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National Preparedness Month – September 2007:

KEEPIN' IT REAL:

Talking with Kids about Emergency Preparedness

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

When it comes to planning for emergencies, it is extremely important to make sure that those around you are also prepared—especially children. Although some adults find disaster readiness a difficult topic to discuss with children, it is essential that preparedness information be presented in a direct, honest manner. When children are made aware of an emergency plan, they will be able to face an emergency situation in a calmer, more capable manner. It is important to have several plans in place to respond to different types of emergencies, and to make certain that children are familiar with each plan. Key elements of any school or home emergency plan should include: what to do, where to meet, who to call, and how to communicate.

How to Involve Children in Emergency Planning

1. **Keep kids involved.** Never assume that an adult will be present during an emergency situation; include children in emergency planning so that they know what will be expected of them. Children should be taught *exactly* where to go, what to do, and how to communicate during a crisis. Emergency plans should be reviewed with children on a regular basis to make sure that they won't forget any information.

2. **Ask for their input.** If children help to create a plan, they will be more likely to remember it when the time comes to implement it. Parents may want to quiz their children by asking, "Where in town is a good place for us to meet if there is ever a crisis? Do you know how to get there by yourself?" or "Who is a the best relative or other person to call outside of

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this area if we cannot communicate with each other? Do you have their phone number memorized?” Be sure to make practice visits to your family meeting place, and practice calls to your emergency contact relatives, so children will feel comfortable doing so when the time comes.

3. Supply Kit Game. Making an emergency supply kit can be a fun game for kids! First, have children make a list of what they think might be needed in an emergency. Compare it with a published list, such as the one on The Department of Homeland Security’s “Ready Kids” website (http://www.ready.gov/kids/_downloads/familylist.pdf). Then, have a scavenger hunt to search the home or classroom for the items that are needed. Make sure to purchase any items that you do not already own for the home or classroom!

4. Go Online. There are great resources on the Internet that can help parents and teachers make learning about emergency preparedness fun for kids. Websites such as Ready Kids (see above) and FEMA for Kids (<http://www.fema.gov/kids/>) are perfect for engaging kids in disaster preparedness. They provide stories and information about emergencies written in a kid-friendly way, and have games that will help kids remember what to do in an emergency. Kids enjoy websites like these and will have fun learning information that could save their lives!

The Aftermath

No one is ever *completely* prepared to experience a crisis situation. Emergencies can strike unexpectedly. They are frightening and often can take an emotional toll on a child. Individuals react to trauma in different ways, and some children will need extra time and attention to allow them to cope with the memories and feelings connected to a distressing experience.

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After an emergency has passed and once everyone involved is safe, it is important to talk with young people about what occurred and help them come to terms with its effects. Children may act out in ways that can confuse parents and teachers, but it is important to remember that patience is essential in helping children recover from an emergency.

Common Reactions– And How to Deal With Them

1. **Regression to earlier behavioral stages.** Children may experience fear and insecurity, resulting in a lack of independent behavior. It is not uncommon for children to regress to thumbsucking, bedwetting or clinging to their parents. They may become afraid to be left alone in places they once were comfortable in, such as school, their own room at bedtime, or the homes of friends. While you cannot allow children to succumb to these behaviors completely, you must be patient and give them time to adjust. Try to compromise and reassure your child that he or she is safe.
2. **Lowered performance in school.** Children and teens alike may experience a lack of interest in schoolwork and after-school activities. They may become disruptive and even resistant to authority in school and at home. Parents and teachers can encourage kids to talk and let them release some of the pent-up stress linked to the event, but sometimes, professional assistance may be needed.
3. **Constant talk about the event, or fear that it will happen again.** This reaction is common among young children, who may be confused about the crisis that they experienced. It is important to be honest with children about what happened and why. Then, reassure them about what preparedness actions are being taken to prevent this type of crisis from happening again. If children make up or exaggerate stories of what they experienced, gently remind them of the facts.

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4. **Helplessness and Guilt.** This reaction is often experienced by teens and older children, who realize that the effects of the disaster reach far beyond their personal experience. They may want to do something to help, and parents should encourage this on a small scale. Taking on too much responsibility may put more stress on teens, but helping out by donating a reasonable amount of time, food, clothing, or toys may be enough to make them feel as if they have done their part.

Preparing children for emergencies and helping them cope with the aftermath are difficult but crucial tasks. Patience and reassurance can be invaluable tools in carrying them out. The National Mental Health Information Center maintains a website with tips for parents and teachers about talking to children after a disaster. Visit <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/KEN-01-0093/default.asp>.

Resource 2 – Schools: Kid-Friendly Preparedness Websites

Ready Kids

<http://www.ready.gov/kids/home.html>

The Ready Kids website is a tool to help parents and teachers educate children in grades 4-5 about emergencies and how they can help get their family prepared. Ready Kids is part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's campaign to educate and empower Americans to prepare themselves for an emergency. The website features age-appropriate, step-by-step instructions on what families can do to become better prepared and discusses the role kids can play in this effort.

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FEMA For Kids

<http://www.fema.gov/kids/>

The Federal Emergency Management Agency created this online resource for children to teach them about disaster preparedness. The website includes preparedness related games and stories for children and safety information for teachers and parents.

TOMORROW: Day 3 – School Violence

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Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com.**