HELPFULHINTS
FOR SCHOOL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
Vol. 2, Issue 7, 2007

FAMILIES AS PARTNERS IN SCHOOL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Emergency Response and Crisis Management TA Center

Ready Campaign

The Department of Homeland Security administers Ready Campaign and Listo Campaign (Spanish version), national public service safety advertising campaigns. Ready Campaign offers parents, teachers, and students community-based information, guides, and strategies for staying safe and secure at school, at home, and in the community. The Ready Kids Web site is in a youth-friendly format and offers a variety of interactive choices tailored for different ages of users: "Creating a Kit," "Making a Plan," and playing games and puzzles. Additionally, the site presents supporting materials for parents and teachers.

Ready Campaign:
http://www.ready.gov

Listo Campaign:
http://www.listo.gov

Ready Kids:
http://www.ready.gov/kids/home.html

Ready America:
http://www.ready.gov/america/index.html

Why Should Schools Involve Families in Emergency Management?

Including family members in all aspects of school emergency management activities can foster positive working relationships in advance of an emergency and thereby strengthen district and school emergency management programs. This edition of *Helpful Hints* provides strategies for forming partnerships and communicating with families and guardians, as well as for designing family reunification plans.

Families and guardians are powerful partners for schools—they offer expert insight about their children, serve as natural vehicles for talking to students about safety, violence, and trauma, play key roles during incidents, and often have skills for and interest in supporting school safety. Communicating with families before, during, and after an incident will strengthen these partnerships. Further, family involvement will reinforce a positive, safe, and healthy learning environment while also adding to districts' and schools' emergency management capacities.

The four phases of school emergency management (prevention-mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery) are the basis for collaborating to create a tailored and comprehensive plan that provides direction to staff, students, families, community partners, and the media during an emergency. The emergency management team may recruit and involve families in particular tasks, such as contributing

This issue of *Helpful Hints* provides strategies for partnering with families to build school emergency management capacity and offers guidance for families on their roles and responsibilities throughout the four phases of emergency management.

Helpful Hints for Forming Partnerships With Families

- Create a schoolwide awareness campaign featuring the district's or school's emergency management efforts;
- Host information sessions that describe reunification procedures;
- Ensure that safety is on the agenda at parent association meetings;
- Communicate with families frequently via the Internet, e-mail and letters;
- Present information at student registration events;
- Participate in community fairs with exhibits showing what families can do to help; and
- Write letters to the editor or send press releases to the local media regarding district preparedness efforts.

to ongoing vulnerability assessments, facilitating family-oriented processes (e.g., student drop-off and pick-up), and participating in response training and emergency exercises. After an emergency or traumatic event, schools can engage families in the healing process by providing guidance for supporting children exposed to trauma, assistance in continuing the teaching and learning process at home, and opportunities to participate in the physical recovery of the campus. Including families increases the likelihood of an effective and coordinated response to an emergency, enhances children's well-being, and assures families that the district and school are taking steps to protect their children.

Form Partnerships With Families in Emergency Management

Strong district and school emergency management teams represent and plan for the safety of the whole school community and all stakeholders. As task forces and working groups are developed, families should be identified and included in all planning activities. Just as law enforcement and fire personnel are experts in response, families are experts about the individual and collective needs of children. Furthermore, families can be pivotal in building buy-in for district emergency management efforts, promoting emergency management program sustainability and ensuring a coordinated response. As districts and schools empower family members to help ensure school safety, families will reinforce the message that schools are one of the safest places in the community.

Establish a Plan to Communicate With Families About Emergency Management

Communication with families is one important component of a comprehensive school emergency management plan. Schools need to develop and document meaningful communications with families before, during, and after an emergency. When creating a family communication plan, it is critical that schools account for language and

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School Emergency Card for Families

KEEP THIS IN YOUR WALLET OR CARRY AT ALL TIMES.

When a school emergency has occurred, families can get critical information and directions by doing one of the following:

✓ Call the school **emergency hotline** at 555-5555.

✓ **Check e-mail** for instant school news and alerts.

