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Officer Development Series – *Public Relations*



Firehouse Tours for Children

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

Let me begin by saying this may seem like an odd place to post a firehouse tour article, but having strong public relations skills is a key component to becoming a great fire officer. A tour of the firehouse falls into the PR category as much, or more, than anything else we will do while wearing our uniform. With that thought in mind, below is an article filled with helpful information. As always, if you have your own departmental SOP that conflicts with anything you read in this article, follow your SOP and disregard anything other than what your department allows. If you don't have an SOP, or you are looking to develop one for your department, I'm confident you will find these tips extremely valuable.

Remember when you were a probationary firefighter and your company officer came up to you and said a group of kids were coming to visit the firehouse today? At first, you probably thought it was cool, until you found out you were going to be the one giving them the tour and teaching them about fire safety.

We have so many wonderful traditions in the fire service; however, we have some bad traditions as well. One is asking our newbies to do the things we, as officers or senior firefighters, don't want to do. I'm not talking about mopping the floor. I'm referring to public relation duties like giving a firehouse tour. Passing the buck to a probie is especially bad if your department does not have an SOP and/or you haven't taken the time to teach the individual what to do.

Fire station tours are important for several reasons. First, we are educating children on things like E.D.I.T.H. and Stop, Drop & Roll, which can save their life. Second, we are interacting with the public, and we are – after all – in the customer service business. Coming across as unprepared or uninterested is simply unprofessional. We want people to look at us as professionals who are, among other things, educated, prepared and compassionate.

How can you avoid a poorly presented tour? First, you should begin by not making probie's do the tour UNLESS you teach them how (and why) first. The best option is to include your entire company in the process, and plan an organized visit.

Before I share some ideas with you, let's take a moment to talk about the "public use" areas of your firehouse. Due to security, safety and liability issues, FD personnel should limit their interaction with the public to only a few areas in the firehouse. Fire Stations are designed and intended for the sole purpose of housing Firefighters and their equipment. Although fire stations are funded with public tax dollars, they are not intended for public use. With this in mind, when

you are conducting a station tour, public safety precautions must be taken. Tours should be limited to public areas, i.e., Apparatus Bay, Day Room, and the Kitchen area (we explain why the kitchen should be included later in the article). Restricted areas should include the weight room, employee restrooms/showers, and dorm rooms. It goes without saying that any time a civilian or public group requests a tour of the facility, all visitors must be accompanied by a department representative.



A fire station tour for children should be both fun and educational. You may not have access to a fire safety trailer or expensive props, but that doesn't mean you can't provide a first-class tour that exceeds the students

and teachers expectations. Again, if you have SOP's, follow them. If not, here are some tips on how you can conduct a Firehouse Tour for Kids.

1. Establish a Safe Area

After you welcome the class and introduce yourselves, immediately establish a safe area. Explain what happens when an alarm comes in (tones, bells, etc.). Stress how important it is that everyone remains calm (remember, you're dealing with children) as they walk over to the safe area. Some departments temporarily take a company out of service when conducting a fire station tour and fire safety lecture. This may or may not be possible, but the time and location of a working fire cannot be pre-determined, so a safe area should be established before beginning the tour. Make sure the area is clean, easy to access, and away from any danger. Hopefully, you will be in a situation where at least one member will be able to stay behind and continue the tour is an alarm comes in. If not, provide the teacher with instructions before beginning the tour.

2. Tour the firehouse

Every kid wants to see the big red fire engine and the pole and the Dalmatian (c'mon, we both know there's a department out there that still has a Dalmatian). Giving a tour of the firehouse is not much different than giving a tour of your own home. One of the first things you could do is walk them through the station and show them where the firefighters work and train. It goes without saying that any "questionable" items hanging on lockers or around the firehouse should be removed. Firefighters like to play jokes on each other, and although my department has a zero tolerance policy against posting offensive things on lockers, not every department (or individual) has enough sense to refrain from doing so.

Take a walk around the station before the kids arrive and make sure the place is clean, and the floor is clear of debris. You may choose not to take the children through certain rooms, but the apparatus floor, day room and kitchen are great places to start.

3. Kitchen - *Is This Hot?*

Every child is familiar with a kitchen. If they are old enough to know that a toaster heats up their bread, they should also know this appliance is dangerous. An effective lesson you can teach is to have them sit or stand in a safe location as one firefighter walks around the room and asks, "Is this hot?" The firefighter should point to appliances like the oven, the coffee pot, and the toaster.

This is where you talk to them each item and explain why they shouldn't touch them. This is also a good time to point at an outlet, talk briefly about electricity, and explain why they shouldn't stick items into the slots. If nobody teaches them this, they may end up learning the hard way.

4. Stop, Drop and Roll

Don't miss the opportunity to teach a child when and how to "Stop, Drop and Roll". An important part of a fire safety lecture is teaching what to do if their clothes catch fire. A person's instinct may be to run or pat the fire out with your hands, but the "Stop, Drop and Roll" method is actually the most efficient way of putting out a clothing fire. This technique should be practiced often so that it will become an automatic response in an emergency situation.

There are props you can develop to help make this lesson more effective. For example, take stretchy material and attach something to it that can symbolize fire. Place the item around their pant leg and have them Stop, Drop and Roll. Use a mat to pad the floor and make sure they don't roll off of it and onto a hard surface. This can be a lot of fun for a child, but it's important to stress *when*, *how*, and *why* they should do this. Check out the end of this article for instructions.

5. Box of Toys

I have found this to be one of the most effective lessons for young children. Take a simple cardboard box, no larger than a shoe box, and place a handful of toys (like matchbox cars or action figures) inside. Also place a pack of matches, a lighter, and a battery operated smoke detector inside. Don't let the children look inside the box, just ask them to sit around you in a semi-circle as you pull out one item at a time and ask the question, "Is this a toy, or is this not a toy?"

