

SAFETY in TRAINING for the FIRE INSTRUCTOR

by David Dodson

This online article has been developed to assist you with safety issues that surround the firefighter training environment. Unfortunately, the fire service has a less-than-desirable safety record when it comes to training activities. Statistics indicate that eight firefighters die each year during these training activities, and thousands are injured. It is likely that as you read this article, one or two firefighters will be injured during a training activity.

For the instructor, injuries and deaths incurred during formal training activities invite legal action to recover damages. Furthermore, fire instructors can be charged with crimes when a death occurs to a student. History shows that fire instructors have been charged with involuntary manslaughter, reckless endangerment, and negligence resulting in death. Combine this with a court trend towards LESS immunity, and one can clearly see that Fire Instructor liability is increasing.

The instructor/student relationship poses a duty upon the instructor to exercise reasonable care to help prevent injuries. This responsibility is truly awesome – and the intent here is to give you tools to help achieve reasonable care.

To prevent injuries (and death), the fire instructor needs to first understand recent trends and problematic areas that lead to injuries. With that understanding, strategies can be developed to help prevent similar occurrences.

Where Training Injuries Occur

A historical review of training incidents reveals several trends that help us understand where and how injuries (and deaths) occur. If you are aware of these trends, you will likely be more aware of the potential for an incident involving one or more of these types of accidents and hopefully take steps to avoid a negative outcome. These are the more common events that occur during training:

- Falls – typically from ladders or roofs.
- Being Struck – by apparatus, heavy equipment, and falling objects.
- Overexertion – leading to heart attack, stroke, thermal stress, and dehydration (renal failure). Strains and sprains are often the result of overexertion.
- Burns – during live fire training.
- CO poisoning – from exposure to smoke.

In many cases, the actions (or inaction) of the instructor can set the stage for an injury event. Well-meaning instructors often design scenarios that better recreate the environment of actual emergencies – in other words, we strive for realism in our drills. While the intention may be good, the creativity and push for realism can introduce inappropriate risks to students. Using explosives, accelerants, and “unstable” props can backfire – especially when they are used in a spontaneous or uncontrolled manner.

Training accidents are mostly preventable. While it seems impossible to eliminate all training injuries in a profession as complex and dynamic as firefighting, this should be our goal.

Preventing Injuries

Safe, effective firefighter training relies on a combination of efforts between your department (administrative control), the instructor, and the student. Of these, the instructor holds perhaps the most important key. These three influences must work together to ensure a safe training activity. The following text provides suggestions for a general approach to training activities, as well as some specific ideas to help you do your part.

Speaking in general terms, the instructor can help provide a safe training environment by employing three concepts:

1. **Be PREPARED.** Preparedness is more than words – it's a universal approach to engaging any training activity. Being prepared involves many facets – failing to address any one of these elements of preparedness can open a window for injuries. The hallmark of any good instructor is the time he or she spends preparing a training event. Time spent reviewing learning objectives, lessons, and props is an investment that pays dividends. Attention to logistics, setup, and assistant instructor coordination is essential.

The NFPA has written several standards that are essential reading for instructors. At minimum, you should know which NFPA standards are applicable to firefighter training, and spend time understanding the content and intent of these standards. In some cases, failure to follow a given standard invites liability. Of particular note are the following:

- NFPA 1001, *Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications*
- NFPA 1041, *Standard for Fire Instructor Professional Qualifications*
- NFPA 1403, *Standard on Live Fire Training Evolutions*
- NFPA 1500, *Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program*
- NFPA 1584, *Recommended Practices on the Rehabilitation of Members Operating at Incident Scene Operations and Training Exercises*

There may also be OSHA Regulations and NIOSH training bulletins that detail pertinent information for your training activity. Do your homework!

Being prepared also includes efforts to know your audience. This is most important when teaching new recruits. Issues of past performance, grades, and progress can be compelling – and may be the trigger to change expectations,

drill pace, and your general approach to the training. Spend time with academy coordinators to understand what recruits have been previously taught and how they are progressing through their training.

