

Disaster Preparedness for Children with Autism

Introduction

Disasters including earthquakes, floods and fires can happen in an instant, and require us to act very quickly. While everyone should have a disaster preparedness plan, families of children with special needs also need to prepare for taking action on behalf of their child, in the event that the child is unable to act independently.

There are several steps you can take to be better prepared for a disaster. These include having an emergency plan, having a backup plan, preparing a survival kit and educating your child about disasters and what to do in case of a disaster. There are steps that every family needs to take to prepare for a disaster, regardless of special needs. A family should create emergency kits and plans in accordance with recommendations from a nationally recognized disaster preparedness agency. Now let's take a look things to keep in mind for a child with special needs while creating an emergency plan.

Emergency Plan

A good emergency plan allows each person in a family to know what to do and where to meet in case of an emergency. The first step in creating an emergency plan is to think of area-specific emergencies that may arise in your local area, including tornadoes, tsunamis, earthquakes etc., in addition to other emergencies such as a fire or flood.

Discuss appropriate actions with your family members in each of these situations. For a child with autism who may be nonverbal, it is important to use pictorial representations, social stories or other means of communication to explain what to do in an emergency. Think about whether you will need a special type of shelter or where you will assemble for shelter in different types of emergencies.

You should also consider an evacuation plan for different emergencies. This is something you will need to discuss with each of your child's

caregivers, and give them a written plan, so they know what actions to take and how to evacuate in an emergency. Let each caregiver and child in your family know the location of the closest emergency shelter. If your child goes to a daycare or preschool or attends other group activities, ask about their emergency plan and where they would assemble in an emergency. You should conduct drills twice a year with children and caregivers, and demonstrate what to do in an emergency situation. Finally, please share information about your child's doctor and where you want your child taken if they need medical help.

Another thing you may want to think about is what types of special equipment your child may need to take with them. Have a plan on how to take this equipment with you during an emergency. In some cases, you may need to have spare equipment ready to go. Think about whether you will need backup power for any electronic equipment your child uses. Ask yourself, how will you charge the equipment? How will you prepare to take the equipment with you at a moment's notice?

In the event of an emergency and an evacuation to a shelter, you should be prepared to assist your child with sensory issues that may arise from the noise at a shelter. You may be able to request the staff to move your family to a quiet area, or an area that is reserved for staff members where it may be quieter and less overwhelming for your child.

Another important aspect of effectively dealing with an emergency, is to know how to keep calm. There are several techniques that may help you keep your child calm, however, you will need to practice these in advance so that your child is familiar with these techniques. These include deep breathing – taking deep breathes through nose and releasing the air through your mouth. Teach your child how to

walk away and not run or push during an emergency and also to keep their hands to themselves, to avoid injuries.

It is a good idea to create a backup plan. Backup plans help you think through the most critical items you may need for your child in an emergency, and how to prepare to have those when you need them. For example, your child may need a medical alert system in the home that they can use in an emergency. Is there an alternative you can have to electrical equipment for your child that may not need charging or batteries? Think about where you can safely store backup equipment in case your home is inaccessible during an emergency.

It is also important to have a medical ID bracelet for your child that specifies their diagnosis. You may also want to create a list of written emergency contacts, medications and dosage, dietary or sensory issues and a description of your child's diagnosis with reference to any atypical behaviors that emergency personnel need to know about. If possible, have your child keep this information on their person so that it is accessible in an emergency.

Another aspect of having a good backup plan is to teach your child how to identify and go to emergency personnel in the event you are separated from them. You can teach them how to look for police officers or fire personnel by identifying their uniforms or ID badges.

Survival Kit

In addition to the information above, you should also have a survival kit handy to grab and take with you in case you need to evacuate. Keep all the things generally recommended for a survival kit at hand. In addition to these, you should also keep extra medication for your child, comfort items that will help your child remain calm, such as special toys, a comfortable change of clothing and shelf stable comfort foods that you know they will eat. Store these items in a water tight and easy to move storage unit or bag. Create a stay-at-home survival kit with basic items that will sustain you and your family for at least a week in case you lose power or gas. There are

many ready-made kits available for purchase that cover the basics you may need, including shelf stable foods, however most times you will need to supplement these kits with useful items such as wet wipes, gloves, batteries etc. Show each member of your family and caregiving team where these items are stored in your home. You can practice a drill with your child and show them how and when to access the items in case of an emergency.

Conclusion

While disasters are hard to predict, being prepared really pays off in an emergency. Creating an emergency plan and a survival kit is indeed time consuming, however not taking the time to create these, can lead to unnecessary difficulties at the time of an emergency. We hope that you have found this information useful, and that you will create a solid plan for your family. Here is a list of resources for you to help you create an emergency plan and kit. Thank you.

Emergency Kit Checklist

<https://www.ready.gov/build-a-kit>
<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/survival-kit-supplies.html>

Family Disaster Plan Template

https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDF_s/Preparedness_Disaster_Recovery/General_Preparedness_Recovery/Home/ARC_Family_Disaster_Plan_Template_r083012.pdf

Emergency Card Template

https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDF_s/Preparedness_Disaster_Recovery/General_Preparedness_Recovery/Be_Red_Cross_Ready/ECCard.pdf

Downloadable Emergency Kit List from FEMA

https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1390846764394-dc08e309debe561d866b05ac84daf1ee/checklist_2014.pdf