

Make Resolutions that Will Last Beyond the New Year

Every New Year, do you make the same old resolutions? Go to the gym. Quit smoking. Be more organized. Then, like many people, do you abandon these goals within a month or two?

Here are some resolutions you can make — and keep — that will benefit you, and also your family, your community and your world.

Improve Your Home's Safety

There are lots of little things you can do around the house to give yourself big peace of mind that your family is protected from all-too-common household accidents. For example, to avoid electrical shocks, place covers over all outlets and tie up or unplug cords so they don't dangle temptingly in front of toddlers or pets.

Home electrical problems account for 67,800 fires during a typical year, according to the U.S. Fire Administration. Inspect appliance cords and immediately replace any that are worn, old or damaged. Keep clothes, curtains and other potentially combustible items at least three feet from all heaters. Make sure electrical appliances are used and stored away from wet floors and counters.

Your home's windows need to be accessible in case your family has to use them as an escape route. Make sure they are not nailed or painted shut, and if they have guards, security bars, grilles or grates, test the release mechanism make sure it works.

On the other hand, windows can pose a falling hazard. Make sure screens are secure, and keep furniture — or anything children can climb — away from window ledges.

Save Money by Going Green

Prices for fuel oil, propane and electricity are expected to rise this winter, so even the smallest improvements could help your family's budget. Replacing incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents can save you up to three-quarters of the electricity previously used by incandescent bulbs.

Put an insulating blanket on your water heater. The U.S. Department of Energy says that adding insulation to your heater can reduce standby heat losses by 25 to 45 percent, and save 4 to 9 percent in water heating costs. The blankets cost anywhere from \$15 to \$50 at your local hardware store or online, and are easy to install.

Change your thermostat to one that is programmable and can be set to lower the heat automatically when the home is empty during the workday, and at night when everyone is asleep. Programmable thermostats can save about \$180 per year in energy costs, according to Energy Star, a joint program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy.

Conserve water, and reduce your water bill, by making simple changes such as running dishwashers and clothes washers only when they are full and taking short showers instead of baths and turning off the water when you are shampooing or soaping.

De-Clutter and Help Others

Especially in these tough economic times, donating your unused items to charity could be a lifesaver for homeless or needy families. If it's in good condition, your out-of-style or outgrown clothing could keep a family warm during the cold weather months.

Many local charities also accept donations of household items that are in working order. That lamp, toaster or set of dishes gathering dust in the garage could help furnish a home for a needy family.

When you redecorate or remodel, don't put out-of-style-but-usable home furnishings such as light fixtures, bathroom vanities, and even door knobs in the garbage. Habitat for Humanity ReStores and other organizations will take and resell them at a fraction of the cost of new, and the proceeds help build Habitat homes.