

Supporting Students With Disabilities During School Crises

A Teacher's Guide

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Most schools have crisis plans to support student safety, but few plans address the complex needs of students with disabilities. School supports should include analysis of school plans and student strengths and needs to ensure that students with disabilities have the best opportunity to be safe in school crises. Recommendations include developing individual emergency and lockdown plans to provide procedures for explicit instruction and needed supports for students with disabilities during a crisis. Implications for such plans and support for their development are included.

Mr. Hunter and Ms. Jakobs were looking around their co-taught classroom one afternoon, trying to decide how they could modify their school crisis plan to support three students with varying disabilities. Mr. Hunter told Ms. Jakobs,

Before the tornado and school shooting that were in the news last month, I didn't really think about what we might need to do differently to help Jamaya, Sam, and Kesha stay safe, but now, I think we have to create a specific plan due to their unique needs.

There does not seem to be a good way to get Kesha out of her wheelchair and to the supply closet with the other students if we have a tornado, and Sam panics every time we have a fire drill so I can't imagine how we best help him in a real crisis situation. Then if you recall, Jamaya refused to stop singing during our last lockdown drill, so we're going to have to figure something out to keep everyone safe if we have a crisis in our building, and having a specific plan for these three students seems to be critical.

Conversations like this have been taking place in classrooms across the country. Without a national model for school-based crisis preparedness, school districts may have inadequate emergency preparedness programs or lack programs altogether (Chung, Danielson, & Shannon, 2008). Moreover, in light of recent events, current schoolwide procedures and emergency plans need to be reviewed and revised to meet the needs of individual students with disabilities who might experience challenges following school procedures in emergency situations (Boon et al., 2011) that may call for a wide and varying range of responses (silence,

staying in the room versus moving quickly from the building). Although no plan can guarantee student safety, general disaster or crisis plans that do not take into account individual learning and physical differences could put some students at greater risk if a plan needs to be implemented (Boon et al., 2011; Boon, Pagliano, Brown, & Tsey, 2012). For example, school emergency procedures often call for students to move quickly, assume unique positions, and/or hide and be silent—all of which can be problematic requests for students with disabilities (Spooner, Knight, Browder, & Smith, 2012).

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Special education teachers are instrumental team members in planning for students with disabilities, including that for the unpredictable nature of crises, such as lockdowns and natural

disasters. Working with students, parents, general education teachers, school administrators, and first responders, the team can develop appropriate individualized plans that take into account the unique needs of each student. Schools might want to add a simple question at the end of each individualized education program (IEP) meeting that simply asks, “Is there a need for a specific plan for this student’s individual needs if there were a crisis in the building?” This question would most likely need to be addressed for students with significant physiologic (e.g., breathing rate and skin permeability) or developmental needs (e.g., communication skills and self-preservation instincts) that make certain children more vulnerable in times of natural and humanmade disasters (Chung et al., 2008). When creating and implementing school emergency preparedness plans, teachers and school leaders need to take into consideration the diverse range of intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development among children with disabilities. Specific recommendations are provided for supporting students with disabilities in crises, as well as a blueprint for schools to consider.

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Crisis Management to Support Students With Disabilities

Crisis management plans must address a range of difficulties that students with disabilities may

demonstrate (Spooner et al., 2012), including being part of a large crowd during evacuation, processing information when directions must be followed quickly, keeping quiet during a lockdown and when lights are turned off, or dealing with noise from sirens and people shouting. All these factors may cause students with disabilities to lose focus and may render them incapable of following directions (Minnesota School Safety Center, 2011). Special education teachers can help students develop resilience and build the developmental assets necessary to stay safe in a crisis (Boon et al., 2012; Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007) by simply developing individualized plans for students with such needs.

As an important first step, special education teachers should be an integral part of the development and revision of school and district crisis plans. A review of the literature regarding school disaster planning found that whereas 86.3% of U.S. school districts have disaster plans in place, 30% of those districts had never conducted a drill (Graham, Shirm, Liggin, Aiken, & Dick, 2006). Further, of 2,137 schools surveyed, 42% reported that they had not met with local officials to discuss emergency planning, and about one quarter stated that their plans did not include provisions for children with disabilities (Graham et al., 2006). In a study of nurses in 470 California schools, Kano and Bourque (2007) stated that only 37% of high schools and 67% of elementary schools reported having adequate supplies for a disaster. This lack of preparation for all students is alarming, but for students with special needs, special education teachers can ensure that students with disabilities have adequate practice opportunities and that first responders are aware of the medical, physical, emotional, and sensory needs of specific students with disabilities. These plans need to be practiced and visited regularly, and procedures should be in place to create a plan for students with disabilities who are admitted to a new school.

