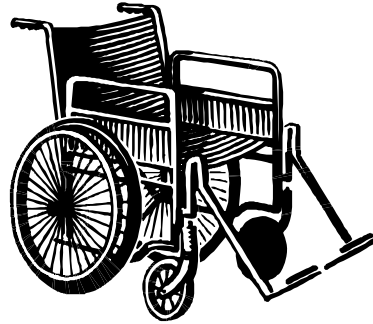


Teaching Fire Safety to People with Disabilities

By Asst. State Fire Marshal Jesse Dobiacki



One of the most challenging and exciting groups to teach fire safety education to is the handicapped. The challenges presented by these students can be quite daunting to those educators with little experience with this population. A little pre-planning on your part, and a firm grasp of the intent of the safety lessons that you teach, can help make their experience a positive one.

Children with special healthcare needs or disabilities are the nation's most fragile with the most complicated medical problems. Unaware of available safety products, uninformed of how to access them, and ill-prepared to execute a workable escape plan, many families of children with disabilities or special health care needs place their trust in the precarious hope that a fire or natural disaster will never happen.

The most important element to consider when planning your handicapped students is the teaching environment itself. Be sure that it is accessible, and, if not, that you can easily make accommodations to include the handicapped in your lesson.

Today's children with disabilities or special health care needs served by children's hospitals nationwide have a real chance to grow up and lead productive, healthy, and safe lives. But without early education on fire and natural disaster safety and access to products to assist in safe evacuation, these families remain at risk of losing their child, not only to health problems or disabilities, but to fires or natural disasters.

Basic fire safety information needs to be conveyed in a way that gives all children the opportunity to learn and practice fire safety skills. Keep in mind that general fire safety tips still apply to all. Children with disabilities are first and foremost children, and will benefit from the years of conventional wisdom that went into creating fire safety programs. It is also important to remember that a handicapped person requires the same fire safety information as any other student. The primary difference between the handicapped student and the average student is that their "correct" response to a any emergency, especially a fire emergency, will have to be a response that compensates for their specific handicap.

This is a grate poster that was designed by the Community Education & Child Advocacy Department at Riley Hospital for Children Indianapolis, Indiana that shows how to Lock, Drop, & Roll

Involve care providers whenever possible. In teaching handicapped students of any age, recognize the fact that they may be well versed in certain aspects of their own emergency care – and so asking many questions of your student, if this is age appropriate, is a sound strategy. Ask: What do you do, at home, to exit when there is an emergency? What do you do if fire gets on you? How to you communicate emergencies to others? Asking questions will help you to tailor your lessons and advice to the specific student. Involving the students care providers in these conversations and lessons is also very effective

Lastly, know the issues and the specific language before teaching, so that you can operate "on the same page" as your students and their care providers. Spend some time reading and researching things like: What's the difference between a quadrapalegic and a paraplegic? What kind of smoke detecting devices are available for the deaf?

Knowing this kind of information ahead of time, and keeping your fire safety education team educated on these types of issues, will help your teaching to be appropriate and effective.

More than 43 million Americans have a disability. The identity of the group of Americans with disabilities is constantly changing — at any moment we ourselves could become part of this group, for maybe a short time or maybe for a long time.

