

Teach Kids to Call 911

Teaching kids to call 911 is similar to teaching adults. The basic tenets are the same: Know when to call, make sure the call-taker knows where you are located and don't hang up. Teaching kids to call 911 should start as soon as they can play with the phone.

1. Teach your child to call from the house phone -- not the cell phone. Once the call from a house phone is made, the child really doesn't need to say anything else to get help. Of course, the more detailed the information available to emergency crews, the better the response will be.
2. Tell your child not to hang up until told to do so. In most cases, 911 call-takers (operators) will keep kids on the line until responders arrive. Children want to know someone is there.
3. Kids have a tendency to mumble when they're nervous. Stress the importance of being heard and understood. The recording equipment and computers make it difficult to hear at some 911 centers.
4. Make sure your child can say his or her first and last name to the call-taker. He or she will use the child's name repeatedly.
5. Your child should listen to the questions carefully, and ask the call-taker to repeat if necessary.
6. Stress to your child the absolute importance not to make things up. Kids may see the call-taker's questions as a sort of quiz, and feel they let someone down if they don't know the answer. That can lead to some creative answers. It's much better for them to just say they're not sure and move on the next question.
7. Have your child practice on an unplugged phone. They can dial 911 and you can be the call-taker. Ask them questions about the pretend incident. Do this kind of role-playing repeatedly. Kids like make-believe and repetition.
8. Teach your child when to call 911. Use basic concepts like when an adult can't wake up, any fire that happens without an adult, or an intruder in the home. Kids get the number down (it's only three digits after all), but they sometimes get confused with when to call. Don't be discouraged if your child can't explain the right situations to you. They often understand intuitively even when they can't explain it. Encourage them to trust their "gut" feelings, and if in doubt, to call.
9. The older the child gets, the more detailed discussions you can have about the appropriate use of 911. It's extremely important that kids not use 911 as a joke. In most jurisdictions, calling 911 for any reason other than an emergency is grounds for a citation and a fine.