Fire safety training uses virtual reality

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The 12-year-olds have heard it many times -- "Don't play with matches." -- so now firefighters are getting their attention using virtual reality fires.

Iowa State University researcher Shana Smith, an assistant professor of agricultural and biosystems engineering, is developing the computer-generated fires to help teach children about fire safety.

Smith says the virtual reality blazes will be realistic, life-size and 3-D. But it will be safe.

Smith said she intends to create computer simulations of fires in an apartment building, home and classroom that will be used to teach children how to react to fires in the different settings.

"I think this is a very good application for virtual reality," Smith said. "It's impossible to offer training so kids know how to respond in a fire event by putting them in a fire. But we can put them in virtual reality."

Will a virtual reality fire scare the children? Paul Sandoval, the deputy chief of the Ames Fire Department, doesn't believe that will occur. He says the program will be all about teaching fire safety, not about frightening anyone.

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