

Safety 101: Prepare children on how to keep safe with emergency basics

Written by Jill Harp For Post-Crescent Media
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Iyara Yang of Appleton is congratulated at a ceremony at Gold Cross Ambulance in Menasha. The now 9-year-old was honored for how she handled herself during a 911 call regarding her mother's health.

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Teaching kids in nonscary ways

According to Vivian Marinelli, clinical psychologist and senior director of crisis management services at FEI Behavioral Health in Milwaukee who is an expert in the field of emergency preparedness, learning about emergencies does not need to be scary for kids when parents or caregivers use the right approach. Many times teachers, parents and caregivers already have talked with kids about some safety issues such as stop, drop and roll and stranger danger, Marinelli said. Use that as a stepping stone by referencing safety issues already discussed to begin a new but similar topic. Also talk about emergencies that are current events such as a house

fire in town or a medical emergency that came up, especially if the child has seen it on television, she said. When talking about the event and how the child might handle that type of emergency, verbally confirm again what they already know. "Tie (discussions) to safety ... because the word emergency makes (kids) worried," Marinelli said. "Let them know the concern is 'how do we keep you safe, how do we keep us safe,' (then) it's not so scary." Finally, make a game out of learning how to handle different emergencies and role play, giving points or a treat, she said. "It is entertaining — not a scary way for kids to learn — and a way for parents to gauge what their child already knows. It also gets them thinking about safety issues and what they can do about it."

For her leadership and courage, Iyara Yang of Appleton, now 9, was honored by Gold Cross Ambulance Services of Menasha recently for her heroics in June when her mother became unconscious.

Feeling frightened and scared at the time of the incident, "I knew the fastest way to save a life was to call 911," Iyara said.

Not only did Iyara dial 911, but on the scene she became part of the emergency team, answering medical questions to determine the cause of her mother's unresponsiveness and interpreting for personnel and her mother, who only spoke Hmong, once she began to wake, said Jason Cotherman, responding paramedic with Gold Cross Ambulance Services.

"Normally kids panic when in distress," Cotherman said. "(Iyara) rose to the maturity of a young adult, staying calm on the scene to help medical staff, all while holding a baby and consoling her two other younger siblings that were terrified."

Thanks to Iyara's bravery in calling 911 and becoming an instrumental part of the emergency team, she helped save her mother's life, he said.

While a teacher taught Iyara to call 911 in an emergency, other informal collaboration exists between parents, schools and emergency first-responders who prepare kids for emergencies and safety situations.

Many times, however, parents take for granted their kids know the basics needed to react in an emergency and do not communicate or reinforce these fundamentals with them, said Dave Lund, sergeant with the Appleton Police Department.

Although parents or caregivers never anticipate an emergency is going to occur, it's important to be prepared and to prepare kids.

Get adult help and/or call 911

The Appleton Fire Department interacts with thousands of school kids in kindergarten and first grade every year, teaching them to differentiate between what's an emergency and what's not so they know when to call for help, said Dave Reigles, Appleton firefighter and public information officer.

There are two things parents should teach their children in an emergency: get adult help quickly and know how to dial 911 when there is no adult help, Reigles said.

"If Dad falls down outside and is laughing, that's not an emergency, but if Dad falls outside and is not awake, then we get kids to realize they need to call for adult help and if no one is home, then call 911," he said.

"Even if a child makes a mistake and identifies something for an emergency and we get there ... there is no mistake. It's not the end of the world, and we can deal with that."

Keep it simple and tell kids that if they need the ambulance, police or fire department, that's when they should call 911, said Steve Krantz, first-responder and field operations manager with Menasha's Gold Cross Ambulance Service.

"Don't ever hang up the phone unless dispatch says it's OK to hang up because ... many times kids hang up before they can get the pertinent information required to help, like their address and phone number," Krantz said.

Address and phone

When calling 911 from home, it's important for kids to know their address and phone number because dispatch will ask for it so personnel know where to respond to the emergency and can call the child back if need be, Lund said.

A child knowing his or her home phone number and address, in some emergency situations, can expedite police contact with a parent or can be a source of information for computer databases when trying to locate a parent, he said.

"It's really surprising the number of kids age 6-10 years that can't tell you their address or their phone

number and all these things we assume they should know, but they don't."

Parents' names and place of work

Another key piece of information kids need to know in an emergency is their parents' first and last names, Lund said.

"We often run into situations with a smaller child that can talk, but when we ask them their parents' names, they simply know them as mom and dad," he said.

That's fine when addressing them, but in cases where a child is lost or wanders away, Lund said, knowing their parents' first and last name is vital for reuniting them as quickly as possible.

Teaching kids the name and location of mom and dad's employer also can be significant in emergencies where the police, fire or paramedics are trying to reach parents, he said.

Get out, get safe

Teach kids that the top priority in a critical situation is their safety and if they are not safe, they need to get out, Krantz said.

To help kids determine if they are unsafe, encourage kids to ask themselves if they are safe, whether someone is sick or hurt, if there is a fire or if someone is being threatened, he said.

"Even if the child doesn't know if they are safe but their mind makes them question it, for whatever reason ... get out and get safe."

Stay calm

"In any emergency, try to keep calm, slow the breathing and talking," Krantz said, "which is sometimes very difficult."

When kids or adults are not calm, their breathing and talking become fast, it's difficult to think straight and communicate, which is crucial in stressful situations, he said.