✓ Visit the school Web site at **www.yourschool.edu**.

✓ Tune to the local **television** stations, Channels 1, 2, and 3.

✓ Listen to the local radio station, KSAF.

technology barriers, recognizing that not all families have the same linguistic capabilities or access to technology. The communication plan should be developed collaboratively with partners, schools, the district, and families and approved by the district public information officer (PIO). Communication activities should focus on promoting the district's and school's programs and informing families of their roles and responsibilities. The plan should give directives for activating all communications systems, including family notification of emergencies.

Provide Emergency Management Training to Families

Families should receive training tailored to address their unique roles and responsibilities during various types of incidents, as well as actions they can take to support the four phases of emergency management.

Training should be accompanied by fact sheets that outline the key roles and responsibilities of family members in an emergency.

Together, the district, school, and partner personnel should design, conduct, and evaluate a variety of emergency exercises. Families may be invited to role-play during exercises and later provide feedback from their perspective during a debriefing. For example, if the scenario prompts a lockdown, families could make attempts to enter campus or a building, testing the incident management team's ability to secure the campus.

Gaining family perspectives on the exercise's successes, challenges, and lessons learned will enhance the impact of the exercise, after-action report, and related modifications to the general plan.

Plan for Family Reunification

Directions and announcements regarding reunification procedures should be made available in all applicable languages, using a variety of accessible methods and outlets. These include district and school Web sites, e-mail, parent association meetings, letters, community fairs, and the local media. Many districts also work with community and faith-based organizations to help deliver messages. In the event of an emergency, school staff should activate all communication measures to advise parents of the evacuation site location and reunification procedures.

Helpful Hints for Establishing a Family Communication Plan

- Create communication templates for a variety of potential threats, to be tailored in the event of an emergency;
- Have communications available in multiple formats (e.g., Internet, e-mail, press release and phone system);
- Have culturally sensitive communications prepared in all applicable languages; and
- Work with the media and community organizations to reiterate key messages and ensure successful communication with families.

Helpful Hints for Providing Family Training

The emergency management team, teachers, or school staff can create student awareness activities that provide opportunities for students and families to work together to enhance their preparedness level. For example, activities may include:

- Creating family phone trees;
- Updating emergency cards; and
- Creating lists of items needed for go-kits at home.
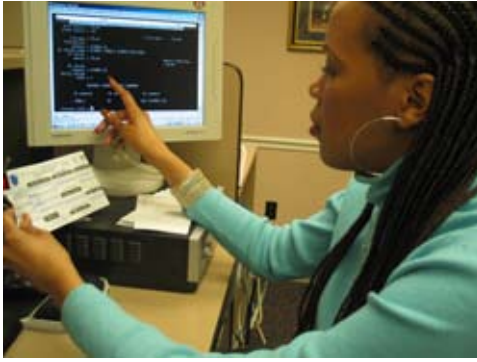
Identify Reunification Sites

Schools should plan to have a reunification site at or near the school and one at each of their evacuation locations. When selecting evacuation sites and designing the reunification site, the following must be taken into consideration:

- Assure that there is adequate road capacity leading to the site, as well as accessible ingress and egress.

- Ensure the site is accessible to people using wheelchairs.

- Prepare in advance signage that leads guardians to the reunification site(s).

- Locate the parent-guardian check-in away from the command center. This will deter disruptions to command, miscommunication, and anxiety produced by having only partial information.

- Plan to place the students away (out of sight, if possible) from the family waiting area. Otherwise, guardians may go straight to the students and bypass accountability procedures.

- Provide proper staffing to direct guardians, answer their questions, and escort them to their children. Consider using staff who know the school's families and who can remain calm during stressful situations. A leader in the family community may also be of assistance, serving as a liaison between families waiting to pick-up their children and the reunification site staff.

- Locate the student-family reunification sites away from any media staging areas.

- Provide adequate distance between the media staging area and the incident command team. The distance should allow the media to film only distance shots, thus preventing unauthorized attempts for images and maintaining student privacy. School personnel and police can limit the media's access to one designated area when the reunification site is on school grounds. This can be accomplished through signage and barriers.

