

Helping Hand



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Talking With Children About Emergency Preparedness

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

When it comes to planning for emergencies, it is extremely important to make sure that those around you are also prepared—especially children. Although some adults find disaster readiness a difficult topic to discuss with children, it is essential that preparedness information be presented in a direct, honest manner. When children are made aware of an emergency plan, they will be able to face an emergency situation in a calmer, more capable manner. It is important to have several plans in place to respond to different types of emergencies, and to make certain that children are familiar with each plan. Key elements of any school or home emergency plan should include: what to do, where to meet, whom to call, and how to communicate.

How to Involve Children in Emergency Planning:

1. **Keep kids involved.** Never assume that an adult will be present during an emergency situation; include children in emergency planning so that they know what will be expected of them. Children should be taught exactly where to go, what to do, and how to communicate during a crisis. Emergency plans should be reviewed with children on a regular basis to make sure that they don't forget any information.
2. **Ask for their input.** If children help to create a plan, they will be more likely to remember it when the time comes to implement it. Parents may want to quiz their children by asking, "Where in town is a good place for us to meet if there is ever a crisis?" "Do you know how to get there by yourself?" or "Who is the best relative or other person to call outside of this area if we cannot communicate with each other?" "Do you have his/her phone number memorized?" Be sure to make practice visits to your family meeting place, and practice calls to your emergency contact relatives, so children will feel comfortable doing so when the time comes.
3. **Supply kit game.** Making an emergency supply kit can be a fun game for kids! First, have children make a list of what they think might be needed in an emergency. Compare it with a published list, such as the one on the US Department of Homeland Security's

“Ready Kids” website, http://www.ready.gov/kids/_downloads/familylist.pdf. Then, have a scavenger hunt to search the home or classroom for the items that are needed. Make sure to purchase any items that you do not already own for the home or classroom.

4. **Go online.** There are great resources on the Internet that can help parents and teachers make learning about emergency preparedness fun for kids. Websites such as Ready Kids (see above) and FEMA for Kids (<http://www.fema.gov/kids/>) are perfect for engaging kids in disaster preparedness. They provide stories and information about emergencies written in a kid-friendly way, and have games that will help kids remember what to do in an emergency. Kids enjoy websites like these and will have fun learning information that could save their lives.

(Source: Bridge Multimedia and EmergencyInfoOnline.org)



Preventing Social Bullying

Physical bullying at school may be limited to the school yard, but emotional bullying doesn't stop there—it follows teens home in the form of text messages, e-mails and instant messages. Bullying on the Internet is often anonymous and regularly goes unreported due to the difficulty of proving the sender's identity. Also, young people are more likely to express things online they might not say in person—bullies find it easier to be mean when they don't have to face their victims.

Social bullying is increasingly common, especially among teenage girls, and it can be just as damaging as physical violence.

A common characteristic of social bullying is that it usually takes place within groups—one child might turn an entire group against another person. In such cases, it's important to remember that bystanders are just as guilty as the “leader.” Children need to be reminded not to become a social bully and also not to allow or follow social bullying. It's also important that adults who witness bullying not use the excuse that “kids will be kids”— instead, they need to take an active role in stopping it.

Five Signs That a Child Might Be Involved in Social Bullying:

How can you tell if a child is participating in or becoming a victim of social bullying? Here are five signs that social bullying may be taking place among your child's group of friends.

1. **Spreading of rumors and gossip.** Malicious gossip can spread very quickly. Even if untrue, it can destroy a child's reputation and make it very hard for him or her to gain social acceptance.
2. **Deliberate exclusion or shunning.** Girls excluding other girls from social activities, or forming cliques to intentionally reject or isolate former friends is a powerful and common method of social bullying.

- 3. Verbal taunting or harassment.** Taunting, as distinct from teasing, is meant to hurt or belittle, and establishes an imbalance of power. Name-calling, rude jokes and calling attention to physical or social shortcomings all can chip away at a child's self-esteem, cause embarrassment and escalate to other forms of bullying.
- 4. Hostile expressions or body language.** Staring aggressively, making faces or derogatory gestures and taking hostile stances are subtle yet effective ways to intimidate, alienate, or reject others without making it obvious to teachers.
- 5. Abusive e-mails or phone calls.** Access to computers and phones allows social bullying to continue after school hours and off school grounds. This lack of escape causes further anxiety for the victim and may result in self-exclusion from social activities.



