

Ready or Not: Emergency Considerations for Children and Families

UC ANR emergency information and resources—before, during, and after

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Family preparedness

Parents and guardians strive to provide their children with physical and emotional security. One of the most important things a parent or guardian can do is **talk** about the importance of preparing for possible disasters and emergencies where you live and where you travel.

The time spent talking about family preparedness and emergency response will be worthwhile if the family experiences a wildfire, house fire, earthquake, or other emergency. Involving children in the planning process and assigning them age-appropriate responsibilities will help them feel less vulnerable and more confident.

The stress of an emergency situation is magnified by having young children or other family members who need your help and care. While people do not want to find themselves or their

children in an emergency, planning and preparing can help families navigate the situation safely and can also help reduce stress during an emergency. Remaining as calm as possible helps you to better handle the emotional and physical needs of the entire family. Following familiar routines whenever possible can also be helpful, such as telling a bedtime story to a child even if the setting is different.

It is important that your children are instructed about emergency preparedness as you develop your family emergency plan. Make sure your plan is tailored to the ages of your children. Particularly for young children, discuss the plan with them ahead of time and practice the plan helps to reduce fear. Children should

- actively participate in preparing for possible emergencies
- be trained to call 911 as early as possible



- have individual responsibilities appropriate to the child's age and abilities, such as putting on walking shoes and going to a designated meeting space

Parents and guardians should talk with their children about the importance of following instructions in the event of an emergency. Review your family's emergency plan often and make sure the children understand the arrangements and are able to follow them even if they are alone. Use the following guidance to increase children's level of readiness:

- teach children how to recognize danger
- make sure children know what alarm and warning systems sound like
- have children memorize their family name, address, and telephone number, may be a parent's cell phone number, or provide children who can't memorize the information with a small index card that includes the information

Psychological first aid

Children depend on daily routines to provide stability in their lives. When emergencies or disasters disrupt the normal routine, children may become anxious. Younger children may regress in their behaviors, which is a normal response.

In a disaster, children look to parents and other adults for help. How you react in an emergency gives them clues about how to act. If you react fearfully, a child may become even more alarmed. Children see our fear as proof that danger is real.

Children's fears also may stem from their imaginations. Regardless, you should take children seriously when they are feeling afraid. Parents and other adults

need to use words and actions that provide reassurance to the child.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural for adults and children. As an adult, you need to provide stability in the situation. When you are sure that the immediate danger has passed, concentrate on your children's emotional needs by asking the children to explain what is troubling them. Your response during this stressful time may have a lasting impact.

Parents, guardians, other caretakers, and teachers should become aware of potential signs of mental stress in children after a disaster. Children may experience anxiety, fear, sadness, sleep disruption, distressing dreams, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and anger outbursts. The children may fear the following:

- The event will happen again.
- Someone will be injured or killed.
- They will be separated from their families.
- They will be left alone or experience some other terrifying situation.



Parents' and guardians' response in the aftermath of an emergency may affect how the child recovers from the traumatic experience. Pay special attention to the child's physical and emotional needs for comfort and assurance that they are safe and need not be afraid, using the following guidance:

- Listen to what the child says about what has happened. Don't interrupt, correct, or show impatience. Allow the child to share their thoughts, feelings, and fears.
- Be decisive and calm but firm. Following a traumatic experience, the child may perceive the adult differently due to the stress of the situation. Try to avoid letting your own concerns, like the added responsibility of cleanup, cost of repairing the damage, temporary displacement, or maybe job losses or related issues, interfere with your relationship with your child.
- Talk calmly with a child no matter how upset you or the child may be. Bend down or pick the child up so that you are at their eye level and are not forcing them to look up. Hug or physically comfort a child if the child is receptive. Reassure your children that they will not be left alone and, as their parent or guardian, you will do everything you can to protect them.
- Try to explain what has happened and what may happen later, such as aftershocks or moving to another location. Don't exaggerate or make promises that you will not be able to keep.

Basic emergency skills for children

Begin to teach the use of the 911 emergency number around the age of two. Start by making a simple card or small chart that illustrates the numerals 911. Explain that this number must only be used in times of emergency. Help children locate the matching numbers on the phone they are most likely to use.



Many households now rely on cell phones as their primary phone, but families with young children may consider keeping a landline that can be used in the event of emergencies. If no landline is available, make sure to teach children how to access the emergency call feature on household cell phones. The emergency call feature varies by type of phone, but all newer cell phones can dial 911 without being unlocked. Also consider keeping at least one cell phone charged and in a designated location in the house so that it is easy to locate in the event of an emergency. An older cell phone that is no longer in service can typically still be used for emergency calls only, if it is kept charged.



Did you know?

During pregnancy and while parenting an infant, it's common to worry about the safety of your baby. Do your best to minimize your own stress during an emergency and understand that babies are resilient. Know that you are doing your best for your baby by planning, preparing, and calmly following your plans.

Children should be taught their full names, ages, and a parent or guardian's phone number. As skills develop, add all parents' or guardians' full names and phone numbers and the family's home address to the list of memorized items.

Review basic safety rules with children, starting as soon as they are mobile. Role-plays are often the best way to do this. Families can practice escaping from imagined disaster situations, such as fallen electric lines, smoke alarms sounding, earthquakes, or natural gas leaks.

