

PREPARING CHILDREN WITHOUT FEAR

HOW TO HAVE OPEN AND HONEST FAMILY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS



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INTRODUCTION



It seems like nowadays the most consequential "kitchen-table" discussions revolve around Wi-Fi passwords and food-delivery services. This is in stark contrast to important family discussions from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. During those times, discussions and training for families and kids in school focused on "Duck and Cover" drills. The purpose was to prevent being hit in the head by falling ceiling tiles during a nuclear blast. While a falling ceiling tile might be the least of your worries during a nuclear attack, families and the public were more open to discussing **emergency preparedness**.

Today, with concerns like cyberbullying, school shootings, and other acts of violence, it's more important than ever to keep these discussions in our daily lives. So, how do you start a talk with children about topics that may be uncomfortable? It's likely simpler than you'd think. Here is a friendly, step-by-step guide on how to get started with crucial conversations with children about **safety and security** in several creative ways.

These open and honest conversations about important topics, even (and perhaps especially) the difficult ones, are crucial for children's healthy development, fostering trust, promoting resilience, and equipping them with the skills to navigate the complexities of life.

STEP 1: SET THE STAGE BY REASSURING CHILDREN THEY ARE SAFE

When discussing safety with kids, let them know that you and other adults are there to protect them. Include talks about the “safe” adults in their lives, such as teachers, administrators, coaches, family members, faith leaders, and neighbors. It is important to clearly understand who a trusted adult is and convey that to them. Reassure them that these individuals are the ones you chose specifically to be there when you can’t be there to protect them.

- » Consider teachers and school staff support
- » Reassure safety for younger kids - not everyone is included in “stranger danger”

Watch for cues when children want to talk about their feelings or observations. Validate their emotions and concerns.

Be sure to discuss the importance of information sharing and how it may not always be what it seems, but it is essential to learn that it is okay to be mistaken.

Remember to reward correct and consistent communication while gently adjusting misinterpreted facts.

- » Confidence & Resilience



STEP 2: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE



Children grow up quickly. When we talk to our children about emergency preparedness, we need to take into consideration their mental, emotional, and physical capabilities. In other words, a kindergartener and a high school senior are at drastically different levels. Ensure you are having age-appropriate discussions and setting realistic expectations. For example, you may be able to talk to your teenager about how to use a window as a secondary exit or how to defend themselves with an improvised weapon. However, when talking to your 5-year-old child, you may need to focus on how to stay quiet during an emergency while following the instructions of a trusted adult.

WHEN AND HOW TO START?

- » **Family conversation time.**
- » **Keep childhood light while being prepared.**

A good topic for most children, regardless of their age group, is having the courage to speak up when they know about someone planning or doing something unsafe. According to the National Institute of Justice, nearly half of all people who engaged in a mass shooting told their plans to others prior to their actions (National Institute of Justice, 2022). We know these are not topics to joke about, so it is better to err on the side of caution than to "hope for the best." If they do not know, remind them and yourself, "hope is not a strategy."



Other sources, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), suggest the number may be as high as 80-90% of attackers discuss their plans with others before they act (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2023). Unfortunately, not everyone who had knowledge of planned violence reported what they knew to the authorities. It is common for children to feel pressure not to "tattle" or be a "snitch." Discuss reporting concerning behavior or conversations to trusted adults, either anonymously or directly, so they can determine if information may prevent potential harm. We should explain the importance of prevention to our children and reinforce the idea that reporting concerning behavior and red flags is a brave thing to do.

Discuss the importance of observations or conversations mentioning guns and other weapons, such as knives, in a school setting, to include a bus, the playground, in backpacks and lockers, and all areas of the school site. Notifications should be made to school staff, administrators, and campus security/school resource officers immediately and without hesitation. If anyone, but specifically a child for the point of this reference, comes in contact with a firearm, stay away from it and seek help immediately. If possible, scream for help and have an adult or appropriate authority take possession. These simple reminders are paramount in today's environment.

- » **Immediate action** (e.g., see a weapon, immediately tell an adult)
- » **Speak up / report**
- » **"Don't wait, notify right away"**

STEP 3: BE OBSERVANT / NOTICE BEHAVIORS



Share the meaning and importance of situational awareness. Have a discussion of what is normal (baseline) and what appears or feels different. If there is a change from what is normal, advise them to trust their senses and look for options to remove themselves from the area. If there is a potential source of danger, there are ways to position themselves to protect themselves. Discuss creating distance between them and a person of concern. Observe if the person of concern has a weapon in their hands. Explain the concepts of cover and concealment.

