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Don't worry, it's only a test

New simulator offers lessons in fire safety

By Josh Noel
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On their hands and knees, all 28 kindergartners crawled to "safety" inside a state-of-the-art Chicago Fire Department simulator as it filled with thick, blinding smoke Tuesday.

But the exercise was a bit too real for one ponytailed girl, who came out with tears streaming down her face.

A plastic fire helmet and cookie helped calm her, along with reassuring coos from her teacher at Carson Elementary on the Southwest Side, said Paige Dempsey, who insisted the lessons were good for the children.

"They're young and such concrete learners, so it really hit home," Dempsey said. "That's a good thing."

The Fire Department agrees, which is why it plans to parade 20,000 children, mostly from age 5 to 8, through its sparkling new toy, called the Survive Alive House, during the next year.

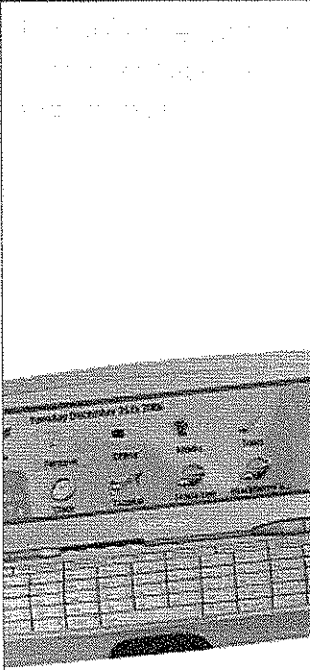
Supplementing years of safety instruction that amounted to orders of "stop, drop and roll," the Fire Department cut the ribbon Tuesday on what is essentially a recreational vehicle outfitted for simulating the deadly smoke that comes from house fires.

Over several hours, more than 100 kindergartners were sent through the vehicle parked outside the school at 5516 S. Maplewood Ave., chosen for its nearness to a blaze in the 5400 block of South Honore Street last month that killed four children.

With children crowded into the vehicle's mock living room and bedrooms, firefighters pumped white artificial smoke through vents in the rooms. As a fire alarm chirped and a light flashed on the ceiling, the children were ordered to their knees and to head to safety.

Many giggled through the simulation, but a few were shaken.

Advertisement



The advertisement shows a large vehicle, the 'Survive Alive House' simulator, with a sign that reads 'FIRE SAFETY EDUCATION 2006'. The vehicle has several windows and a door. Below the image, the text reads: 'ONLY FROM X cingular raising the bar will'.

"You can sit in a classroom and tell them everything you want, but now they can actually go through it," said Joseph Roccasalva, the Fire Department's coordinator of fire awareness. "This would make them a little more calm if it really happens."

The \$138,000 vehicle was bought with a grant from Fireman's Fund Insurance Co. Company spokesman Ron Mori said it is believed to be the first completely self-contained fire-safety instruction unit in the world.

The Fire Department already has a simulator that can be hitched to a truck and is powered by an external generator.

"Being self-contained, [the new simulator] handles better and it's easier to get out of places," Roccasalva said. "It helps us get to where we've got to go."

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