

Emergency Preparedness for Children

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The realities of natural and man-made disaster incidents support the need to discuss emergency situations before they happen. We hear about the importance of personal preparedness and situational awareness when surviving life-threatening events on a continual basis. However, talking about potentially life-threatening situations can be frightening, and especially so for children. How can we do this without creating more fear?

We can begin by reminding children of their strengths. Kids are already great planners, having been taught routine and expectations by their families, friends, caregivers and teachers. For example, preschoolers are involved in the daily schedules and activities of their education. Once elementary school begins, homework is also added to the mix. Planning for emergency situations is an easy extra step in the overall development of your children.

Parents and caregivers start safety training early in a child's life. Most have had discussions with their children on "Stranger Danger" and "Stop, drop and roll" before they have even started elementary school. These are lessons that can be used to introduce additional elements of emergency preparedness. By using the following suggestions to open a dialogue, it can be simple to explore other emergencies and explain how to best respond.

Beginning a Discussion about Emergency Preparedness

It is important to build from a child's prior knowledge of safety precautions and emergency response when discussing emergency preparedness. The following are some steps you can take to facilitate a well-organized and productive conversation:

- Identify a timeframe during which you can focus on the discussion. This timeframe can be anywhere from fifteen to thirty minutes, depending on the child's age and level of development.
- Use the term "safety" along with "emergency" to create a link of understanding between the two and dilute the negative connotations surrounding the latter term.
- Start the discussion by reminding children of previous safety discussions like "Stranger Danger" and "Stop, drop and roll."

- Ask the simple question: “What other things might we have to think about?” This is an effective way to gain a child’s attention and also to find out what other emergencies they think about. Children might focus on a personal event or recent news item.
- However, if they are unable to think of anything, you can suggest emergency situations that might happen or would require certain steps or knowledge (i.e. losing electricity, calling for help, being lost).
- Break down the discussion into small, easily digestible pieces. Try to focus on one specific situation per each discussion.

Talking Points

As you explore the topic of emergency preparedness with your children, there are key elements you should try integrating into each talk. The following are some “talking points” to consider:

- Begin with a standard emergency situation and discuss who might be able to help. Explain that, when calling for help, children should find an adult immediately. If an adult cannot be found, then they should call 9-1-1.
- Use simple language when explaining 9-1-1 so that children can easily understand. Remind them that they need to be in a safe place prior to calling and explain in detail what will happen when they call. Also indicate what information they will need to provide: the emergency location is always asked first, then the child’s name/location/phone number, and then what has happened.
- Explain that, if a child is speaking to someone on the phone about an emergency situation, they need to stay on the line until directed otherwise.
- Review a list of important names, numbers, addresses and medical information. This includes any information related to parents, siblings, or caretakers, as well as out-of-state relatives. This should also include work information such as a parent’s place of business and office contact numbers.
- Talk about fire escape plans for home, school or other facilities that a child frequents. Familiarity with exit routes and remaining calm will go a long way to aid children in the event of a quick escape.
- Go over situations that require children to either stay in place or get out/get safe. Clarify circumstances in which a child should question whether or not they feel safe, such as in the presence of injury or an external threat, or with an environmental danger like fire.
- Decide on a familiar location or meeting area in case a child is separated from others.
- Teach them basic first-aid. Introductory level classes are sometimes provided through the local Red Cross, a local hospital or other organizations. You also can ask that the school nurse teach a first-aid class to students.

There also is a need to promote a sense of calm in emergency situations. It is difficult to react appropriately when you're in a panic, after all. A few brief lessons on remaining calm and seeking immediate help and/or safety can teach children to acclimate themselves in an emergency situation so that a cool head prevails. To aid this process, make sure the child is familiar with who the police, firefighters and emergency medical teams are and what their uniforms look like.

Training and Teaching Emergency Preparedness

Once earnest discussions about emergency preparedness are taking place, you can start training children on how to react with mock scenarios. When practicing emergency situations, make them interesting and fun; do not make them scary. While a sense of fear is likely, a child's reaction must be anchored in a sense of knowledge, calm, and self-confidence. Here are a few teaching tips:

- Utilize the framework of a game when working through emergency scenarios. The goal would be to learn how best to respond to each situation
- Test your children's current knowledge of emergency scenarios. Ask them what they would do in a given situation. Provide helpful information as needed.
- Start with less-threatening situations and then build on them until the children appear ready to move forward with more intense scenarios.
- Ask, "What other scenarios would you like to practice?" Let the children be involved in the process and feel valued in their preparation.

Monitor the impact of the emergency preparedness training over time. Ways to gauge preparedness in children include:

- Frequently asking if they have any questions about the scenarios.
- Facilitating open discussions about the children's progress between parents, teachers, and the children themselves.
- Taking note of any behavioral changes during the preparedness training.
- Talking about any concerns the children might have.

Keep in mind that practice is vital to internalizing the information conveyed in emergency preparedness trainings for children. Practice on an as needed basis and take into account the child's age and degree of progress. Younger children or those having difficulty retaining the information may need monthly sessions; older children or those with an ability to learn quickly might only require a refresher discussion every six months to a year. You will know best how often you should speak with your kids about this topic.

The FEI Difference

FEI Behavioral Health was created to support and further the mission of its parent company, the Alliance for Children and Families, by delivering services and needed resources to individuals and families throughout the United States. These services include the guidance necessary to implement productive, useful emergency preparedness plans for the caregivers and parents within your workforce.

FEI's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is an invaluable resource when dealing with the trials and tribulations surrounding emergency situations either at home or in the workplace. When utilized, employees or their family members can access the EAP through a toll-free number or by accessing a personalized FEI EAP website. FEI has continuous 24-hour toll-free telephone coverage, 365 days a year. Individuals will have the means of speaking with a counselor at all times; answering machines are never used.

Another FEI specialty is in Crisis Management. Our crisis experts have developed specialized services to address the human side of emergency response through the integration of our mental health expertise, critical incident experience, and state-of-the-art call center and information technology. FEI will assist you with the human side of business recovery, help manage crisis effectively to assure business continuity, and provide meaningful support to victims, victim families and your employees.

When addressing emergency preparedness, FEI's crisis management experts augment your ability to:

- Develop "best practice" plans for responding to the needs of parents, caregivers and children.
- Track the location, status and contact details of employees involved in emergency situations.
- Communicate continuity plans, operational information and organizational needs.
- Immediately respond to employee and family inquiries.
- Compassionately reach out to employees and families and track needs and services.
- Collect, sort and maintain information through use of our exclusive web-based information system.
- Effectively manage employee and family assistance response efforts.
- Mitigate the effects of trauma.

For 35 years FEI Behavioral Health has responded to hundreds of customers' critical incidents and has provided crisis support following work-place violence, natural disasters, aviation accidents, and acts of terrorism. A leader in preparedness, response, and recovery associated with the human dimensions of disaster, FEI integrates behavioral health expertise, crisis management experience, and technology to offer specialized crisis management services.

Preparing your children for potential emergency situations is a vital skill that could not only save their lives, but your own. FEI is here to help you plan for the safety of your workforce and the children in their care.

FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees' focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.