Simple but critical steps must be a part of the overall plan developed by schools and districts—such as making sure that school personnel have needed medical supplies and equipment in place to assist children with disabilities in emergency and crisis situations.

When Mr. Hunter and Ms. Jakobs reviewed the school and district plans, they found several gaps in how school administrators reported specialized health needs to first responders; they also noted a lack of accessibility to safe shelter during tornados for students who used wheelchairs. Given these concerns, they were able to meet with administrators and develop a better electronic reporting system to interface with first responders’ systems. Ms. Jakobs and Mr. Hunter also worked with the physical therapist and fire marshal to identify some alternative seating that allowed any student with mobility issues or use of a wheelchair to be safer during tornados or earthquakes.

Focusing on Individual Student Needs

After considering the needs of the school as a whole, special education teachers should focus on individual student learning needs and how they can teach students to be safe from a variety of dangers, including natural disasters and school violence (Boon et al., 2011). Partnerships among teachers, parents, social workers, school counselors, psychologists, administrators, and first responders are needed to provide this crucial level of individualized support. When appropriate, teachers should consult with students about the supports that they feel they might need in a crisis; they should also consult with students to ensure that they can use self-advocacy skills to share their needs with a substitute or with another unaware individual who might provide support during a crisis. For example, a student with autism might be able to identify sensory supports that would help him or her stay calm, whereas a student who uses a walker to ambulate might be able to help

identify barriers to a quick escape in a fire, tornado, or earthquake. Ensuring that this plan is shared with the student, parents, and all individuals who might work with the student should be a schoolwide expectation (e.g., making the individualized crisis plan a part of the substitute teacher folder), especially for students who are nonverbal. As students progress in grade levels, the plan needs to be a part of all classrooms where the student is served, as secondary students often have anywhere from four to 10 teachers and settings throughout the day.

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Collaboration among students, teachers, and key personnel could help to ensure that the environmental demands placed on an individual student with a disability does not exceed her or his ability to meet that demand (Boon et al., 2012; Brock & Jimerson, 2012; Edwards et al., 2007). Just as teams do in a strength-based approach to IEP development, special education teachers need to focus on individual student crisis assessments, creating strength-based plans to support students safely during a crisis (Edwards et al., 2007).

Steps for Designing an Individual Emergency and Lockdown Plan and Skills Assessment

Mr. Hunter and Ms. Jakobs felt that they knew what their students needed, but they were not sure how to develop an effective emergency plan to meet individual student's needs. We suggest that special education teachers

collaborate with students, parents, school personnel, and key community partners to develop an individual emergency and lockdown plan (IELP). An IELP allows special education teachers to note needed accommodations and share specific concerns related to how a particular student follows directions and responds to new or perceived frightening situations. An example of an IELP for a student with autism and epilepsy is provided in Table 1. Within IELPs, specific students' needs can be addressed. For example, if a student is not able to follow verbal directions, multiple adults in the facility must know and understand the accommodations needed, such as a picture schedule for all directions. As IELPs are developed, team members should consider the issue of confidentiality in sharing student information with first responders, but they should also ensure that a procedure in a crisis is in place to make individual needs known to anyone who might be involved in support the student. Teams might consider adding a waiver for parents to sign that gives the school permission to share critical student information with first responders who might support students in an emergency situation.

Another issue that should be addressed by special education teachers is how to encourage student compliance and silence—two essential components of student safety during a crisis situation (Chung et al., 2008). Teachers and first responders must be aware of the individual needs of every student and know how to support that need. For example, if a student has a history of hiding, first responders may have to conduct a physical search of the environment and know that this child responds only to specific prompts, such as an adult asking, "Do you want some pizza?" whereas phrases such as "Where are you, J?" may not elicit a response. If a student requires specific motivators, these direction and needs should be included as part of the plan.

