



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

Leave Your Child in Safe Hands

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The holiday season is upon us and along with worrying about what to serve and what presents to give, parents face a different and more important decision. Who can watch the kids? It's natural to worry when leaving your child with a babysitter and many parents are concerned about finding someone dependable and may wonder, "Can I trust this person to be as caring and gentle with my child as I am?"

"Parents mistakenly believe that if a sitter is reliable and affectionate toward their children, that's good enough," says Virginia Lancaster, Coordinator of the Arkansas SAFE KIDS Coalition.

"Unfortunately, these qualities won't necessarily keep kids safe. Babysitters not only need to know what to do in an emergency, but they also should be able to predict the kinds of dangers kids – especially toddlers – can get into."

Protecting your children from injury should be foremost in your mind when leaving them in someone else's care. The National SAFE KIDS Campaign recommends that you discuss your safety concerns with any prospective sitter.

To help put your mind at ease, interview several potential babysitters before making a decision. The Arkansas SAFE KIDS Coalition and the National SAFE KIDS Campaign suggests you consider the following when interviewing babysitters:

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- Is the sitter at least 13 years old?
- Is he or she responsible and reliable?
- Is the sitter experienced, and can he or she provide references?
- Has the sitter taken a babysitter training course?
- Is the sitter certified in infant and child CPR?
- Is the sitter willing to accept your guidelines for taking care of your child?
- Does the sitter understand the importance of watching a child at all times?
- Does the sitter know what to do in an emergency?

Whether you select a family member, a neighborhood teenager, or a friend to watch your child, your sitter needs to be aware of safety precautions and how to respond in the event of an emergency.

The Arkansas SAFE KIDS Coalition recommends you take the following steps before leaving your child with a sitter:

- Childproof your home. Explore your home at a child's level (on hands and knees, for example) to look for hazards.
- Give the babysitter a tour of your home. Inform your sitter of safety precautions you have taken; point out baby gates, child resistant locks, smoke alarms, carbon monoxide detectors, electrical outlet covers, toilet locks, etc. Show the sitter where phones, first aid supplies, fire extinguishers, flashlights and extra blankets are located. Make sure your sitter knows your planned fire escape routes.
- Show the babysitter where to find emergency telephone numbers. List phone numbers of where you can be reached, the fire department, police department, poison control center, ambulance or emergency services, your doctor and hospital, a neighbor and a relative.

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- Make sure the sitter knows which rooms are off limits to your children – especially infants and toddlers. For example, your child should not be allowed to play in the kitchen or the bathroom because of potential hazards in those rooms.
- Before leaving, go over clear written instructions on appropriate dose and time for any medications the sitter may have to give your child.
- If your child is allowed to ride a bike or to use a skateboard or in-line skates while you're away, make sure the sitter knows where to find your child's helmet, knee pads and other protective gear and insists your child wear them.
- Instruct your sitter never to leave your child alone — even for a second. There is no substitute for constant supervision.

If you are planning to leave your child at your sitter's home, make sure you review the information mentioned above and check their home for childproofing first. The time and energy spent on these preliminary steps can make an important difference in your child's well being. For more information, contact Virginia Lancaster at the Arkansas Department of Health, (501) 661-2278. The Arkansas SAFE KIDS Coalition is co-sponsored by the Arkansas Department of Health and Arkansas Children's Hospital.

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