



Advocates for Children of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn

Preparing Students with Disabilities for Emergencies at School

Preparing all students for emergencies is important, but it is especially so for students with disabilities. Under federal law, schools must create emergency plans for students with disabilities.

There are three types of school emergencies to prepare for:

1. LOCKDOWN — when there is a safety threat *inside* the school building.
2. SHELTER-IN-PLACE — when the safety threat is *outside* the building.
3. EVACUATION — when everyone needs to *leave* the building for safety reasons inside or outside the school building.

Plans for schools and individual students will be different for each type of emergency. Emergencies are scary, but preparing for them ahead of time and practicing what to do in emergencies can help students manage their fears when real threats occur.

How can you help your child with a disability prepare for possible emergencies at school?

We recommend you take the following steps at home to help your child prepare for emergencies:

- Think about how your student's disability might affect their ability to follow directions during drills and real emergencies. For example:
 - Will loud bells cause sensory issues?
 - What happens if the elevator is out of service and your student has mobility needs?
 - What's the plan for sharing real-time instructions with students with hearing impairments?
- Talk about emergencies with your child at home and what they can expect during an emergency. Some things to keep in mind for those conversations:
 - Speak calmly and work hard to keep your own anxiety in check while talking to your child.
 - Listen to any fears or anxieties your child expresses and answer them as clearly as possible.

- Practice at home with your student the steps they will need to take in school in emergencies. For example:
 - Have your child practice keeping quiet for long periods of time.
 - Figure out if there's something they can rely on for comfort during a scare.
 - Play games that give them practice following directions.
- If possible, have your child meet with emergency personnel (local fire fighters and police officers) ahead of any emergency.

What can school staff do to keep your child with a disability safe during an emergency?

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) can include specific information about how school staff should manage your student's emotional and physical needs during drills, lockdowns, sheltering-in-place, and evacuations. Talk about emergency planning with your child's IEP team. You can do this at your annual review or ask for a special meeting to discuss school safety plans and your child. At that meeting:

- Ask how plans will be similar or different for emergencies that lead to lockdowns, sheltering in place, and evacuations.
- Find out who at the school is responsible for keeping your child safe during an emergency.
- Ask how the school plans to notify and update parents if there is an emergency. For example, how will you find out where to pick up your child after an evacuation?
- If your child's disability requires medication, discuss with school staff how they'll make sure your child has medication they'll need available in the case of an emergency.
- If your child uses a wheelchair or is not able to leave the building on their own because of physical needs, ask how they will safely exit the building during an evacuation. How will emergency personnel know where to find them to provide help?
- Ask questions about your student's specific disabilities. For example, if your student is on the autism spectrum, how will school staff keep them calm during an emergency? How will emergency personnel know which students have emotional needs to be aware of?

TIP:
Check with your school to make sure they have up-to-date contact information on file (the "Blue Card") so they can reach you or another trusted adult in case of an emergency.

Make sure your child understands, to the best of their ability, the different actions that their school will take to keep them safe during an emergency and what drills will involve. Remember to practice at home, too, if you think your child will need extra time to get used to all you and the rest of the team have put in place at school.

This tip sheet is not legal advice. If you have a legal problem, please contact an attorney or advocate.

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