In review of specific supports for students, we recommend using several tools as listed in Table 2. In addition, Table 3 is a checklist to assist special education teachers in assessing current

school and classroom plans and identifying where additional supports might be needed.

Crisis plans should also take into consideration travel problems that may be common for students who use wheelchairs or crutches to ambulate or for those who have an impaired gait. In the case of a fire or natural disaster, circumstances such as blocked or collapsed hallways could require transferring students to blankets or alternative carrying devices, the need for which must be addressed in the comprehensive plan (Minnesota School Safety Center, 2011).

When considering procedures for natural disasters and lockdowns, special education teachers should plan for ways that a student can carry an IELP. The IELP should be accessible and part of the student's organizational system. For example, it could be in the student's daily planner, in an iPad or tablet as a note, or in a backpack along with medication, communication devices, or other accommodations. In addition to a teacher carrying the information in a folder or clipboard, copies of the IELP should be kept in multiple locations where it is easily accessible to administrators, school personnel, emergency personnel, and the student's parents. Also remember that it is critical to give the IELP to substitute teachers and to other support personnel who serve the students (e.g., physical therapist, classroom aide, general education teachers).

Consider school readiness. After creating IELPs for students who need additional supports, special education teachers should take a second look at how the individual student assets and needs will be served in the overall district and school crisis plans. Using the IELP and information gathered from Table 3, Chung and colleagues (2008) have suggested that teachers revisit and revise the larger school plans to determine school readiness.

As teachers analyze overall crisis plans, they should use the district and school crisis and lockdown plans, student IEP, student schedule,

Table 1. Sample Individual Emergency and Lockdown Plan

Student information	Samisha, age 11, fifth grade
Student strengths that might help them in a crisis	Samisha does well with all adults and children and will be fine to transition with different adults during a crisis.
Medical needs	Diagnosis of autism and epilepsy. Has Diastat in the office. Seizures (stares off into space) last 30 seconds/3 times per day on average—administer Diastat for seizures longer than 5 minutes.
Communication needs	Samisha does not speak and uses an iPad to communicate. Her communication app is Sounding Board, and notes on how to use the app can be found in the Notes app. Samisha uses her device to request food and breaks.
Sensory needs	Samisha seeks lots of tactile pressure (shoulder squeezes and hugs) and will vocalize loudly if she feels stressed. If given Chewelry (chewable necklace and wearable sensory tool for individuals who chew or fidget; available at http://kidcompanions.com/) or a food treat, such as Smarties candy, she will cease her vocalizations for approximately 5 minutes, then a new incentive is needed. She likes to hold markers and will open and close them as a preferred activity. Other option for quiet: if she is given packs of Smarties, she will open and eat candy silently until it is gone, then request more. 8 packs of Smarties = 10 minutes of quiet.
Other critical information	Samisha is terrified of loud alarms and will hide when an alarm, such as the school fire alarm, rings. She needs physical assistance (hand on the back or under the arm to guide her out of the building).
Samisha’s emergency kit should include	iPad, Chewelry, box of markers, 8 packs of Smarties. Her kit is in the backpack purse that she carries with her whenever she travels in the building.

Table 2. Tools for Teaching

Tool	How it can be used
Individual emergency and lockdown plan	One created for and kept with each student; ensures that emergency personnel will know what the child needs to support his or her physical and emotional/sensory/communication needs.
Social narrative	Teach steps of lockdown drill in each location; what student should do in each environment.
Individual student lockdown bag	To support a child during a lockdown. Purpose is to keep the student quiet. Bag should include preferred tasks that the student could access if alone during lockdown. Items to include low-light flashlights for students who are afraid of the dark or social story for students to remind them what they should be doing.
Sensory items	For students with specific sensory needs, include sensory items in the bag. Provide hiding spots in each location that might support those needs. A student who seeks lots of pressure might do well hiding under the sink, where he or she can push against the cabinet. Allow student to practice using this location.
Picture schedule	To remind the student of what is happening (“First we hear the announcement or an adult tells us to hide”) and what might happen next.
Behavior plan/incentives	For students who have issues with following directions. Build compliance by awarding stickers or usual reward for every few minutes of compliance. Include incentives in the emergency bag for self-rewards as needed.

