

# Students with autism introduced to firefighters

◆ **In an emergency:**  
Lights, high-pitched noises  
can be very traumatic.

By **GRETYL MACALASTER**  
Sunday News Correspondent

**NEWINGTON** — For 8-year-old Tia Carmichael, approaching a firefighter in uniform without fear was a big step on Thursday.

Carmichael is one of 27 students at the Birchtree Center with an autism spectrum disorder who became better acquainted with fire personnel and fire-drill procedures on Thursday.

The interactions were as much an education for local firefighters as for the students.

“This is an opportunity for these first responders to get to know our students and learn more about the challenges our students face, so they’ll be able to better help our students in

the event of an emergency,” said Jessica Files Squier, director of development and community relations for Birchtree.

And if first responders can better communicate with students with autism, there is a lessened chance of misunderstanding in an emergency situation.

“It is really a dual process,” Newington Fire Chief Dale Sylvia said.

The Birchtree Center moved from Portsmouth to Newington last year and has started doing regular drills with the department.

Students with autism spectrum disorder can be particularly sensitive to the flashing lights and high-pitched noise of the fire alarms.

“Anything that happens spontaneously in the life of a child with autism can be very traumatic,” said Christine Guarino, executive director of the Birchtree Center. “So the practice makes it familiar, and they

are more able to understand what the signals mean and respond appropriately.”

So for now, staff are warned of upcoming fire drills to help prepare the students. The goal is to have spontaneous fire drills like those in typical school settings.

Students seemed particularly enamored with Newington Firefighter/EMT Tracy Dudgeon, who was in full firefighting gear.

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