

Keeping your family safe in the cold months

In light of the tragic loss of 3-year-old Elijah March, winter safety has never been more important

Elijah March was a three-year-old boy who left his grandparents home at 4 in the morning in just a diaper, T-shirt and boots in the Bathurst and Lawrence area on February 19 of this year. After he was discovered gone, the entire city and even people from the cities that surround Toronto banned together to find the missing little boy. Unfortunately, by the time he was found, it was too late. The frigid Canadian temperature didn't take long to formulate the workings of a real life tragedy.

The calamitous loss of Elijah sparked an outpour of grief and sadness, and some even played the blame game pointing fingers at the family. Did the grandparents do enough? Should someone have been awake at that time, or heard the little boy trying to get out of the apartment?

Although it holds no closure, sometimes accidents just happen without anybody to blame. There are, however, steps that parents can take to avoid the same fate.

Step 1: Discussion

Constable Victor Kwong with the Toronto Police says that one of the things you can do that can be a major help with keeping your kids safe in the winter months is simple—have a discussion. It's important that you give your kids the tool of knowledge when it comes to their safety and since children are much smarter than people give them credit for it's important to sit down with them and outline safety practices. Even older children can benefit from the discussion because they too can be aware of closing and locking doors behind them when they leave and making sure that the younger children in the family are always with an adult whether it be a parent, family member or baby-sitter. If you give them the information they need to keep themselves safe, there's a better chance they will do just that. Tell your children what times they are allowed to exit the home on their own or with friends, and develop a safe, warm place to go to if by some chance your child gets lost in the cold. For children, just knowing what they can do in this type of situation is half the battle.

Step 2: Develop a security system

Not all parents have the ability to deck their homes out with a top of the line security system but that doesn't mean they can't have one in place. Something as simple as hanging a bell on the door can

alert the adult in charge that the door has been opened. It's important that the bell is loud enough, and remains on the doors at all times. Also, a lock at the top of the door will be extra protection for a child who is able enough to pull a chair to reach the mid-level lock. A chain lock or dead bolt at the very top of the door will provide enough height that, for most young children, can't be reached. Also, it is important to discuss these locks and bells with baby-sitters so that they know to keep them locked and in place at all times. When it comes to dropping your children off at baby-sitters homes, make sure you have found someone you can trust and someone that is willing to proof their home to avoid any accidents.

Step 3: Know your surroundings

As mentioned above, if the bell does not work you can establish a safe, secure place within the neighbourhood. Whether it be a store close by that you frequent with your child or a neighbour's home that you trust, make sure that both yourself, your child, and the third party are aware that you have chosen your safe place and that your child knows exactly how to get there from the area around your home. Also, ensure your child knows the neighbourhood. Take your child for walks and teach them to get their bearings in the neighbourhood so that eventually no matter what direction they walk in they will know how to get back, or to the safe place from a certain radius around the community you live in.

Step 4: Be prepared for the cold

It's no surprise that the Canadian winter weathers are frigid and relentless, but with that comes many ways to ensure that your children, who are much more susceptible to the weather, stay safe and warm even if they do happen to wonder off on their own. When the weather is below -27, playing outside should be strictly off limits, even with bundling up. When it isn't as frosty, children should be bundled up with pants, warm socks, sweaters, snow pants, a winter jacket, a scarf, mittens and a hat. They want to stay warm but they also want to stay dry, and that's when a snowsuit will come in handy along with regular checks of their gear. Also, when it is that cold out, you'll want to make sure that your children are playing close to a warm shelter where they can take breaks from the temperatures between tag games. For example, staying close to the house or a warming station in the city could be very beneficial.

In Canada, there's no way to avoid the cold weather but with these steps you may just make winter a safer season for yourself and your family. For more information on how to stay safe in the winter months go to www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/winter_safety.

—*Angelica Bottaro*