Remind them of their pre-identified points of ingress and egress, look to see if those routes are clear, and if possible, move towards an exit or pathway to a safer area.

» Trust-building

Discuss the importance of talking to a trusted adult if something “doesn’t feel right” or makes them uneasy. This is the first step to recognizing and understanding the power of intuition.

» Active listening

It is easy to make ‘I spy’ games fit for improving situational awareness. For example, “I spy a fire extinguisher,” or “I spy a back door.” The bonus here is that they help improve YOUR situational awareness at the same time!

» Scavenger Hunt



STEP 4: HAVE A PLAN



Jumping into a conversation about active shooter scenarios will likely make children uncomfortable. Try easing into emergency preparedness conversations with them by starting with familiar topics like fire safety, tornadoes, or earthquakes. Ask them about their last emergency drill at school and what they liked or disliked about it.

EMERGENCY EQUIPMENT LIKE FIRE EXTINGUISHERS

Once you get into the conversation, you can shift into other important topics like active shooter prevention and response. For example, talk about the importance of knowing where multiple exits are, what a safe corner is, the importance of moving quickly, and why understanding cover and concealment are vital if shots are being fired.

COVER SHOULD STOP A BULLET, WHILE CONCEALMENT WILL HIDE YOU FROM AN ASSAILANT

When you go to a restaurant or a movie with your family, get in the practice of identifying alternate exits before you sit down and have them do the same. Once seated, ask them to tell you how many different exits they identified. Explain that there may be times when the best exit for an emergency may not be the way they entered.

Waiting until there is an emergency to search for alternate exits is not a good strategy. When you are at the mall, teach your children that most stores have their own exits, and depending on the type of emergency, they may not want to run back to the main entrance of the building.

PLAYGROUND SCENARIO PRACTICE

Don't be afraid to quiz your children. When your teenager asks for permission to go to the mall with friends, ask probing and quizzical questions: "What would you do if...?" For example, what would you do if someone pointed a gun at you and told you to get into their car? You may consider screaming and yelling to alert others while running away. Remind them that nothing good will happen by getting in a car with a stranger, so that is the place to make their escape.



STEP 5: STAY CONNECTED



Many kids in the United States receive their first cell phone by the age of 11. Phones are an excellent way for parents to contact their children and monitor their whereabouts. You may create a favorites list on their phone so they can immediately dial or text if necessary. However, it is important to plan for contingencies.

- » Cellphones and connectivity
- » No phone? Have a backup plan

What if a child's phone breaks, gets lost, or is taken away? Even as adults, we often have trouble memorizing important phone numbers because we have become overly reliant on our smartphones. Consider laminating a list of emergency contact numbers for your child and showing them where it is in their backpack, or having them put it in their pocket. A child may be overwhelmed following a traumatic incident, and having access to a list of emergency contacts may be helpful.

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) continues to accelerate. Unfortunately, criminals have used AI to extort money from tricking individuals into thinking their loved ones are in trouble. This can also be used against children who may think they are receiving a legitimate phone call or text message from their parents. One best practice is to develop family codewords that can be used in conversations to help authenticate if the message is from the real person.