school layout, and IELP to conduct a step-by-step review that includes

- reviewing school plan and school layout,

- reviewing IEP (specifically, check for communication needs, physical supports needed, behavioral support needs, accommodations, and modifications),

- noting any barriers to the student’s ability to comply with the school plan,
- noting any barriers to the student’s access throughout the facility,

Table 3. Teacher’s Emergency Plan Procedural Checklist

Step	Work	Done?
1	Develop a clear safety plan for lockdowns across the entire building. Consider obstacles such as stairs, locked egress doors, and loud alarms that might be a physical, sensory, or emotional barrier to a student.	
2	Develop a clear safety plan for different times of day. Include contingencies for busy traffic times, such as beginning and end of day and during lunch, and schedule changes for events such as school assemblies.	
3	Develop individual emergency and lockdown plan for each student (see Table 1).	
4	Involve local emergency personnel (police, fire, and EMT) in the plan annually to ensure that they are aware of specific needs of students with disabilities so that in the event of an emergency, they are familiar with those students requiring specialized procedures.	
5	Teach students what to do. This includes how, when, and where to go and when they can come out (what words might be said, such as an “all clear” announcement or police officers identifying themselves).	
6	Practice the plan with the students in the classroom.	
7	Provide lots of opportunities for practice to mastery. Many students with disabilities need multiple opportunities to practice skills to gain and maintain mastery.	
8	Practicing the plan in every classroom in which the student might be. Because generalization is a challenge for many students, it is imperative that students practice across multiple settings.	
9	Practice the plan in the halls and community areas of the school. For example, if the student is in the restroom or taking a note to the office, where should she or he go in the event of an emergency?	
10	Keep copies of plans (including Table 1) with lesson plans and roster, as well as a set located in the office and possibly with the student.	
11	Keep an emergency bag for students that will help them maintain safety in the event of a lockdown. The bag can include favorite items, snacks, activities, or other things to keep students occupied and quiet. Suggestions include stuffed animals, stress balls, and headphones to help lessen anxiety. Include needed medical supplies, such as masks for those with respiratory difficulties; snack items and medication for students with diabetes; and rescue medications for students with epilepsy and allergies.	

- brainstorming solutions to barriers, and
- creating an IELP based on solutions to barriers.

Analysis should include considering all aspects of the school environment and student-specific needs. For example, students with low vision or blindness are more likely to find safety in an environment with which they are very familiar. In the same way, students with autism or emotional disorders may struggle with changes to routine. Such students may be more likely to quietly comply with the unique instructions required during a crisis if behaviors have been taught and practiced repeatedly. In both scenarios, the skills that students

require to survive a crisis—whether navigating an environment to find safe shelter or maintaining silence and following multiple specific directions—must be taught, with a focus toward generalization of skills (Chung et al., 2008). Table 4 lists some suggested strategies that could support the development of such skills for students with a variety of learning differences.

Students with disabilities need specific instruction in crisis prevention to be part of their specially designed instruction (Spooner et al., 2012). Best practices for students with severe disabilities include systematic instruction focusing on behavior analysis in the preparation and implementation of interventions (Spooner et al., 2012). If a student

with autism, for example, uses a picture schedule throughout his or her day, a social story or picture schedule (see Figure 1) can be created with lockdown or other emergency procedures (Gray & Attwood, 2010). For a student with an intellectual disability who uses an augmentative communication device or needs repeated practice to master a concept, the same accommodations can be provided in preparation for lockdown and emergency procedures (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). A student with a behavior disorder who requires incentives and a specific behavior contract to comply with teacher requests will need the same accommodations built into the IELP (Adelman & Taylor, 2002).

