



## Tips for Protecting Children in Violence-Based Emergencies

Shooting violence in schools account for less than one percent of deaths of school-aged youth. However, 70 percent of parents are at least somewhat concerned about the risk their child faces from school shootings with more than one-third of parents reporting being very concerned about the prospect. Practicing lockdown and shooter drills have the potential to empower staff and save lives, but without proper caution, they can risk causing harm to participants. Here are some tips from Save the Children and Safe and Sound Schools on how to keep children safe in violent emergency situations.

- 1. Talk to Children About Violence-Based Emergencies.** This is particularly important if your child has learned about a recent emergency situation. Talk about violence-based emergencies generally and in an age-appropriate way allowing for children to express their concerns or ask questions. Refrain from sharing graphic details, but use the opportunity to talk through any concerns that your child may have. First, listen carefully to your children, reassure them and be honest. Never lie to children. Address any inaccurate concerns that they may have (e.g., school shootings happen frequently; children are not safe at school). Focus on safety, helping children recognize the plans that are in place to protect them in all types of emergency situations.
- 2. Teach Children Response Options:** There may be a few ways to respond to an intruder based on where the intruder or danger is located. Make sure that the response options below (Get Out, Stay Out, Hide Out) are presented as choices and not expectations.
  - **Get Out:** If it is possible to get away from danger, go to a safe place. Teachers, leaders and first responders will come to find you in your meeting place or another place.
  - **Keep Out:** If it is not possible to get out of the building or out of harm's way, keep danger out of the room by locking and blocking doors and staying away from windows.
  - **Hide Out:** Stay out of sight from danger by hiding behind or large pieces of furniture. Try to stay as quiet so we know can know if we need to get out or when the danger has passed.
- 3. It's Normal to Be Scared:** Everyone feels afraid when they are in danger. Fear is how our bodies alert us and prepare us for action in times of danger. Help children understand that their natural reactions to danger (e.g., freeze or flight) are normal and these choices are not wrong or inadequate.
- 4. Follow the Leader:** Teach children that there are adults like teachers, leaders and first responders that will be working to keep them safe. It's important to stay quiet and listen to teachers and for directions.
- 5. It's Okay to Break the Rules:** Sometimes children may be separated from their leader or teacher. In the absence of an adult, kids may have to make safety choices on their own. Let children know that no one will be angry at them for breaking rules (like throwing things, entering staff-only areas, or running in the hall) to be safe.
- 6. Practice Makes Progress.** By practicing different response options children are more likely to have confidence to make a safe decision in an actual emergency situation. Practice lockdown and shooter drills that are developed and implemented by a multidisciplinary safety team and informed by mental health professional. Make sure the complexity of the drills and how they are communicated are age appropriate.



7. **Increase Drill Complexity as Children Develop:** Participation in drills should be appropriate to individual development levels and take into consideration prior traumatic experiences special needs and personalities. As children mature, they can handle more information and more complex drills.
8. **Parents Should Have a Choice:** Parents should always be informed and educated about the types of safety education, programming and drills that are planned for a school or program site before they are implemented. Parents should always be allowed to opt their children out of such programming and provide feedback.
9. **Be Reassuring:** Children model their reactions on adult behavior so effective drills should result in staff who inspire calm and confidence in children. Remind children that there are caring adults who will be working to keep them safe in all types of emergency situations.
10. **Learn to Recognize Signs of Trauma:** Although it may be normal for children to be a little anxious during emergency drills, if children appear extremely fearful, angry or withdrawn during or following a drilling exercise seek professional help. Involve mental health professionals in the development and implementation of drilling exercises.

**Sources:**

*Stay Safe Choices*. 2013. Safe and Sound: A Sandy Hook Initiative.

*Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills*. 2014. National Association of School Psychologists and National Association of School Resource Officers.

## Emergency Education and Training Activities

### Basic: All ages

**Introduction to Safety Concepts:** Help children learn to identify adults who can help them in emergency situations, including what they might look like (i.e., with uniforms, or masks) and what kinds of tools they carry as helpers. An example would be inviting a first responder to visit your classroom or program.

**Familiarity with Surroundings:** Tour the building or facilities and have a scavenger hunt helping children recognize possible exits, phone location, first aid materials, light switches, supplies kits, and other materials. Help kids get basically familiar with areas that are typically off limits during a school or program hours, such as the staff lounge, front office space and other halls or doors that could be used for evacuation or sheltering in place during an emergency.

### Beginner: Elementary and above

**Educational Media:** Present age-appropriate, non-threatening stories of emergency protocol that help children see safe behaviors being practiced. Ensure a multi-disciplinary team is involved in the development and/or review of the materials and present to parents in advance so they can choose to opt out their child.



**Scenario Discussions:** Create no-and low-stress opportunities to talk through safety scenarios, including potential actions and available tools for children and teachers. Have children brainstorm, discuss, problem-solve multiple situations. For young children, use a game format to spark discussions, such as “What Are Sammy’s Safe Choices?” Teenagers can engage in more intensive strategic discussions. Children’s participation in scenario discussions help with mental preparation, improved awareness and overall readiness for emergencies.

**Walk Through Drills:** These low-stress drills help children act out safety actions that might occur during an emergency. They are not time or rushed and leaders can use this time to demonstrate necessary steps or available options. A walk through drill could be considered a “slow motion drill” that allows for questions and discussion along the way.

**Intermediate:**

**Pre-announced Drills:** This is an announced rehearsal of emergency responses and protocols. All participants know that this is not a real emergency. Children should be instructed to act and follow instructions as if it were a real emergency.

**Unannounced Drills:** These drills are not recommended for active shooter drills. An unannounced drill simulates real-world conditions in that it is unexpected. Participants are encouraged to treat the drill as a possible emergency and follow all necessary protocols.

**Advanced:**

**Full Scale Drills, Simulations and Advanced Simulations** require an increasing level of involvement and participation of first responders and other local government agencies. While these are critical in improving and coordinating emergency plans and protocols for schools and other child-serving organizations, children’s participation should be limited.

**Source:**

[\*Hierarchy of Education and Training Activities\*](#). 2013. Safe and Sound: A Sandy Hook Initiative.