



## The Municipality of the County of Richmond Emergency Management Organization



Good day to you all.

As the province gets back to school, this seems like a great time to talk about discussing emergencies with children and young adults.

Emergencies are scary, for children and adults alike, but these conversations are the first step in creating familiarity by reducing the anxiety of the unknown. If you have young ones, they need to be included within your planning. And that means understanding why we have these plans as well as their part in them.

When I was younger, a really long time ago, before fire departments had pagers; the local department tested their alarm sirens every Friday at 6:30 in the evening. One evening, after I had gone to bed, the sirens went off. My parents were out and my brother and we had a baby sitter with us. As I was waking up to the siren she checked on my brother and I, asking if “we were scared by the siren?” I told her that of course I wasn’t scared; it was just the siren at the fire hall.

This charming story from my youth is not about my courage, but to emphasize the fact that because my family had discussed that alarm I knew what it meant. There for I wasn’t scared of it.

The same is true when discussing your household’s plans. Children have an incredible ability to adapt. They may not know the whole situation, but if they understand the when and how, they will typically respond accordingly.

Talking about these things will empower your children to act appropriately during a crisis, potentially saving their lives, as well as translating into confidence going forward when confronted by the unknown.

Now that I’ve sold you on the why, let’s discuss the how.

Here are some thoughts to keep in mind during these conversations;

Explain Why: Continue to focus on how it’s just about safety, not the disaster, like other safety rules. An example could be, “Let’s talk about emergencies so we can be ready and practice. This way, if an emergency happens, we know how to stay safe.”

Be Honest: Kids are really good at remembering things you have said in the past and repeating them back to you at the most inopportune times.... Stick to your messaging, keep it light but be truthful and brief. The reality is that people can get seriously hurt or die during emergencies, but do not focus on the death and destruction, stay focused on the aspect of safety. Stay positive, even if it’s not a very positive topic.

Listen: It is an unfortunate truth that most of us don’t listen as well as we should, and even less so when children are talking. Let them express their ideas and feelings completely before responding. If possible, you can read emergency themed storybooks with the child, where children can respond to the characters experiences and actions, where they can consider the topic more abstractly.

Be Reassuring: It is OK for children to be afraid. Continue to reassure them that there are many adults who care about their safety, within and outside their household. You can also end the conversation at any time and come back to it later if you feel like the child is having a difficult time.

Limit Graphic Images. It is certainly an option to use images of disasters but avoid images with graphic content. For younger children think about using cartoon images and limit their exposure to the news media. A repeating news cycle can appear to be similar disasters every couple of minutes.

Focus on the Learning: Children are naturally curious. Introduce these topics with play activities like low crawling around the house. Draw maps of the house or the route to your emergency muster point. There are resources like “The Magic School Bus” books and TV show that discuss the science behind earthquakes and volcanoes or “The Magic Treehouse” books that have child heroes dealing with all sorts of issues.

Recognize Helpers: In a world where we spend a lot of time teaching children to be aware of strangers, recognizing the helpers is also important. When I would do school visits as a paramedic, I asked if anyone knew what I was? I would eventually get “ambulance guy”, “doctor helper” or “hero medical dude” (my personal favourite). Then why they thought that? The point was to recognize the uniform of a helper. Reflective stripes for EMS, pants with stripes down the leg for police and bunker gear for firefighters as well as vehicles with flashing lights are a great star. Helpers are also teachers, school staff, the dentist or doctor and their staff and others. When appropriate teach them about places where help can be found, government buildings, clinics, schools, pharmacies, anywhere there is a security guard and so on.

Say “I Don’t Know.”: You’re going to get a *whole* lot of questions. Learn to get comfortable admitting you don’t know, and then use that opportunity to discover the answer together. Just be cautious how you search the internet so you can censor the information coming back... Look at the Canadian Red Cross, Environment Canada, FEMA or the CDC websites for a heap of useful information. Of course you can also always go the library, for those of us (*like me*) that still like books.

There are a ton of resources around, consult your child’s teacher for advice or resources. Spend some time doing online research into the topic; there are some interesting “games” around disasters and preparedness aimed at children. A project called the “Big Life Journal” has resources, products and a podcast all based around celebrating children’s successes and resiliency. Again I don’t get anything from these sites, but I have used them.

I have included some comic book style games;

- “Disaster Master”, <https://www.ready.gov/kids/games/data/dm-english/index.html>
- “Build A Kit”, <https://www.ready.gov/kids/games/data/dm-english/index.html>

I also put together a Safety Bingo and Preparedness Scavenger Hunt for you to use as tools, which are posted on the website as well.

In closing, I am not trying to tell anyone how to raise their family. You are the expert on the little one in your life. I am only offering some information about talking to your little ones about what can be a scary topic.

Thanks for joining me today.

Take care.

Be safe and be awesome to each other.

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