2. **Have a SAFETY ATTITUDE.** Once again, this isn't lip service. A safety attitude starts with the basic belief that training-related injuries are NOT ACCEPTABLE. You can spread this attitude by empowering students to bring up safety concerns. A safety attitude in training can carry to incident handling. One adage says that we should "train like we play and play like we train." You instill this notion by building good habits during training activities. To quote the late Vince Lombardi, "Practice doesn't make perfect – PERFECT PRACTICE makes perfect!" Training is the starting place for good habits...teach students the "right" way and don't encourage short-cuts.
3. **Be AWARE.** Students engaged in learning and practicing new techniques will be "task-focused" and may not be entirely aware of their surroundings. The instructor must not only watch student behaviors but must also be aware of other influences that can be distracting or catch students off guard. Be mindful of moving apparatus, weather changes, and student fatigue. Being aware is also about listening – listening to your students. The aware instructor can detect confusion, minor injuries, embarrassment, and peer pressure by simply listening to what students are saying, or – in some cases – what they aren't saying.

Let's now explore some specific ideas to help you maintain a safe environment during training activities.

1. **Give apparatus operators very explicit directions.** The number of injuries and deaths associated with apparatus are increasing at a dangerous rate. In 2004, three firefighters died because apparatus backed over them. Advise and remind drivers that students may not be paying attention to apparatus. Set speed limits on drill grounds and give specific instructions that apparatus shouldn't be moved without a walk-around or spotters. Reinforce seat belt use – even if the apparatus is moving short distances for a repeated evolution.
2. **Use Accountability Systems.** Students assembled for a hands-on class should be assigned the responsibility of using an accountability system to help keep track of each other. There are many academies that use the local accountability system for all aspects of training – even classroom sessions! Familiarity, awareness, and teamwork are all improved greatly with repeated use and reinforcement.
3. **Define expectations.** The good instructor will brief students on the purpose, objectives, and desired outcome of the training session. Tell students how they will be evaluated and what you expect.

4. **Give a SAFETY BRIEFING.** ALL hands-on training activities should include a safety briefing. That's right – ALL hands-on activities! A safety briefing doesn't have to be long, or boring. Make the safety briefing motivational and encouraging. A typical training safety briefing should include, but is not limited to the following components:
 - Required PPE.
 - Limits, thresholds, and the “pace” of the drill.
 - A process or signal that a safety issue is terminating the drill.
 - A procedure and meeting place for drill termination.
 - Empowerment that everyone is responsible for identifying safety hazards.
 - Expected hazards or conditions that will be present during the drill (like moving vehicles or limited visibility!).
 - Rehab requirements and expectations.
 - Areas or actions that are “off limits.”
5. **Use a Safety Officer.** Some training activities, like live-fire evolutions, require the use of a safety officer. Consider using a safety officer for all hands-on drills. This may sound restrictive – but the benefits can be extraordinary. Reinforcing the concept that we must watch out for each other is invaluable and helps breed a “safety-first” attitude. For simple, low-risk activities, have students take turns being the safety officer. For complex or higher-risk activities, use an experienced fire officer.
6. **Minimize competition.** There are few training activities that require full-speed accomplishment. Use the training activity as practice time to help students perfect skills; speed will come with repetition. The competitive nature of firefighters is natural, but can lead to injuries – especially when the competition is spontaneous and not closely supervised.
7. **Let students acknowledge their weaknesses or difficulty in performing a task.** Training is an opportunity to let students explore weaknesses. Allow students to openly discuss their needs or their frustrations. Empower students that have mastered a skill to help those that still need improvement and don't tolerate the petty belittlement that other students use to shame the person needing help. Pride, shame, and embarrassment can impede team development and progress.
8. **Explain what *could* go wrong.** It's important that students know that unintended results can result from the many tasks, tools, and procedures used in the fire service. And while it is best to let students “learn by doing,” it's also important to make well-timed interruptions to explain what would happen if the firefighter slipped, fell, or failed to follow procedure.

9. **REHAB often.** Overexertion during training is the trigger for strains, sprains, dehydration, and heat-related injuries. While we hope that firefighters maintain good physical health, the fact remains that all of us – even the physically fit – have bad days. The best policy for rehab during training is to rest often, over-hydrate, and make sure the students refuel (eat). There is no formula for the number of breaks an instructor should give. Factors such as PPE, weather, sun exposure, physical effort, and previous activity can all influence the frequency and duration of breaks. An instructor should never “push” a student’s physical limitations – the liability is too great. Activities that require a significant physical output should be done with significant attention to medical monitoring and strict control.

This article is not intended to be all-inclusive; rather, it’s designed to help you set the stage for a safe training event. If you practice diligence, use this guide to help, and approach your instruction with the students’ best interest in mind, you’ll be well on your way in helping to provide a safe training experience. Don’t just BE SAFE – as an instructor, you must MAKE IT SAFE!