

Preparing Your Family for Disaster



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Preparing Your Family for Disaster

When preparing your family for disaster, prepare to be on your own for at least three days. Chances are likely that after a major disaster, traditional emergency response teams will be too busy to provide immediate care to you or your family.

The Plan

- Have at least a three-day supply of food, water, clothes, medical supplies and other necessary equipment for everyone in your family.
- Decide where and when to reunite your family should you be apart when a disaster happens.
- Locate shutoff valves for water, gas, and electricity. Learn how to shut off the valves before an earthquake or other disaster.
- Choose a person outside the immediate area to contact if family members are separated. Long distance phone service will probably be restored sooner than local service. Do not use the phone immediately following a disaster.
- Keep a small amount of extra cash available. If the power is out, ATM machines will not operate.
- Keep an extra pair of eyeglasses, house keys and car keys on hand.

- If you have a family member who does not speak English, prepare an emergency card written in English indicating that person's identification, address and any special needs such as medication or allergies. Tell that person to keep the card with them at all times.
- Conduct earthquake and fire drills once every six months.
- Know the "safe spots" in each room.
- Make copies of your vital records and store them in a safe deposit box in another city or state. Make sure your originals are stored safely.
- Establish all the possible ways to exit your home. Keep all exits clear of debris.
- Know the locations of the nearest fire and police stations.
- Take photos and videotapes of your home and your valuables. Make copies and place them in a safe deposit box in another city or state.

- Make sure all family members know about your disaster plan. Also, relay this information to babysitters or others who might be in your home.
- Know the policies of the school and daycare your children attend. Make sure your child's emergency release card is up to date. Designate others to pick up your child should you be unable to pick them up.

General Tips

- Stay away from heavy furniture, appliances, large glass panes, shelves holding objects, and large decorative masonry, brick or plaster such as fireplaces.
- Keep all hallways clear. Hallways are usually one of the safest places to be in an earthquake.
- Stay away from kitchens and garages, which tend to be the most dangerous places because of the many items kept there.

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Preparing Children for Disasters

Children should be prepared for disasters just as adults should be. Involve your child in disaster preparedness activities. Remember, knowledge is power and knowing what to do in an earthquake or other disaster may save your child's life.

Infants and Toddlers

- Cribs and tall, unsecured bookcases or shelves that could slide or topple should be placed away from windows.
- Have at least a three day supply of water, formula, bottles, food, juices, clothing, disposable diapers, baby wipes and prescribed medications stored where they would most likely be accessible following an earthquake or other disaster.
- Keep a disaster kit containing the above items in your car if disaster should strike while you are on the road or away from home. Make sure to rotate the supplies to insure you don't miss an expiration date on food, formula, etc.
- Store strollers, wagons, blankets and cribs with appropriate wheels to evacuate infants, if necessary.

- Install bumper pads in cribs or bassinets to protect babies during the shaking that will occur in an earthquake.
- Install safety latches on all cupboards and overhead cabinets so that nothing can fall on your baby during an earthquake.

Preschoolers and School-age Children

- By the age of three children can understand what an earthquake is and what to do when the ground begins to shake. Take the time to explain what earthquakes are and how they feel in terms that your children will understand. Conduct drills with the entire family and review safety procedures every six months.
- Teach children what to do wherever they are during an earthquake, be it home, school, outdoors or in a tall building.

- Show children the safest places to be in each room when an earthquake hits. Also show them all possible exits from each room (including windows).
- Use sturdy tables to teach children how to "Drop, Cover and Hold."
- Make sure your child's emergency card is up to date at school.
- Although children should not turn off any utility valves, it is important that they know what gas smells like. Contact your local utility company for programs that teach children what to do in the event of a gas leak. Advise your child to always tell you if they smell gas.

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Children who experience an initial traumatic event before they are 11 years old are three times more likely to develop psychological symptoms than those who experience their first trauma at a teenager or later.

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Helping Your Child After a Disaster

It's important to remember that some children may never show distress because they don't feel upset, while others may not give evidence of being upset for several weeks or even months. Other children may not show a change in behavior, but may still need your help. But children are able to cope better with a traumatic event if parents, friends, family, teachers and other adults support and help them with their experience. Help should start as soon as possible after the event.

Children may exhibit the following behaviors after a disaster:

- Be upset over the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, etc., which are important to them.
- Change from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive, or may change from being outgoing to shy and afraid.
- Develop nighttime fears, (nightmares, fear the dark or sleeping alone).
- Be afraid the event will reoccur.
- Become easily upset, crying and whining.
- Lose trust in adults. After all, their adults were not able to control the disaster.
- Revert to younger behavior (bed wetting, thumb sucking).
- Not want parents out of their sight. Refuse to go to school or day care.

- Feel guilty they caused the disaster because of something they said or did.
- Become afraid of wind, rain or sudden loud noises.
- Have symptoms of illness, such as headaches, vomiting or fever.
- Worry about where they and their family will live.

Things parents can do to help their children:

- Talk with the children about how they are feeling. Assure them that it's OK to have those feelings.
- Help the children learn to use words that express their feelings, such as happy, sad, angry, etc.
- Assure fearful children you will be there to care for them, reassure over and over.
- Go back to former routines as soon as possible. Maintain a regular schedule for the children.
- Reassure the children that the disaster was not their fault.
- Let the children have some control, such as choosing clothing or what meal to have for dinner.
- Re-establish contact with extended family.
- Help your children learn to trust adults again by keeping promises you make.
- Help your children regain faith in the future by making plans or the future.
- Get needed health care as soon as possible.
- Spend extra time with the children at bedtime.

- Make sure the children eat healthy meals and get enough rest.
- Allow special privileges, such as leaving the light on when they go to bed for a short period of time.
- Children should not be expected to be brave or tough, or to "not cry."
- Don't give children more information than they can handle about the disaster.
- Find ways to emphasize to the children that you love them.
- Allow the children time to grieve losses.
- Develop positive anniversary activities to commemorate the event. These may bring tears, but they are also a time to celebrate survival and the ability to get back to a normal life.