

Determining Self-Preservation Capability in Pre-School Children

Background

In the 1994 edition of NFPA 101, *Life Safety Code*, the requirements for Day-Care Centers were completely rewritten by the Technical Committee on Assembly and Educational Occupancies to bring the requirements more in-line with the current (at the time) functioning of day-care centers and to include adult day-care centers into the definition of a Day-Care Center. Part of the revision work included restructuring requirements based on capability of self-preservation. For children, the Task Group that performed the initial investigative work for these revisions interviewed multiple day-center owners and early childhood experts to determine at what age toddlers would be considered incapable of self-preservation. The questions asked of the early childhood experts were as follows:

- At what age will a child take instruction from staff and follow those instructions without having to be carried or using hand-holding techniques, following in a line the staff member to the outside of the building?
- At what age will most children be able to walk up or down stairs without having to be carried or have to drop to their knees in order to climb up or down stairs?

The bulk of the answers received by the Task Group were 24 months. Hence, the Technical Committee defined children younger than 24 months as incapable of self-preservation and thus more stringent requirements in the *Code* apply. It has been noted that the *International Fire Code* uses 30 months for their cut-off for “self-preservation”, even though they do not use that specific term. It means the difference between being classified as “I” (Institutional), which has more stringent requirements versus “E” (Educational). The Task Group performed to the best of its ability in asking the appropriate questions to help determine the appropriate age for being considered capable of self-preservation, but it is possible that the Task Group did not ask the correct questions or a large enough sample pool.

The Annex language from NFPA 101 that provides further explanation of Self-Preservation has been provided below.

A.3.3.176 Self-Preservation (Day-Care Occupancy). Examples of clients who are incapable of self-preservation include infants, clients who are unable to use stairs because of confinement to a wheelchair or other physical disability, and clients who cannot follow directions or a group to the outside of a facility due to mental or behavioral disorders. It is the intent of this *Code* to classify children under the age of 24 months as incapable of self-preservation. Examples of direct intervention by staff members include carrying a client, pushing a client outside in a wheelchair, and guiding a client by direct handholding or continued bodily contact. If clients cannot exit the building by themselves with minimal intervention from staff members, such as verbal orders, classification as incapable of self-preservation should be considered.

Project Description

This project includes three tasks, which could be split into two phases.

Phase 1

Task 1: A literature review of the research related to the subjects of self-preservation and evacuation by young children. The information found should then be compiled into a report to be shared with the Technical Committees.

Phase 2

Task 2: Develop questions to be asked during interviews to accurately define the age that a child would be considered capable of self-preservation. In order to develop these questions, the student or student team should work with a group of early childhood experts with education and knowledge in growth and development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and are familiar with the issues surrounding evacuation of these age groups.

Task 3: Using the questions developed during Task 2, interview early childhood experts with education and knowledge in growth and development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The results from both Task 2 and 3 should be documented in a report.

How this Information Will be Used

The objective of this project would be to give guidance to the NFPA 101 Technical Committee to help them provide a more accurate definition of capable of self-preservation as used for pre-school aged kids in the Day-Care Centers chapters of NFPA 101 and NFPA 5000; therefore, providing requirements for Day-Care Centers that will be safe and better aligned.