



# Stay Safe Procedures in Early Childhood Programs

The purpose of stay safe procedures is to prepare teachers and program staff to stay calm, take control, and be supportive of children and adults during a crisis, versus not knowing what to do and feeling overwhelmed and helpless. It is helpful and necessary for early childhood programs to be familiar with and practice their stay safe procedures. Practice helps adults prepare, and practicing drills on staying safe can empower staff and save lives.

However, drills that do not consider the developmental needs of children may cause additional distress. Early childhood staff can minimize distress by keeping young children's development in mind and providing emotional support for everyone involved.

This resource outlines key components to include in stay safe procedures and highlights considerations for the developmental and social and emotional needs of younger children.

Stay safe procedures refer to what other organizations may call “lock down,” “violent intruder,” or “active shooter” protocols. Carefully consider the words your program uses to name these drills and procedures. The term “stay safe” reflects developmentally appropriate language for young children.



National Center on  
Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety

## What We Know About Stay Safe Drills and Young Children

Stay safe drills are now standard practice in most K-12 school systems. There are models for how to conduct drills with elementary and secondary school students, but almost no research on the unique needs of younger children.

Young children look to adults to make sense of the world around them. They closely watch the facial expressions and listen to the tone of voice of their caregivers to know how to feel, behave, and understand a situation. It is important that adults know how to regulate their own emotions so they feel calm and can support the children in their care.

Teachers and families know their children best. In alignment with developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood settings, adults need to consider that

children's developmental capacities vary, and each child will have different needs. Children with disabilities or complex needs may require more support to understand a drill. Children who have had trauma may also need extra support and reassurance about drills being opportunities to practice staying safe. Children who are dual language learners will need the opportunity to learn the language and concepts with phrases from their home language.

Guidance around these types of drills is still emerging and continually evolving. The more we learn about how to keep children safe, and how adults and children respond to such drills, the more refined and useful our processes will be to keep children safe.

## Planning for Your Stay Safe Drills

It is essential to determine what stay safe procedures would work best for your given situations and your program, staff, children, and families. Your emergency preparedness, response, and recovery team can work with your local agency leadership, Policy Council, law enforcement, mental health consultants, and other supporting personnel to make these decisions. The next sections present questions to consider and suggestions for each of the three key topics — prepare, share, and practice.

### Prepare



### Share



### Practice



# Prepare

## Do you have the right people to form, inform, and approve the stay safe plan?

- Who are the key members of your planning team?
  - How are you involving the following groups?
    - Program staff and leaders
    - Local law enforcement
    - Mental health consultants and other emergency preparedness, response, and recovery experts
    - Health Services Advisory Committee
    - Policy Council
- Are there other community experts whom you may want to consult?
- How are you engaging the families in your program?

## How will you keep the physical space safe?

- Where is the safest space, away from windows and doors, to shelter in place? Does this vary throughout the program based on the unique design of classrooms or outdoor play spaces?
- What are your procedures for the following?
  - Keeping an intruder out (e.g., barricading or locking doors)
  - Managing other elements of classroom safety (e.g., closing the shades, turning off the lights)
- How will you decide when to shelter in place versus when to exit the building for safety?
- If you evacuate, where will your meeting space be?
- What is your plan for contacting the families of children after an evacuation?

## How will you account for children's individualized needs during stay safe procedures?

- How do you address children's development?
- How do you meet the unique needs of infants, toddlers, and preschool children?
- How do you support children's social and emotional needs? Do you take a trauma-informed approach so every child will benefit from practices that prevent possible re-traumatization?
- How do you address the needs of children with disabilities or chronic medical conditions?

- How do you support the needs of children who are dual language learners?
- How will you make sure emergency supplies include the equipment, food, medications, and other items children may need when they shelter in place? How will the plan accommodate children with allergies during the drill or event?

## How will you care for adults' physical health, mental health, and individualized needs during stay safe procedures?

Pay attention to adult regulation and adult feelings. These kinds of drills can stir up anxiety for everyone — children and adults. It is important for adults to check in and pay attention to their own feelings before talking with the children in their care. Children turn to their trusted adults when they experience new things, and when they feel anxious or confused. They need to know the adults in charge are available to support them so they feel confident that adults can keep them safe.

- How will you get input from the staff about the drills?
- How will you address adults' mental health needs? Do you take a trauma-informed approach so every adult will benefit from practices that prevent possible re-traumatization?
- How will you account for adults' physical health or medical needs during these drills?
- How will you support staff after a drill?

## How will you engage families?

It is essential that all families are made aware of your program's procedures for keeping children safe in case of an intruder.

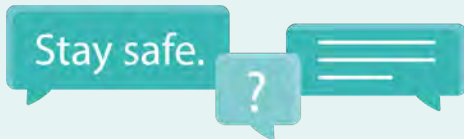
- How will you get input from the families about the drills?
- How will you tell families when you plan to run a drill?
- How will you help families prepare to discuss this with their child before the drill, and again after? See tips for talking with young children below.
- How will you support families after a drill?



## Share

**Once you make a stay safe plan, you need to let everyone know what to expect.**

- How will you share the plan with all program staff? If the program varies by setting (i.e., indoors vs. outdoors) or program option (e.g., center-based or family child care home), how will you help everyone be aware of the differences?
- How will you share the plan with substitutes, floating staff, or less regular program staff?
- How will you share the plan with families?
- How will you encourage staff and families to ask questions, and how will you give them informed and caring responses to any concerns?
- How will you share the plan with local law enforcement, emergency personnel, and other community partners?
- How often will you review and revise the plan to make sure it reflects the most current knowledge and evidence on what works best in these situations?



