

Summary: Research-into- Action Brief

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Research-into-Action Brief series

The series provides concise summaries of academic and grey literature on a range of topics for practitioners working in the fields of child-centred risk reduction (CCRR), climate change adaptation, and school safety. This summary highlights the main messages in the full Research-into-Action Brief on school emergency drills.

Find the full Research-into-Action Brief series at:

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School Emergency Drills

There is evidence that school drills play a pivotal role in both the gradual improvement of school disaster risk reduction (DRR), and response preparedness. There is also scholarly consensus that emergency response skills are important to master, and that school drills provide children and adults with important opportunities to learn and practice protective actions and build confidence in such actions. The research also suggests how to improve school drills to make them more effective.

The findings support recommendations in two areas: individual capacity-building, with suggestions for how to supplement and modify drills, test realistic scenarios, avoid confusion and build confidence; and organisational capacity-building, with suggestions for 'after-action reviews' processes, and developing links between school and household and community preparedness.

Lessons for Conducting Effective School Drills

The following lessons are supported by evidence from the scholarly literature and reflect our best current knowledge on how to conduct effective school drills.

1) Students should learn how to assess the dangers present when a natural hazard occurs and learn how to make decisions to ensure they are as safe as possible.

There is a widely held belief that repeated practice of school drills helps children learn skills for safe emergency response, so that behaviours such as "drop, cover and hold" in case of earthquakes become second-nature (Dengler, 2014). However, there is also evidence that the practised response is not always the correct one: for example, after an earthquake that causes damage to buildings and power lines, it may be safer to remain in a particular building rather than go outside (Tipler, Tarrant, Johnston & Tuffin, 2015). Typically rote drills do not teach people how to best assess their situation and make decisions in unexpected scenarios.

2) Drills should be adapted for different age levels and abilities. Practitioners can also use children's unique strengths and abilities.

Children of different ages and capabilities vary in their physical and cognitive abilities. Therefore, the skills for emergencies that are taught and practiced should be adjusted to be appropriate for the age level and abilities of children. Note that children with disabilities are likely to need specific adaptations and extra practice.

The strengths and abilities of children should also be used. For example, children often demonstrate a desire to help others during times of distress (Vezzali, Drury, Versari & Cadamuro, 2016). This is an important strength to build on. Rather than regarding children as vulnerable and dependent on adults, practitioners can help children learn how to stay safe and help others in age-appropriate ways.

More information

All the references in this Research-into-Action Brief, and many more, can be found in the Child-Centred Risk Reduction and Comprehensive School Safety Bibliography at:

https://www.zotero.org/groups/1857446/ccrr_css

Find all the references on this topic by using the tag "School Drills."

Readings

International Finance Corporation (IFC), (2010), Disaster and Emergency Preparedness: Guidance for Schools.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies & Save the Children (2018), Public Awareness and Public Education for Disaster Risk Reduction: Action-Oriented Key Messages for Households and Schools (2nd Edition).

Petal, M (2008), Disaster Prevention for Schools: Guidance for Education Sector Decision-Makers.

US Department of Education (2013), Guide for developing high-quality school emergency operations plans.

3) School drills should test varied and realistic situations.

When staff, students and families are familiar with the basic procedures that take place during a school emergency drill, the following drills should challenge the school community to respond to:

- Unannounced or unexpected drills: drills during lunch break rather than during class time;
- Full simulation drills: these include all procedures needed during an emergency from the event itself through to reuniting children with their families; and
- New and different situations: by adding new challenges to the drill, such as blocked exits or aftershocks.

During these activities, there should be no blame for mistakes and problems. Mistakes are important for learning and improving future responses to emergencies.

4) Engage all participants in reflecting upon, evaluating and applying learning outcomes from drills

Observation is one way to assess the outcomes of a school drill, but this will not show whether students understand the emergency responses they are practicing. Questionnaires, interviews and group discussion can all be used to evaluate if children have learned the purpose of the drill and can apply what they've learned in a real emergency.

Reviews after school drills should involve staff, students, parents and the wider school community. They should identify a list of actions that are needed and assign responsibilities among the school community to reduce risks in the school environment and improve school disaster management plans.

5) Signals and alarms for building evacuation, shelter-in-place and lockdown should be different and easily distinguishable. Verbal announcements should be used to clarify that a drill is taking place.

An important component of any school emergency procedure is the use of signals and alarms. It is important that different signals and alarms for evacuation, shelter-in-place, and lockdown are used. Immediately before all drills, including unannounced drills, there should be a verbal announcement such as: "This is an emergency drill. It is not a real emergency. This is a drill." This is because staff and students should be able to discern a drill from a real emergency.

6) When conducted thoughtfully, drills will not create anxiety in children. They will build children's confidence and competence, even when conducted after a recent hazard event.

There is sometimes concern from parents, teachers and school administrators that drills and other forms of disaster education will cause children to be anxious and fearful. However, research has found that well-planned drills and associated learning activities do not increase anxiety or worry in children; rather, they increase their knowledge of what to do and their confidence in their coping abilities (Johnson, Ronan, et al. 2014).