- » Secure info / code words
- » Deepfakes / AI risks

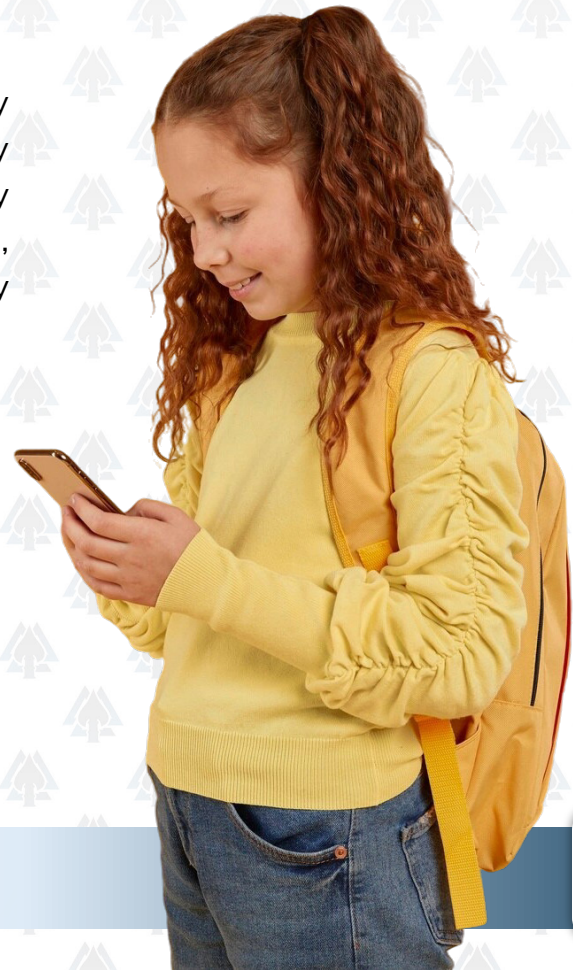
If your child receives a suspicious text or phone call, tell them to ask questions that a random person would not know, such as a previous pet's favorite food. Talk to your children about AI-related topics like deepfake videos, voice cloning, and, when age-appropriate, "sextortion." Remind your children that no matter how devastating a threat may seem, they should always choose to tell a trusted adult when something is wrong, and they will help them get through it.

When at venues such as the mall, a sporting event, or an amusement park, be sure to have a plan in place in case you get separated. Tell your children that if you do get separated, they should stay where they are and ask an employee to stand with them. If your child doesn't have a phone, they could ask the employee to call you using the emergency contact numbers you had them put in their bag or pocket earlier in the day.

- » Emergency contact sheet

Depending on the type of emergency, it may not be practical or safe for the child to stay where they are. Therefore, it is best to identify a family rally point, such as under a large sign, near a statue, or at the end of a security checkpoint, where you can reunite.

- » Have a rally point or plan



STEP 6: BE CREATIVE



There are several ways to make emergency preparedness more enjoyable, especially for younger children. For example, scavenger hunts can be fun. Try making a list of things to find like fire extinguishers, first aid kits, emergency phone numbers, and emergency exits. You can also include a riddle leading your children to a designated rally point.

This exercise can be done at home, church, or school, and will help kids familiarize themselves with the locations of emergency equipment, etc. Next, even if you have phone numbers written down, they could still get lost. Try incorporating your phone number into a catchy jingle that you can teach your young children to sing.

PHONE NUMBER JINGLES

We recently asked a 20-year-old college student how she remembered her phone number when she was a child. Her answer was simple; she replied "the phone number song" her parents taught her at five years old.

MNEMONICS

Another helpful strategy is using mnemonic devices to remember things like license plates when you do not have something to write on. Try teaching your children how to use the numbers and letters in a license plate to make up a quick story that may help them recall it later. For example, the license plate “213 JCP” could be remembered as, “213 JC Penney” or “Two 13-year-olds Jumped in the Cold Pool.” Also, teach your children how to take a “mental snapshot” of what the vehicle and the person look like.



- » Story-based memory tricks
- » Mental snapshot

Not everyone can look at a car and tell you what the make and model is. However, taking a moment to visualize specific details like the color of the vehicle, how many doors it had, and unique features like tinted windows, bumper stickers, rust, or dents may be extremely helpful to the police. The next time you are driving with your child, point out a license plate and ask your child to help you figure out a way to remember it using a mnemonic device as practice.

MAKE IT FUN AND INTERACTIVE

Depending on their age, taking a free ‘Stop the Bleed’ course may be appropriate, but for younger children, the “Scouts” (Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts) first aid concept of ‘hurry cases’ may be a better place to start. Hurry cases are choking, not breathing, bleeding badly, and poisoning.

Look at your home and car first aid kits and see if your family has more than basic bandages!

- » Immediate action



A FINAL WORD



All of us share a specific trait that relates to this guide. If you do not practice something in your head, you won't know how to do it when the time comes. You must visualize your action(s) before your body knows what to do, especially in an emergency. Having open discussions about safety and preparation isn't just about following rules. It is about building trust and confidence. Like the friendly characters in their favorite TV shows, your children look to you for guidance and encouragement.

Work with your family to strengthen teamwork and utilize your critical thinking skills to make a plan. Our children need to know they are loved, protected, and ready to take on the world. Your family's safety begins with a simple conversation. Let's kick that off today and stay on the path to Destination #NEVERHERE.

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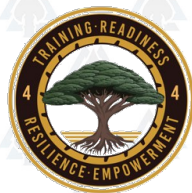
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