Children should also be taught to identify danger signals such as the smell of smoke, the smell of

natural gas, the movement of an earthquake, and the sound of smoke and carbon monoxide alarms. They should also be taught what to do when they detect a danger signal, which will usually be to find a parent or guardian. Only in a fire or other imminent danger should a child be taught to escape FIRST and then to seek assistance. Designate a safe family meeting place outside the home in case there is not time to seek assistance inside, such as the home's mailbox, the lobby or office of an apartment building, or a trusted neighbor's porch.

Work together to assemble emergency kits. These kits can be made for the family, for school, for work, or for vehicles. Don't forget to pack games, puzzles, and books to help pass the time if you must leave home for another shelter. As you prepare the kit, discuss the purpose and use of each item. For more information on creating an emergency kit for your family, refer to Issue 1: Planning for an Emergency.

As children mature, help them to increase their emergency preparedness skills. For example, teach them how and when to turn off the utilities and how to use your home's fire extinguisher.

Considerations for pregnancy, breastfeeding, and infant care

The stress of an emergency situation is not what any family wants while anyone is pregnant or caring for an infant. Remaining calm and reducing stress as much as possible is one way to help your baby during an emergency. Consider what items you may need to add to your emergency kit, including items that make you more comfortable during pregnancy or postpartum. Such items might include a hand pump if breastfeeding, infant formula if formula feeding, baby food, diapers, and wipes.

A breastfeeding parent and child have the advantage of being able to feed anywhere and at any time. However, disruptions may occur when the baby is not comfortable breastfeeding or when the parent is not able to breastfeed. Offering to breastfeed frequently and consciously making time to continue the breastfeeding relationship may help to prevent these difficulties.

Stress and breastfeeding less than usual can contribute to the development of mastitis, a painful infection of the breast. If you are not able to breastfeed as often as usual or are separated from your baby for a period longer than the regular feeding cycle, use a breast pump to express milk. The regularity

of the feeding varies with the age of the infant from about every 2 hours for a newborn, 3 or more hours for a 3-month old, or about 4 hours at 6 months old. Anyone who suspects mastitis should consult with a health care provider as soon as possible, express milk as regularly as possible, and rest. Even if exclusively breastfeeding, parents should make sure to include a hand pump that does not rely on electricity in their emergency kit.

For families feeding infant formula or combination feeding, remember to include infant formula in your emergency kit, the measuring cups and potable water needed to prepare the formula, and enough bottles to last for a day in case they are not easily cleaned. Alternately, consider including ready-to-feed liquid formula. Develop a rotation system to ensure that the formula in your emergency kit does not expire, as expired formula should not be fed to an infant.

For older infants who have started eating solid food, and for toddlers and children with special dietary needs who may not eat the same foods as adults, be sure to include some foods you know they will eat in your emergency kit.

After the emergency: time for recovery

You may be anxious to get back into your home if you evacuated and may be worried about the possible damage to the building and your belongings. But the recovery of your family physically and emotionally is of utmost importance.

Reassure and comfort. Immediately after the emergency situation, engage in psychological first aid. Try to reduce your children's fear and anxiety in an age-appropriate way. This may include talking with them, providing hugs, singing, or otherwise engaging in actions with which your children are familiar and comfortable.

Keep the family together. While you look for housing and assistance, it may be easier to leave your children with relatives or friends. However, keeping the family together as much as possible will be reassuring to children.

Encourage children to express themselves. Let verbal children talk about the disaster as much as they want. Encourage them to share their feelings. Listen to what they are saying. If possible, make some time for the whole family to be present during this sharing time. Nonverbal children may want to draw pictures or otherwise express their feelings as they are able.

Include children in recovery activities. Give children tasks that are their responsibility. This will help children feel that they are contributing to the recovery. Having a task will help them understand that they can take actions to help things return to normal.

For more information

Your county UC Cooperative Extension office may be able to advise you on preparing your family for emergency situations. Remember that being prepared will speed up the recovery process.

Other resources for family preparedness include

- [redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/emergency-preparedness-for-kids.html](https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/emergency-preparedness-for-kids.html)
- [ready.gov/kids](https://www.ready.gov/kids)
- [extensiondisaster.net/hazard-resources/family-health/children-and-disasters](https://www.extensiondisaster.net/hazard-resources/family-health/children-and-disasters)

For information on infant feeding in disaster situations, consult [cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/features/disasters-infant-feeding](https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/features/disasters-infant-feeding).

For mental-health first aid and suicide prevention, the following resources are available:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 24/7: call 1-800-273-8255
- Crisis Text Line 24/7: text 741-741 to connect with a trained crisis counselor
- Lifeline Chat, [suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat), which connects individuals with counselors for emotional support and other services via web chat 24/7
- California Youth Crisis Line (youth can call or text 24/7): 1-800-843-5200

About this publication

The Ready or Not Emergency Preparedness Newsletter Series is a resource for individuals and families. Each newsletter addresses a specific topic on how to prepare for a disaster. The series includes the following issues: 1: Planning for an Emergency; 2: Safety Considerations; 3: Food and Water; 4: Emergency Considerations for Children and Families; 5: Finances and Insurance; and 6: Time to Clean Up.

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