This works best when you pull out 2 or 3 toys before you pull out a pack of matches. When you hold the matches up and ask the question, almost 100% of the time, the kids will yell out "Not a toy!" This is a good time to tell them what to do if they find a pack of matches (or a lighter), which is... don't touch it, just tell an adult! The last item you should pull out is a battery operated smoke detector. I activate the detector before removing it from the box. This may frighten one or two kids, but it's a great way to lead into what they should do if the smoke detector on their ceiling or wall activates. Teach them to stay low and get out of the house. See number nine for tips on E.D.I.T.H. (exit drills in the home).

6. Suit up before their eyes

Having a firefighter walk into the room wearing full turnout gear and an SCBA can traumatize a child. Remember, to them, you look (and sound) like Darth Vader. Instead of doing this, have a firefighter don his/her gear right in front of the children. At every step, have the firefighter interact with the children. For example, after putting on bunker gear, the firefighter can say, "Everybody can tell it's still me, right?" Once the firefighter is "on air," let the children come up and give him a high five. This is where another firefighter can explain that we use this gear so we can help people in trouble. Stress the point that if there is a fire where they live, and



they see a firefighter wearing full gear, they shouldn't be scared. The need to know we are there to help them.

I should advise you that for every ten who love this part of the tour, there may be one who cries. The teacher, who already has a relationship with the child, should be the one to comfort these children. Just forewarn the teacher prior to starting this lesson.

7. Let them sit in the Engine

Seriously, what kid doesn't dream of sitting in a fire engine? Although this may be the highlight of the tour for a youngling, this is strictly up to your departmental policies. If you choose to do this, and there are more than ten children, it may be advisable to make two lines, on each side of the apparatus. Many times, the teachers like to take photos of the children sitting in the apparatus. Make sure the child is secure in the seat and one hand is always in contact. This will help ensure there isn't an accident, but don't lose sight of the society we live in today. Don't do anything without the teacher's permission, and understand the reason why many departments prefer not to let the children sit on the apparatus - simply to avoid injury and potential litigation.



Whether you do or don't allow them to sit in the Engine, it can also be fun to open a couple apparatus doors and show them some of the tools you use. Disclaimer: Do not let them hold or handle any firefighting tools, except maybe a low pressure booster line.

8. Hold booster line

Again, this is dependent upon your departmental policies, but most children find this to be the absolute highlight of their tour – hands down. Stretch a booster line and flow the minimum amount of water. Let the children hold it, one at a time. When doing this, the firefighter should control the nozzle and never let go of the line. Some departments create props like the one in the photo to simulate a structure fire. Then, they help the child aim the hose stream at the fire.



If you flow water, be sure to address the issue of water runoff in advance so you don't disrupt nearby residents or cause any damage, or pooling of water.

9. E.D.I.T.H.

Many trips to the firehouse take place during fire prevention week. Because of this, teachers usually have the students work on assignments related to fire safety. When children visit the firehouse, regardless of their age, you should always ask them to participate in one homework assignment. The assignment: Go home, talk with the adult(s) they live with about what to do in the event of a fire. The adult may not know the proper answer, which is why you should give each student copy of E.D.I.T.H. (Exit Drills In The House).

The E.D.I.T.H guideline, which you can develop, order, or search for and download online, should consist of the following components:

1. Test Smoke Detectors (Check batteries),
2. Prepare an Escape Plan (Identify exits, and designate a meeting area outside),
3. Talk about 911 (Identify locations of phones outside, like a neighbor's house),
4. Practice Exit Drills In The Home regularly, and
5. Examine your home for fire hazards and take steps to prevent a fire before it occurs.

10. Give them something to remember their trip

When people go on trips, they come back with souvenirs for their kids. A trip to the firehouse can be as exciting for a child as a trip to a local street fair. Maybe we can't give every child stuffed animals or Mickey Mouse ears, but we could give them inexpensive items like fire safety stickers or coloring books. You may even be able to purchase coloring books with all the drills outlined above. This is a perfect item because it's fun, and it reinforces the safety tips you covered during the visit. A group picture in front of the apparatus is a great way to end a memorable and successful tour.

Additional Tips:

If you have a fire pole at your station, it may be fun to let the children see one of the firefighters slide down it. Under no circumstances should you let the children do the same. I'm sure I don't have to belabor that point and explain why.

Formal tours should be scheduled in advance and coordinated through the appropriate office (Training, administrative, planning, etc) Whenever possible, groups should be limited to a manageable size in the event that a tour must be terminated due to an emergency response. During times of elevated security threat levels, or immediately following an incident where hose and tools need to be tested, inventoried, and cleaned, firehouse tours should be rescheduled to a later time and date.

"Stop, Drop and Roll"

1. Stop what you are doing if your clothes catch fire. Do not try to pat the fire out and do not try to run.
2. Drop to your knees and lie down on the floor on your stomach.
3. Close your eyes and cover your face and mouth with your hands to protect yourself from flames and smoke.
4. Roll onto your back and to your front repeatedly until the fire is out. Fire needs air to burn; rolling from your back to your front will help to smother the fire.
5. Remove burned clothing and check that it is not smoldering. Treat any burns immediately. Skin burns from fire is one of the most serious injuries and should be flushed with cool water as soon as possible.



Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso is a speaker, fire service instructor and co-author of the best-selling book Fireground Operational Guides (PennWell, 2011). The book features 70 incident specific guides that can be used in the field, when developing SOP's, or when studying for promotional exams.