Special considerations must be taken when designing reunification sites for each school. The age, size, and special needs represented in any school population will determine whether or not a site is appropriate or needs modifications. For example, high school students should be located in a secure area far away from their cars to prohibit them from leaving on their own. Schools can enhance a site location by installing

temporary or portable fences. To lessen trauma for the younger, more vulnerable elementary students, schools could use fences as barriers, blocking their exposure to injury, damage, the incident command, and the parent reunification table.

Maintain Emergency Cards and Release Forms

Schools should maintain current emergency information cards for each student. Cards should have contact information, including cell phone numbers, for parents and legal guardians, and for at least two additional emergency contacts. This information needs to be updated frequently. The legal or authorized guardian(s) must be clearly documented in order to ensure that the child is released safely in an emergency. Additionally, emergency cards should note medical issues requiring immediate attention.

Emergency cards are typically stored in a school's main office. During an emergency, school personnel will take the cards to the reunification site. Some schools also store a copy of the emergency cards in a teacher's emergency go-kit to ensure that all students are accounted for and their medical needs understood. School staff will be permitted to release a student only to the authorized individual(s) listed on the card.

Parents and guardians picking up students will be required to show proper identification and sign a release form before leaving with their child. Districts should work with

their general counsel to create release forms that protect students' safety. The form should state who is authorized to retrieve the child, the names of and information on each sibling within a family, and updated information on students' emergency contacts. Schools should be considerate of families' language needs in this area as well.

RESOURCES

FEMA Resources for Parents and Teachers

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has created a Web site tailored to meet the needs of families and teachers promoting student emergency preparedness and coping efforts. The Web site provides caregivers with safety information, a curriculum, and learning activities appropriate for the home or classroom. The site is accessible at http://www.fema.gov/kids/teacher.htm.

"Keeping Our Children Safe and Secure: Pandemic Flu and Emergency Preparedness"

The U.S. Department of Education offers a parent series called "News You Can Use" as a method for presenting important, timely information about issues affecting children's safe and healthy academic development at school. Every month a new episode is aired and each is archived. With input from a variety of federal agencies, this episode on pandemic flu and emergency preparedness offers information on infectious disease and preparing for a potential influenza and other emergencies. Originally broadcast live on Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2006, the archived webcast is available at http://www.connectlive.com/events/ednews/2005-06archive.htm.

RESOURCES (con't.)

Home Safety Council (HSC) Resources for Families

Through national programs and partners across America, the HSC works to educate and empower families to take actions that help keep them safer in and around their homes. Through its charitable and education projects, the HSC works with national safety-related organizations, home products suppliers, school systems, local fire departments, and volunteers across the country to improve home safety. Learn more by visiting http://www.homesafetycouncil.org.

A Guide for Intermediate and Long-term Mental Health Services After School-related Violent Events

The American Psychological Association offers an extensive set of resources addressing recovery issues for schools. The document highlights post-trauma reactions and behaviors and explores what to expect of typical elementary school students, middle school students, high school students, and teachers exposed to trauma. It also offers guidelines for teachers and parents seeking to help students of different ages cope with their emotions. Accessible at http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/NMH03-0151/page4.asp.

Reactions and Guidelines for Children Following Trauma/Disaster

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency's (SAMHSA) National Mental Health Information Center (NIMH) offers this brief guide. It outlines the different roles of school-based service providers, including teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and school nurses. Accessible at http://www.apa.org/practice/ptguidelines.html.

Family Readiness Kit: Preparing to Handle Disasters

The American Academy of Pediatrics presents this family guide identifying key steps families can take to prepare for emergencies, to support the social and emotional needs of children, and to ease the recovery process. Along with national and local resources, the kit provides information and tools for families in four sections: Understanding Disasters, Families as the First Resource for Preparation, Protection, and Recovery, Making Your Neighborhood Disaster-Ready, and Community and National Resources. Accessible at http://www.aap.org/family/frk/frkit.htm.