”*

While there are other babysitter training curriculums, Safe Sitter® is the only national, 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization devoted exclusively to preparing adolescents to be safe, responsible, nurturing babysitters. Safe Sitter® is more than life-saving – it is life-changing.

For more information on becoming a Safe Sitter® teaching site, contact:

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About the Author,

Debra J. Jarvis has 30 years experience in the fire service as well as a master's degree in leadership studies with an associate's degree in fire science. Chief Jarvis served 8 years as a fire chief in the Chicago suburbs, is an adjunct on-campus instructor with the National Fire Academy, an Executive Fire Officer graduate and also does public safety and not-for-profit consulting and training. She may be contacted at debrajarvis@earthlink.net.