Table 4. What a Child With a Disability Might Need in a Crisis

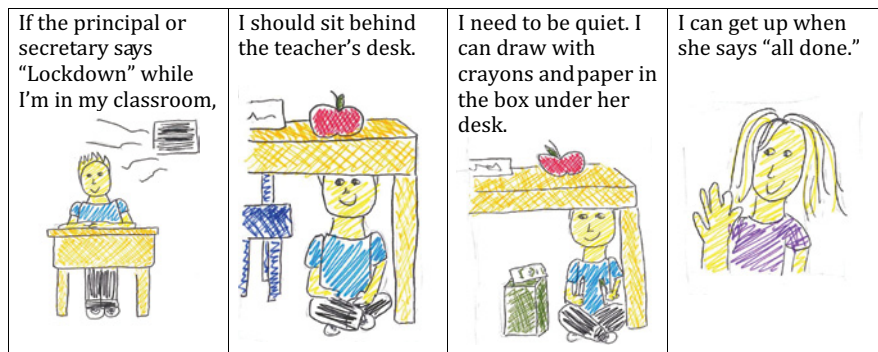
Disability	Characteristics	Consideration
Autism	Works best in predictable routines, needs differentiation in tasks, benefits from peer-mediated intervention strategies. Keep consistent.	Structure and predictability are important, so frequent practice with emergency procedures is needed. Task analysis of discrete responses needed, with systematic prompting, use of least intrusive prompts, and error correction. Needs tasks differentiated and predictable routines.
Low vision or blindness	Partial or complete loss of vision; student may or may not see colors, shapes, or movement; may have total blindness with no residual sight.	Multiple opportunities to explore the facility when it is in lockdown mode to understand which exits might not be available. Strobe lights or vibrating pagers to supplement audible alarms; Braille signage or audible directorial signage; prerecorded directions on a CD.
Deaf-blindness	Significant loss of both hearing and sight. Student may or may not have limited hearing or sight.	Opportunities to explore facility, practice moving to safe locations and positions. Consider a sighted partner to get to safety. Include strobe lights or vibrating pagers to supplement audible alarms; Braille signage or audible directorial signage; color-coded routes; prerecorded directions on a CD.
Emotional/behavioral disability	Behaviors may be externalizing (overt behaviors) or internalizing (anxiety, depression); behaviors are observed to be markedly and/or chronically beyond the norm of age/cultural group.	Student with emotional disabilities or emotional/behavioral disorders needs systematic instruction and practice with self-management skills.
Hearing impairment	May have mild to significant hearing loss. Student may or may not have enough hearing to respond to alarms.	Alternate communication system (use of alternate lighting or alerts sent to his or her phone or communication device).
Intellectual disability	Lowered rate of acquiring new knowledge and skills; difficulty with remembering information; slower to attend to critical features of new tasks; limitations in self-care and social relationships, as well as difficulty with behavioral excesses.	Needs to be presented with explicit teaching of desired skills paired with active response opportunities; practice opportunities to build fluency (speed) of responses; programming for generalization of skills over settings.
Orthopedic impairment	Limited mobility, uses crutches or wheelchair to ambulate.	Student may need adaptive equipment, such as wheelchair, positioning device, crutches, or braces, to move to or maintain a safe position, as well as accessible routes to safe locations. If exits or escape are blocked, may need additional supports, including alternate lifts; may need to be carried to exit facility.

Many special education teachers are already using tools that may be applied to teaching preparedness behaviors. Social narratives, for instance, have been shown to be effective tools to teach routines and increase desired actions (Gray & Attwood, 2010). Such stories are written at a student’s comprehension level and used to rehearse or practice scenarios to prepare students for anticipated eventualities (Santsosi,

Powell-Smith, & Kincaid, 2004). Given each student’s specific needs, the special education and general education teachers may collaborate with other professionals and partners within the local school community. Table 2 includes tools that special education teachers can use to teach crisis procedures, and Figure 2 provides a sample social narrative to help prepare a student for a crisis or crisis drill.

Develop skills assessments. Table 4 presents ideas that may be helpful as professionals begin safety planning according to the common characteristics often shared by students with disabilities. Once this initial analysis is complete, special education teachers can use a student’s IEP to incorporate more individual strategies. Although IEPs may not have been tailored to support students during a crisis, some of the information in them—such as sensory

Figure 1. Sample Picture Schedule



Note: Artwork created by Catherine Clarke, high school junior, for a peer with autism.

