

Tip Sheets

Fire Safety in Child Care: Special Considerations for Children with Disabilities

A commitment to fire safety through policy and procedure is the foundation for fire prevention.

Fire safety in child care programs involves awareness, education, practice, and making accommodations. Knowledge of each child's individual needs is essential to ensuring their safety in the event of a fire evacuation. With a few adaptations in place, intentional fire safety (rather than fire technology) is the most effective way to reduce risks of fire for individuals with disabilities.

All early care and education programs should have a written fire safety and evacuation policy that is reviewed periodically with all staff—including new staff upon orientation. Parents should also have access to the written policy on fire safety.

Children with disabilities have an increased vulnerability to fire-related incidents given their physical and/or cognitive limitations. Fire safety curriculum *must* be tailored to their needs. Knowing the child's history, age, special education services, mental health services, and program plans will help you prepare the most effective way to talk about fire safety.

Fire drills and evacuation plans—which will help children and adults be better equipped should an evacuation become necessary—need to be set up to ensure safety and instill a feeling of security. As with curriculum planning, you must know the health history of each child and what challenges might be presented due to the disability in the event of a fire evacuation.

Begin age-appropriate fire safety talks early.

Discussions about fire should be important and serious. Large group is a good time to present this information. Sharing a little each day is a great way to reinforce the concepts for children.

There are many creative ways to discuss fire safety, such as activities, books, and having someone from local fire department come to the program. Dramatic play is also a wonderful way for young children to process any concerns they may have.

Visual Supports

For children with and without special needs, visual supports (books, posters, videos) are an important teaching tool. A visual evacuation plan will be easier for all children to understand. Show them where to start and finish (the meeting place), to never go back inside the building, and explain why.

Children who have autism, ADHD, or a disability for which change in routine can be challenging will benefit from visuals that use words and pictures to show the steps to follow. Children with visual or hearing impairments, however, will need adaptations in communication for effective safety education and evacuation. Adaptions could include a variety of visuals, such as tape or footprints on the floor, a larger print book, or increasing the font on posters.

Considerations for Children with Visual or Hearing Impairments

- Install strobe alarms so children with a hearing impairment are alerted by a pulsating light.
- Include Braille or tactile signage throughout the building for a child with visual disabilities.

- Use sign language to communicate with those who have a hearing impairment that the fire alarm is sounding and evacuation is needed.

Considerations for Children with Mobility Limitations

Each child with a physical disability is unique. Work with the child's occupational and/or physical therapist to learn how to best move the child in an emergency. Other considerations may include:

- Which exit has the ramp needed and how access is incorporated into the evacuation plan.
 - Make sure there is an accessible exit which is barrier free at all times.
- Practice putting out a fire in their lap with a blanket or dropping from their mobility device to "stop, drop, and roll" then stay low in smoke. Support the child and reassure them there will be an adult to help them if necessary.
- Being aware of children in the program who may have a temporary need for assistance (such as crutches for a broken leg) or who may have gotten ill during the day and have mobility challenges just on this particular day.

Develop a daily check-in plan, make note each day if any children have a new physical challenge, and assign an adult daily to any child who has mobility limitations. This individual should stay with the child/children through each drill and evacuation to ensure all children are able to exit the building, whether independently or with assistance.

Specialized Adult Assistance

Any child in the program with a disability—whether physical and/or cognitive—will need an adult assigned to them to help get them out of the building during a drill or evacuation.

Part of the practice for a fire evacuation should include the adult's approach to a child who is

visually impaired so they will not panic. Consider using and practicing an approach signal.

In some programs the adult might differ from day to day. In this case, the adult should let the child know that they are their support person for the day. They do not need to say anything about a fire but should greet the child on arrival saying "I'm your helper today" to provide a sense of security.

If a child will need specialized adult assistance when evacuating due to fire, it is important to educate all professionals working with the child in the unique needs and correct handling of all children to ensure timely and safe evacuation.

Crosschecking numbers often throughout the evacuation will help to ensure that no one is left behind. Being proactive and preparing ahead of time will go far in ensuring safety for all children.