Students With Symptoms of Mental Illness Often Don't Seek Help

Studies show that the incidence of mental illness on college campuses is rising, and a new survey of 2,785 college students indicates that more than half of students with significant symptoms of anxiety or depression do not seek help. This is despite the fact that resources are available at no cost on campus, said Daniel Eisenberg, assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. Eisenberg and doctoral students Sarah Gollust and Ezra Golberstein conducted the web-based survey in an attempt to quantify mental health service use and factors associated with whether or not students seek help.

It's important to understand what motivates students to seek help or not for several reasons, Eisenberg said. Most mental disorders first occur before age 24, and those problems often have long-term implications into adulthood. Studying a university setting lends insight into what other factors besides affordability keep people from seeking help.

U-M is a national leader in efforts to reach students and educate them about resources available, Eisenberg said. The University recently developed a mental health assessment instrument that will be used by a national network of counseling centers, conducted a stigma reduction campaign called "Real Men, Real Depression," developed a mental health resources website, and hosts a Depression on College Campuses conference annually.

Eisenberg stressed that even though the incidence of mental disorders on college campuses is rising, studying the conditions surrounding the phenomenon presents an opportunity. "Often college student mental health is framed as a problem on the rise," Eisenberg said. "One can also think of it as a unique opportunity because college campuses offer several ways to reach students and affect their lives positively."



Learning to Accept others Helps Children to Accept Themselves

Headlines today consistently echo the problems that exist within our schools and communities and how they reflect a moral breakdown in our society. There seems to be little tolerance for accepting differences in others, resulting in increased violence within schools and communities. Part of the problem is the lack of respect toward diversity. Children of all ages need to be taught respect for diversity and learn that other people and families, though different, can share similar experiences and values. Reading is an important tool for broadening a child's universe in a safe and stress-free way. Teaching children through creative storytelling the meaning of diversity and how important it is can increase their understanding and acceptance of others.

According to the US Department of Education, the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success is reading aloud to children. A recent study showed that children read more when they see other people reading at home. Over the past 25 years, studies show a gradual and steady decline in the number of children who read for fun outside regular school hours. This decline in recreational reading, says Tory B. Hanlen, author of *Sense and Non-Sense* (BookSurge Publishing), has contributed to children seeking inappropriate means of expression, which includes a lack of respect for themselves and others.

"Families need to meet this challenge of teaching children to accept differences in people, as well as teaching them good and acceptable behaviors." Awareness that differences exist, and that there is more than one approach to an issue, can expand a child's universe and appreciation of others. "Having self-acceptance is what allows acceptance in others," Hanlen says. And children need not be afraid to be different themselves. Broadening their horizons allows them to understand that "different" is acceptable.



Major Energy Gap Contributes to Obesity Among Teens

A recent study by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) shows that America's overweight teens consumed an average of 700 to 1,000 calories more than required each day over a 10-year period.

This "energy gap"—or the imbalance between the number of calories children consumed each day and the number they required to support normal growth, physical activity, and body function—resulted in an average of 58 extra pounds for overweight teens.

The study, the first to look at the energy gap among children and youth, was published in the December 2006 issue of the journal *Pediatrics*. Them study shows that US children and teens overall consumed an average of 110 to 165 more calories than they required each day. Over a 10-year period, this energy gap led to an excess 10 pounds of body weight on average among all teens.

Previous research in the field estimated that a much smaller energy gap was responsible for the obesity epidemic in US adults. The new analysis focusing on children, however, found a much more serious caloric imbalance than previously recognized in adults.

"Our research indicates that early prevention may be critical," said Y. Claire Wang, MD, ScD, the HSPH researcher who led the study. "The energy gap becomes bigger and harder to close as kids accumulate more excess weight." This suggests that strategies to prevent excess weight gain from occurring during childhood may be more effective than attempting to treat overweight teens.

To address the childhood obesity crisis, it is important to understand and quantify the energy gap. The study recommends using a range of strategies to close the energy gap, including:

- Supporting longer and more frequent physical education classes that require children to be physically active for at least half of the class time. (Having class three times a week instead of once can mean a difference of 240 calories per week for a typical 9-year-old boy.)
- Reducing the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages in schools and at home. (Switching one can of soda for water could mean a difference of 150 calories.)

- Consuming less fast food. (Eating at fast-food restaurants has been associated with an additional 120 calories per day.)
- Decreasing time spent watching TV as a way to increase physical activity and limit exposure to advertising, which has been associated with increased energy intake. (One hour of TV watching replaced by one hour of slow walking is a difference of 55 calories burned. In addition, reducing TV viewing by one hour is associated with 160 fewer calories consumed per day.)



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