



Teaching Your Child How to Use 911

One of the challenges you have as a parent is to help your child acquire the skills to work through whatever obstacles life presents. Teaching your child how to use 911 in an emergency could be one of the simplest - and most important - lessons you'll ever share.

Talking About 911 With Your Child

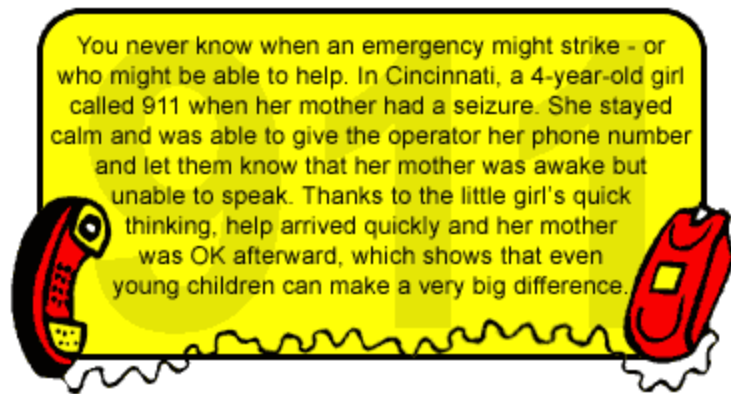
Not that many years ago, there was a separate telephone number for each type of emergency agency. For a fire, you called the fire department number. For a crime, you called the police. For a medical situation, you phoned the ambulance or doctor.

In 1968, the U.S. government worked with the phone company to establish 911 as a central number for all types of emergencies. An emergency dispatch operator quickly takes information from the caller and puts the caller in direct contact with whatever emergency personnel are needed, thus making response time quicker.

According to the National Emergency Number Association, 911 covers nearly all of the population of the United States. Check your phone book to ensure that 911 is the emergency number you should use in your area.

Everyone needs to know about calling 911 in an emergency. But children in particular need specifics about what an emergency is. Asking your child, "What would you do if we had a fire in our house?" or "What would you do if you saw someone trying to break in?" gives you a chance to discuss what constitutes an emergency and what should be done if one occurs. Role playing is an especially good way to address various emergency scenarios and give your child the confidence he or she will need to handle them.

For younger children, it might also help to talk about who the emergency workers are in your community - police officers, firefighters, paramedics, doctors, nurses, and so on - and what kinds of things they do to help people who are in trouble. This will paint a clear picture for your little one of not only what types of emergencies can occur, but also who can help.



When to Call 911

Learning what is an emergency goes hand in hand with learning what isn't. A fire, an intruder in the home, an unconscious family member - these are all things that would require a call to 911. A skinned knee, a stolen bicycle, or a lost pet wouldn't. Still, teach your child that if ever in doubt and there's no adult around to ask to always make the call. It's much better to be safe than sorry.

Make sure your child understands that calling 911 as a joke is a crime in many places. In some cities, officials estimate that as much as 75% of the calls made to 911 are nonemergency calls. These are not all pranks. Some people accidentally push the emergency button on their cell phones. Others don't realize that 911 is for true emergencies only. That means it's not for such things as a flat tire or even about a theft that occurred the week before.

Stress to your child that whenever an unnecessary call is made to 911, it can delay a response to someone who actually needs it. Most areas now have what is called enhanced 911, which enables a call to be traced to the location from which it was made. So if someone dials 911 as a prank, emergency personnel could be dispatched directly to that location. Not only could this mean life or death for someone having a real emergency on the other side of town, it also means that it's very likely the prank caller will be caught and punished.

How to Use 911

Although most 911 calls are now traced, it's still important for your child to have your street address and phone number memorized. Your child will need to give that information to the operator as a confirmation so time isn't lost sending emergency workers to the wrong address.

Make sure your child knows that even though he or she shouldn't give personal information to strangers, it's OK to trust the 911 operator. Walk him or her through some of the questions the operator will ask, including:

- Where are you calling from? (Where do you live?)
- What type of emergency is this?
- Who needs help?

- Is the person awake and breathing?

Explain to your child that it's OK to be frightened in an emergency, but that it's important to stay calm, speak slowly and clearly, and give as much detail to the 911 operator as possible. If your child is old enough to understand, also explain that the emergency dispatcher may give first-aid instructions before emergency workers arrive at the scene.

Make it clear that your child should **not** hang up until the person on the other end says it's OK, otherwise important instructions or information could be missed.

More Safety Tips

Here are some additional safety tips to keep in mind:

- Always refer to the emergency number as "nine-one-one" not "nine-eleven." In an emergency, your child may not know how to dial the number correctly because of trying to find the "eleven" button on the phone.
- Make sure your house number is clearly visible from the street so that police, fire, or ambulance workers can easily locate your address.
- If you live in an apartment building, make sure your child knows the apartment number and floor you live on.
- Keep a list of emergency phone numbers handy near each phone for your children or babysitter. This should include police, fire, and medical numbers (this is particularly important if you live in one of the few areas where 911 is not in effect), as well as a number where you can be reached, such as your cell phone, pager, or work number. In the confusion of an emergency, calling from a printed list is simpler than looking in the phone book or figuring out which is the correct speed-dial number. The list should also include known allergies, especially to any medication, medical conditions, and insurance information.
- If you have special circumstances in your house, such as an elderly grandparent or a person with a heart condition, epilepsy, or diabetes living in your home, prepare your child by discussing specific emergencies that could occur and how to spot them.
- Keep a first-aid kit handy and make sure your child and babysitters know where to find it. When your child is old enough, teach him or her basic first aid.

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Date reviewed: November 2004

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