Figure 2. Sample Social Narrative for Following Emergency Procedures

At our school, we practice getting to our safe spots for emergencies. We practice going to the hall for tornadoes, going outside for fires, and going to our cubby room for intruders. Sometimes it's confusing because we can't always tell if we are practicing or if it's a real emergency. It's ok if I don't know if it's practice or real, but it's important to listen to the teacher and follow directions. In our safe spot, my friends and I must be very quiet and listen to our teacher and helpers. If I am not quiet and listening to my teacher, I may not know where to go or what to do and then I could get hurt. I will quietly follow my teacher's instructions when we practice or have an emergency.

needs, behavioral supports, and ways to help students process directions—can help special education teachers as they develop crisis and emergency plans (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). Based on the information gleaned from Table 4 and the IEP assessment, an IELP can be developed, such as the one provided in Table 1.

To create a supportive IELP, special education teachers need to first consider what an individual student might be required to do during that crisis or lockdown. For example, in a time of any crisis, students must be able to follow directions quickly, maintain silence, and communicate with emergency personnel in the event that their primary caregivers are no longer able to speak for them. Within any crisis preparation plan and practice opportunities, special education teachers should focus on student physical safety and mental well-being, working to ensure that disaster preparations are not causing undue stress (Council for Exceptional Children

& Council for Children With Behavior Disorders, 2013).

Important considerations in developing the IELP include assessing for needed language supports. Students with autism and students who are deaf or have communication disorders may need additional devices and supports. Students with limited English proficiency may also need language supports, but 25% or fewer school districts' crisis plans include written procedures for communicating with students and families with limited English proficiency (Nickerson & Gurdineer, 2012). Crisis plans should include providing critical information for students in their native language or mode of communication. If, for example, a school has three students who speak Spanish and two students who use American Sign Language or communication devices, the crisis plan should include directions and information in that child's native language or communication style. If a lockdown is called in the building, it

should be announced in both English and Spanish, with a plan to ensure that teachers who work with students who are deaf or use American Sign Language know the sign for lockdown and how to communicate safety directions using American Sign Language (Minnesota School Safety Center, 2011). For students who use alternate systems to communicate, picture supports and symbols on their devices should be prepared in case teachers and students need to communicate about crisis plans. Information should also be provided to first responders about students who might have limited English proficiency, and supports should be prepared for families to communicate crisis information.

Help students understand the sounds and language of danger.

Educators must teach the language of danger in school settings (Minnesota School Safety Center, 2011). Consider this example: For some schools, the word *lockdown* as used by a teacher or administrator over the public address system means that there is a likelihood of physical danger within the building. This might be a person with a weapon spotted near or in the building. In this example, students would need to understand that they must seek shelter in their current location, such as a classroom or office. If students are out in the building, they will need to recognize that that they must move to safety. It is not just words, however, that indicate a dangerous situation. In the case of school shootings, the sound of gunfire might be the first alerting sound of danger. Special education teachers can help students to identify sounds that might indicate danger and know what to do next.

Help students learn to maintain position.

Maintaining position in a space that might be small, dark, or uncomfortable—with or without other children or adults—is vital. Examples of times when this is required include school shootings or intruder lockdowns, where students have to hide in classrooms closets to stay safe. During tornado drills, students are expected to sit in a protective position



in a hall or room that may not have lighting or, in an earthquake, move to a supportive structure or leave the building. Special education teachers can incorporate the teaching of maintaining position through use of reinforcers, social narratives, and repeated practice, or they can provide suggestions for alternative seating for students with limited trunk support (Minnesota School Safety Center, 2011). These procedures, though, need to be taught immediately upon arrival and to be reinforced regularly to ensure that the IELP is a meaningful document.

Help students learn to maintain silence. Educators have learned, through recent school shootings, the importance of children being out of sight and silent in a lockdown (Minnesota School Safety Center, 2011). However, many students with disabilities may not be able to maintain silence for long periods. In this instance, specific plans need to be put into place and this skill continuously developed with the help of reinforcers as part of the overall crisis planning and training process.

Help students learn to follow directions quickly. Students need to be able to follow directions quickly, which requires automaticity (Minnesota School Safety Center, 2011). For events such as tornados or school shootings, students need to be able to automatically follow the plans required for that crisis. Some plans require students to be able to generalize a skill, such as hiding under a desk in the classroom, hiding under a table in the art room, or hiding under the

risers in the chorus room (Chung et al., 2008). Many students with disabilities gain automaticity from repeated practice in multiple settings and often do best when the activity is paired with an incentive plan. Direct instruction—with its emphasis on explicit teaching, modeling, practice, and the use of examples and nonexamples to ensure generalization—can be implemented to teach these skills to a broad range of students (Current Teaching Alerts, 1999).

