A family gathered around the hearth is a symbol of warmth, togetherness and peace. But don’t let the romance of a cozy fire distract you from its hazards. Typical fireplace-related accidents include a) clothing ignition, b) sparks landing on flammable material, c) using flammable liquids, and d) inadequate ventilation.

1. Before you start a fire, assemble the proper tools nearby. A fire extinguisher is important for emergencies. Use long-stem matches to light the fire. Keep area rugs and other flammable items away from the fireplace. Don’t wear loose-fitting clothing when tending the fire.

2. There are certain materials that are dangerous to use in your fireplace. These include wrapping paper, polystyrene packaging, tree branches, and charcoal lighter fluid.

3. Place the wood at the back of the fireplace on a grate. Every fireplace should have a fireplace screen and/or door that you can close to separate yourself from the fire. The screen also protects you from flying sparks and embers.

4. Before you’re ready to start a fire, make sure the flue is clean and the damper open. Are vents and chimneys operating properly? Have your fireplace and chimney checked once a year. When you’re ready to start a fire, add kindling underneath the logs, and light the kindling with long matches. If using package fireplace logs, be sure to follow the directions on the package.

5. Before going to bed, put out the fire. You can use sand to safely do this. Be sure all the ashes have cooled before you dispose of them.