## Practice

Young children are less likely to be frightened or upset about participating in a stay safe drill when it is familiar to them, they know what to expect, and the adults around them express assurance and confidence. It is important to set up a schedule of drills to help your staff, families, and children become comfortable with the routine. They can follow the same frequency schedule as other emergency drills in your program. Below are some ideas on how to practice stay safe drills with young children.

**Consider the developmental capabilities and understanding of toddlers and preschoolers. Young children may completely rely on adults to manage them during an emergency.**

**Toddlers can:**

- Follow two- or three-step directions.
- Imitate the actions of adults and playmates.

**Preschool-age children can:**

- Practice basic safety commands such as “Get Out” (evacuate) and “Hide Out” (stay out of sight, lights off, remain quiet).
- Understand the concept of “Keep Out,” when an adult locks and barricades classroom entries to “keep out danger.”

**Use these words and ideas when talking with young children.**

Let children know that we do many things to keep us safe, like wearing a helmet, wearing a seatbelt, looking both ways before crossing the street, and washing our hands. Tell them that these drills are about helping everyone stay safe.

Talking to children, even infants, about what is happening around them is critical to helping them feel safe. When young children know what to expect and adults around them are calm, they are less likely to have emotional dysregulation.

Keep explanations about the drill short. For example, you might say, “Today, we will have a ‘staying safe’ drill to practice staying safe at school. It is the adults’ job to keep you safe. We will practice sitting and staying still. We know it is hard to stay still and be quiet, but we want you to be as quiet as you can and follow our directions.” Keep in mind that very young children can stay still and quiet for a couple of minutes at most.

When caring for infants and toddlers, use your everyday soothing strategies to comfort and help regulate them.



## Practice (cont.)

When talking to preschoolers about a stay safe drill, ask them what they know about the drill: “Why do you think we practice these drills?” Be prepared, as children often know more than we think. By learning what they feel or think about drills, you can have a conversation about how drills keep them safe and answer their questions and concerns. Acknowledging children’s thoughts and feelings supports your role as a trusted caregiver.

### Use a social story.

You can customize a social story to your classroom and drill situation. You may add some photos of the safe space or what the classroom may look like during the drill. An example for the story might be:

*“Sometimes we need to practice staying safe. Being safe means many different things. It can mean wearing a helmet when you are on a riding toy. It can also mean leaving the building during a fire drill. Sometimes when we practice staying safe it means being quiet, going to a special place, turning off the lights, and closing the shades. When we are staying safe, we can look at books, take a rest, or think about places and people who make us happy.”*

### Use children’s literature.

- *Storm Is Coming* by Heather Tekavec and Margaret Spengler
- *How Do Dinosaurs Stay Safe?* by Jane Yolen and Mark Teague



## Prepare for the Questions Children May Ask

Families may find these questions and answers useful as they talk with children before and after stay safe drills. As always, teachers and families know the children best. You can tailor the answers to work best in your situations.

- Q:** What is a stay safe drill?  
**A:** This drill helps us stay safe if there is someone who shouldn’t be in our building, in our classroom, or on our playground.
- Q:** Why do we have to do this?  
**A:** Our job is to keep you safe. These drills help us keep you safe.
- Q:** Why do I have to be quiet?  
**A:** Being quiet can help us hear important directions and information.
- Q:** When will it end?  
**A:** Most of the time, we will sit quietly for only a few minutes. Other adults will let us know when the stay safe time is over.

## Procedures to Follow During an Intruder Event

- **Follow the plan.** Use the plan your program has developed, shared with staff and families, and practiced regularly with adults and children. Follow your program reunification procedures. Having a system in place to text families may be helpful, as phone services may be overwhelmed with the volume of calls. It may not be possible to find a child’s parent, guardian, or other designated people. Do your best to contact every child’s family and emergency contacts as soon as possible.
- **Inform.** If possible, call 911 or your local emergency management system and tell them where the intruder is. Do not assume someone else has already called.
- **Check in with yourself.** Pause and take a deep breath so that you can attend to the children’s and your own needs.
- **Attend.** Talk to children about what is going on around them — even if they don’t understand the words. For example, “That noise was loud and scared you. I am going to pick you up, hold you, and keep you safe.” Support children’s big feelings without minimizing or denying the way they feel.
- **Assure.** Tell the children that you are there to keep them safe. Emphasize safety. Allow children to express their concerns and ask questions. Reassure them and be honest in a developmentally appropriate way. Correct any wrong concerns that they may have by gently reminding them of what you are doing to stay safe at that moment.
- **Be honest.** Use simple, age-appropriate language. Let children know what happens next. Repeat that it’s normal to be scared. Everyone feels afraid when they’re in danger or when they don’t know what is going on. Help children understand that their reactions are normal.
- **Stay self-aware.** Remember, children respond to volume, tone of voice, and emotions. Be responsive rather than reactive and be aware of your own feelings and how you respond to children’s concerns.

## Recovery

After an event, the adults and children in your program may need immediate and ongoing support. It is important to know in advance who can offer behavioral health support after trauma, such as psychological first aid, in your community. If you have a formal relationship with a mental health consultant or community mental health agency, include details in the agreement about how they can help after a crisis. It is critical to give everyone — staff, families, program leaders, community members, and others — opportunities to discuss their experience. Keep in mind that each person will need individualized support to help them recover. To the extent possible, give staff the flexibility they may need to resume regular activities and schedules.

Watch for signs of trauma. It’s normal for children and adults to be anxious about shootings and violent events. Involve mental health professionals in the recovery process. If children seem extremely fearful, angry, or withdrawn during or after an event, talk with their families about whether to seek professional help. Also keep in mind that anniversary dates of the event can be a particularly vulnerable time for traumatic memories to arise.



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June 2024