Provide multiple opportunities for practice. According to the results of a study by Zhe and Nickerson (cited in Nickerson & Gurdineer, 2012), children who participated in an intruder crisis drill obtained knowledge and behavioral skills, compared to a control group of children who did not participate in drills and did not obtain this knowledge and skills. As students and teachers practice emergency drills, it is important to revise procedures and ensure that all needed supplies are available across multiple settings. Consistent training across a variety of settings and times of day will help students who need additional support to maintain and generalize skills.

Teach students to communicate with emergency personnel. Being able to communicate with emergency personnel and differentiate between helpful adults and those adults who want to harm them is a critical skill for students. Children should be taught to recognize features of emergency personnel, such as badges, uniforms, matching colors for shirts and pants, name tags, buttons and belts, hats, and

even firefighters' coats to identify helpful adults. Providing opportunities for students with disabilities to see and practice talking with emergency personnel in nonemergency situations may be helpful.

Prepare for teacher injury or death. Although it is unthinkable to most individuals, one of the lessons learned from the tragedy of the school shootings in Connecticut is that teachers must be prepared to instruct students on what to do if the teacher, due to injury or death, is unable to direct students to help them stay safe. How can educators help prepare students for safety and ensure that emergency personnel will be able to meet the specific needs of children with disabilities? First, special education teachers should consider less-threatening terminology to use with students, such as “If an adult is hurt” or “If you are by yourself.” It is important not to incite fear into students or make them think that this type of danger is imminent or that it happens every day; what is important is to remind students that these procedures and practice are to help them stay safe (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012a, 2012b). This same type of discussion can be framed as one of transition into college, work, and community life where they will need to have a plan to support their individual needs independently in the future.

Other Considerations

Labeling. Among the issues that should be clarified in schoolwide plans is the issue of labeling. When using terminology such as *students at risk*, schools allow for the support of a larger population than those with disabilities or IEPs, traditionally referred to as *students with special needs* (Boon et al., 2012). Using this larger label ensures that the school looks at all students who might have mitigating factors, including those with health needs (e.g., diabetes, asthma) or those with second-language needs who are not served by an IEP or 504 plan but still need medication, other

health-related treatment, or other ways to communicate.

Holistic communication plan. One critical element for all crisis planning is to maintain clear communication with students, parents, and first responders. Every year, as part of the IEP review or as a separate process, teachers should collaborate with students, parents, and first responders regarding specific plans that support students during a crisis. In addition, specific plans should be put in place to communicate with parents throughout a crisis to ensure that the health, sensory, emotional, and communication needs of every student with a disability are being met.

After the crisis. Children with disabilities are at greater risk than are their peers for developing compounding health difficulties and emotional stresses after a crisis (Boon et al., 2011). Plans should be in place for counseling and monitoring following any crisis for all students, but special attention needs to be given to any unique or perhaps unresolved issues that might resonate for students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children & Council for Children With Behavior Disorders, 2013). These plans should include observing students, acknowledging their feelings in a calm way, creating a positive classroom culture, and providing opportunities for students to share their concerns.

Conclusion

After recent school crises across the nation involving natural disasters and school shootings, many teachers and administrators increased their collaboration with local emergency personnel to modify school safety plans, but work may still need to be done to support students with unique learning or behavioral needs. Although plans cannot account for every possible scenario, careful strategizing for student safety is of utmost importance. Special education teachers must know and include best practices that will help students with exceptionalities learn and generalize basic survival skills across the academic day and environments. With the help of teachers, students can learn what to do

in cases of fire, tornado, or lockdown, and they can respond safely, no matter where they are in the building, as long as they have been taught what they need to do and how they should do it.

Special education teachers must know and include best practices that will help students with exceptionalities learn and generalize basic survival skills across the academic day and environments.

As special education teachers plan for ways to support students in crises, they need to partner with parents, emergency responders, and other key community members to support the safety of students with disabilities no matter what the crisis. Essential components of a school district's crisis readiness include the development of IELPs, explicit instruction in procedures during a crisis, practice across multiple settings, and an annual review of emergency strategies based on individual students' needs.

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