

Don't look now, but the holiday season is nearly upon us. Taking some precautions — some obvious, some less so — can **help your children keep safe** throughout the fun and excitement of the holiday season.

Keep Holidays Safe for Children

The end-of-the-year holidays are rapidly approaching, and that means more of everything: lights, toys, decorations, food, family, celebrating. With all the rush of activity, it becomes all the more important to keep safety at the top of the priority list. Here are some helpful tips for keeping your holidays safe for the children in your life.

Trees

- When purchasing an artificial tree, look for the label “Fire Resistant.”
- When purchasing a live tree, check for freshness. A fresh tree is green, its needles are hard to pull from branches, and when bent between your fingers, the needles do not break. The cut end of a fresh tree trunk is sticky with resin, and when tapped on the ground, the tree should not lose many needles.
- When setting up a tree at home, place it away from fireplaces, radiators, or portable heaters. Place the tree out of the way of traffic and do not block doorways.
- Cut a few inches off the trunk of your tree to expose the fresh wood. This allows for better water absorption and will help to keep your tree from drying out and becoming a fire hazard.
- Be sure to keep the stand filled with water and be aware that heated rooms can dry live trees out more rapidly.

Lights

- Never use electric lights on a metallic tree. The tree can become charged with electricity from faulty lights, and a person touching a branch could be electrocuted.
- Check labels to make sure that any lights you plan to use outdoors are certified for outdoor use. To hold lights in place, string them through hooks or insulated staples, not nails or tacks. Never pull or tug lights to remove them.
- Check all tree lights — even if you’ve just purchased them — before hanging them on your tree. Make sure all the bulbs work and that there are no frayed wires, broken sockets or loose connections.
- Plug all outdoor electric decorations into circuits with ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) to avoid potential shocks. You can buy GFCIs at any hardware store.
- Turn off all lights when you go to bed or leave the house. The lights could short out and start a fire.

Decorations

- Use only non-combustible or flame-resistant materials to trim a tree. Choose tinsel or plastic icicles.
- Never use lighted candles on a tree or near other evergreens. Always use non-flammable holders, and place candles where they will not be knocked down.
- In homes with small children, take special care to avoid decorations that are sharp or breakable, keep trimmings with small removable parts out of the reach of children to avoid them from swallowing or inhaling small pieces, and avoid trimmings that resemble candy or food that is likely to prove tempting to young children.
- Wear gloves to avoid eye and skin irritation while decorating with spun glass “angel hair.” Follow container directions carefully to avoid lung irritation while decorating with artificial snow sprays.

Toy Safety

- Select toys to suit the age, abilities, skills, and interest level of the intended child. Toys too advanced may pose safety hazards for younger children.
- Before buying a toy or allowing your child to play with a toy that he has

received as a gift, read the instructions carefully.

- To prevent both burns and electrical shocks, don’t give young children (under age 10) a toy that must be plugged into an electrical outlet. Instead, opt for toys that are battery-operated.
- Remember to check the age-appropriateness of all toys, and remember that children under age three are at risk of choking on small parts in toys or games meant for older children. Government regulations specify that toys for children under age three cannot have parts less than 1 1/4 inches in diameter and 2 1/4 inches long.
- Be wary of balloons, as children under age eight can choke or suffocate on uninflated or broken balloons.
- Remove strings and ribbons from toys before giving them to young children and watch for pull toys with strings that are more than 12 inches in length. They could be a strangulation hazard for young children.
- Remove all wrapping papers, bags, paper, ribbons, and bows from tree and fireplace areas after gifts are opened. These items can pose suffocation and choking hazards to a small child or can cause a fire if near an open flame.

Food Safety

- Bacteria may be in raw foods. In the flurry of festivities, be sure to allow enough time to fully cook meats and poultry, and thoroughly wash raw vegetables and fruits. Also keep raw foods and cooked foods separate; thaw meat in the refrigerator (or defrost in a microwave) and not on the countertop; and use separate utensils when preparing them.
- Be sure to keep hot liquids and foods away from the edges of counters and tables, where they can be easily knocked over by a young child’s exploring hands.
- Wash your hands frequently, and make sure your children do the same.
- Never put a spoon used to taste food back into food without washing it.
- Foods that require refrigeration should never be left at room temperature for more than two hours.

Happy Visiting

- Clean up immediately after a holiday party. A toddler could rise early and choke on leftover food or come in contact with alcohol or tobacco.
- Remember that the homes you visit may not be childproofed. Keep a special eye out for danger spots.
- Keep a list by each phone with all of the important phone numbers you or a babysitter are likely to need in case of an emergency. Include the police and fire department, your pediatrician, and the national Poison Help Line, 1-800-222-1222.
- Traveling, visiting family members, getting presents, shopping, and all the many other rituals of the season can increase a child’s stress levels. Sticking to your child’s usual routines as best you can, including sleep schedules and nap times, can help you and your child enjoy the holidays and reduce stress.

Fireplaces

- Before lighting any fire, remove all greens, boughs, papers, and other decorations from the fireplace area. Check to see that the flue is open.
- Use care with “fire salts,” which produce colored flames when thrown on wood fires. They contain heavy metals that can cause intense gastrointestinal irritation and vomiting if eaten. Keep them away from children.
- Do not burn wrapping papers in the fireplace. A flash fire may result as wrappings ignite suddenly and burn intensely. ●