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Preparing for disasters at school: Tips for parents



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The sudden and unexpected nature of disasters means there's always a chance we can be separated from our families during an emergency. It's a frightening scenario, especially for parents. While there's no substitute for having your children safely in your care, there are ways to allay your worries. Get to know the emergency preparedness plans at your children's schools, get involved in the planning process and talk with your children about the importance of planning ahead.

Preparedness at school

Most schools have some type of emergency preparedness plan — we can all remember lining up and marching outside at the ear-splitting sound of a fire alarm. Today, most school preparedness plans are much more extensive and address a variety of human-caused and natural disasters.

A good first step in assessing whether your child's school is prepared is to learn about the kinds of disasters that can happen in your community. Such disasters can range from tornadoes and earthquakes to terrorist attacks and school shootings.

Don't be shy: Ask the school for a copy of its emergency preparedness plans. Also, be aware of various school safety procedures — for example, is there a sign-in procedure for visitors? Learn about the school's evacuation procedures and locations and how they will notify you in case of an



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emergency. How often are school emergency drills practiced and updated, and are individual faculty trained in emergency response? In what emergency instances should you not attempt to pick your child up from school? Remember, many school buildings also serve as community shelters and so the school may be one of the safest places for your child to be.

Make sure the school has all of your contact information on file. If your child has special medical needs, consider talking with the school nurse on how to prepare for your child's care in case you're separated from your child for a longer period of time.

If you find the school's emergency preparedness plans are lacking, ask what you can do to contribute. Many school emergency plans are formed with input from parents.

Also, find advice from the experts. For example, the U.S. Department of Education website offers a variety of information for school administrators on effective crisis planning – this information will be helpful to you as you assess the school's emergency plans.

An important note to keep in mind: Research on school-based crisis planning is still in its early years and so there is little hard evidence to help measure what practices work best. Fortunately, according to the Department of Education, major crises in the nation's schools are somewhat rare.

Talk with your child, make a family plan

After you've learned about the school's emergency plans, talk to your child about them. There can be a lot of distractions in a classroom and students don't always pay attention. So a one-on-one refresher course certainly can't hurt. Also, make sure your child knows her or his address, the full names of parents or guardians as well as important phone numbers. It's also a good idea to designate another trusted emergency contact for your child in case you're unavailable.

When creating your household emergency plan, consider how school procedures will affect it. Also, designate an emergency meeting place in case you can't remain at home, and check that everyone knows where it is and how to get there. Don't forget to talk about an emergency communications plan for your family, which may include designating a long-distance relative or friend that everyone can contact if necessary. If your child is old enough to drive to school, consider putting a portable emergency stockpile kit in her or his car and make sure they know about your community's evacuation routes.



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