

21 Weeks to Preparedness

-by Bill and Ginny Pfohl

Getting a family ready to respond to a crisis takes planning. Many families leave children out of this preparation, mistakenly believing that they create more fear in a child by bringing up the possibility of a disaster or crisis. Children learn about disasters and crisis at school; they have fire and earthquake drills on a regular basis. These create ready opportunities to talk about a family crisis/disaster plan. Do not be afraid to bring it up, as many children are relieved to have their parents talk to them and ask for their help. The recent earthquake in Haiti also provides an opportunity to have family talk about what to do if a disaster happens in this region or to their home.

A child's response is influenced by age. All children can have an emotional reaction to a crisis. For many, it will be short and occur only during the crisis; for other, it may last longer. Children watch parent's reaction so adults need to stay calm and maintain a sense of control. Younger children frequently show their emotions through play. Older children's and teens reactions may be more mature, and they may want to talk about it. Your children are watching you to know how to react and what to do.

The American Red Cross breaks down planning into three parts: Prepare, Prevent, and Respond.

Prepare

Preparing for a possible disaster or crisis with children takes some specific planning and should cover the following issues.

- What types of emergencies are likely in your area?
- What should the child(ren) do if they are away from home?
- Whom should they call if there is an emergency? Teach children how to call 911. Put it on speed dial on all phones.
- What do the various signals mean (e.g. smoke alarm, COWS sirens, etc.) and what should children do if they hear them?
- Where should the family meet if there is a disaster or fire?
- Specific rules: never go back in to a house or building without an official's (fire, police) permission. Stay at the family's designated "safe spot" until everyone is there.
- What exits are possible? Where are safe places in a storm or earthquake?
- What do they need to bring? Children's "safety kit" packs should also include a few of their favorite toys/possessions/books/coloring books/comfort items and a favorite snack.
- What is to be done with family pets? Children become very attached to them.

- Review and practice your family crisis plan monthly.

Other issues to consider: do you need a collapsible ladder for a two-story house? Do you need food stores that can be quickly available if you were trapped in your home? Involve your child(ren) in preparation and planning, as they may have many good ideas that might not occur to you.

Prevent

Children are great observers of people and their surroundings. They can be of great assistance in helping to prevent a possible emergency. Have them go on a safety hunt: smoke detectors and fire extinguishers are good; gasoline storage, exposed electrical cords, wood-burning stoves, and unsafe smoking can create hazards. Ask children to regularly be the “safety” person and watch for hazards. Teach safety rules. Teach them the differences between a weather “warning” and “watch.”

Respond

Parents can be of great emotional support to their children during and after a disaster. Hugs are good! Children need a sense of safety and security. Talk to them, and listen to their concerns. The most common reaction is fear! If there is a loss-person, pet, place, or thing- they may be very sad or upset. They may feel guilty about what they did or did not do during a crisis. They are quite concerned whether they will happen again-fire, tornados, and earthquakes. Answer their questions as honestly as possible without scaring them more. Limit what they hear and watch on the media. Children can be frightened by what they see and hear from others. Be aware of your own emotional and physical condition and reactions. Children will be watching and listening to you. Try to maintain routines-meals, bed time, prayers, etc. can be reassuring to everyone.

In the event of a community disaster, stay informed about what to do and where to go. The Red Cross will set up shelters for those needing shelter, food, and medical care.

Whether for a single event or a community disaster, children need to be part of your planning, prevention, and response. It will help everyone’s recovery and safety.

The Red Cross has more information about children and their reactions to crisis.

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