Considerations for Children with Emotional and/or Behavioral Challenges

Children with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, learning disabilities, and/or anxiety disorder may have difficulty learning about fire safety, drills, and evacuation. Even if a child does not have a specific diagnosis, they may struggle with transition, fearfulness, impulsivity, or intractability.

Take care to present information about fire in a way that does not scare children. A child who is afraid may stop listening. Depending on their age and developmental needs, children may need to talk about any worries/fears they may have about a fire or leaving the building in an emergency.

- Talk to children with disabilities about what they can expect to happen before a drill and reassure their sense of safety and security.
- A child who is anxious may need reassurances such as sitting near an adult while reading

about fire and/or positive teacher talk including "you are safe here; my job is to keep you safe."

- It may be more productive to talk one-on-one with a child who is often anxious about change.
- Be attentive in the moment to children who may react with anxiety to intervene quickly and ensure a sense of safety and security.
- You may need to expand your discussion about fire safety to include other types of safety—such as bicycle safety—in order to provide a broader sense of what it means to be safe.
- Build on a child's natural interest areas to encourage safety (ex. What do firefighters do?).

Reassure children that the most important thing for them to do is to follow the plan that they have practiced. Consider a facilitated group discussion in which children are able to voice concerns. If children do not have all the words for their fears due to their development or speech/language abilities, provide children with words to help them express their feelings.

Additional Tips for Easing the Transition of a Fire Drill or Evacuation

Having a fire drill or an evacuation is a major change for children who do not adapt well to changes in their routines. Be proactive in your preparation. It may help transitions to:

- Plan for a toy or comfort items to be kept by the door to be given to the child when making transitions, especially when upset.
- Have consistent cues (hand signal and/or an appealing visual that displays a picture, color, or phrase) in place that signal a fire drill. Practice the cue often so it is seen by the child as a less fearful event.
- Include planned fire drills within a child's and/or classroom's daily visual schedule.
- Attend closely to a child who tends to react quickly without thinking, run away, or become

agitated. This can help mitigate circumstances that might escalate behaviors. For example, if you knowing ahead of time that a child may react by running out of the room, you can make sure you're near the child before the alarm is sounded (when possible, or get to the child's side as soon as an evacuation begins).

If the drill has been practiced, the child with high anxiety, high impulsivity, or reluctance to move will be familiar with next steps. The point is to help children feel safe and secure so a drill or an evacuation will be achieved with limited resistance on the part of a child. Other strategies for children with emotional or behavior challenges include:

- Be consistent in how the drill is practiced.
- Break down the fire drill into easy-to-follow steps; consider a visual cue or support.
- Practice sounds such as alarms/sirens so a child will associate the sound to the emergency.
- Use social scripts to teach skills and awareness.
- Make sure the child understands the importance of meeting at a designated area after the drill or evacuation.

The sounds of sirens, loud voices, and other sensory input may be challenging to a child who struggles with sensory over-responsiveness and can easily result in behavior meltdowns or withdrawing behaviors. For a child who reacts strongly to loud noise, consider using sound muffling equipment, such as ear plugs or even simple earmuffs, to lessen the impact. (The child must still be able to hear adult instructions).

Conclusion: Practice and Stay Calm

Practice becomes an important tool for managing a disruptive event such as a fire drill. The more a child is familiar with what is going to happen next, the better equipped they will be to handle it emotionally.

Regardless of a child's developmental needs, it is always helpful to use a calm manner when practicing safety drills and evacuations. **Staying calm will help children remain calm.**

When caring for all children it is important to use careful explanation and consistent language such as "we will be safe, my job is to keep you safe." These reassuring phrases go a long way in making fire safety education and evacuation drills more effective in the event of an emergency situation.

Additional Resources

FEMA | Keeping Kids Safe from Fire
<https://www.usfa.fema.gov/prevention/outreach/children.html>

Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide for People with Disabilities
<https://www.nfpa.org/Public-Education/Fire-causes-and-risks/Specific-groups-at-risk/People-with-disabilities>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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