

Planning for emergencies

By Phillip Rowell

Child care services need to develop procedures that outline how emergencies will be managed to protect individuals, maintain safe environments and meet the requirements of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation. An emergency can be a daunting experience; sometimes people are confused and feel a loss of control. This is compounded when services do not spend time preparing child care professionals and children for the possibility of an emergency occurring or believe that certain emergencies 'will never happen to us'.

Defining an emergency

Emergencies are sudden, unexpected events or situations that require immediate action to prevent injury or illness to individuals or damage to the carer's home or coordination unit.

A carer may need to respond to a range of different types of emergencies such as:

- fire or natural disasters, which include bushfire, flood, cyclone or thunderstorm
- power failure or structural damage to buildings
- vehicle collision or breakdown
- intruder - human (for example, burglary) or animal (for example, a snake or a bee swarm)
- incidents causing an injury or fatality (for example, electrocution).

Adopting a risk management perspective

When developing procedures for dealing with emergencies, coordination unit staff and carers should adopt a risk management approach which:

- identifies the types of emergencies that may occur and when they may happen
- analyses the potential risk to the safety and wellbeing of children and adults
- develops strategies to eliminate, minimise or control the emergency and/or subsequent risks.

Regardless of the type of service or its location, all services need to develop emergency procedures to deal with the potential threat of a home fire. However, there may be different ways to deal with a fire depending on the scheme and its unique characteristics. For example, carers located in rural areas may need to develop procedures to manage bushfires. Alternatively, a coordination unit that shares its facilities with other businesses may have emergency procedures imposed by the building's management body.

Because every carer's home has a different floor plan and emergency exit, and homes may be located anywhere from a rural property to a suburban house or apartment, individualised emergency procedures will need to be developed for each carer.

Developing procedures to manage emergencies

When developing procedures to manage potential emergencies, schemes should always comply with the OHS legislation and regulations in their state or territory.

The following questions can assist schemes to develop effective procedures:

- What are the potential responses to particular types of emergencies? For example, evacuate the carer's home or remain inside until further notice or to administer first aid or seek further medical assistance.
- Who is responsible for the children's emergency contact records?
- How does the scheme support staff, carers' and children's physical and emotional wellbeing? For example, if the emergency is an intruder, what types of strategies keep children and adults calm?
- What type of authorities does the scheme keep in contact with during an emergency?
- How do staff and carers communicate with families during and after an emergency?
- How is the emergency documented and reported?
- When are emergency policies and procedures reviewed, dated and sourced?
- Which recommendations from recognised authorities does the scheme use? For example, the Fire Protection Association, Australia.

Planning for emergencies on excursions

Schemes also need to consider the implications of a possible emergency when planning for children's excursions. Consider:

- How does the location of the excursion venue affect the possible risks involved? For example, if the excursion is near water such as the beach.
- Does the excursion destination or venue adequately meet with the scheme's expectations of emergency management?

- If the carer is using a vehicle such as their own car, what is the plan in case of a traffic incident?
- What type of information is required to accompany adults on the excursion?
For example, the most recent emergency contact details for children.
- Who is responsible for managing the emergency on the excursion?

Developing and practising emergency evacuation plans

One of the most effective ways to deal with many emergencies such as a home fire is to evacuate the building. The challenge in family day care settings is that carers are often by themselves with children and when an emergency happens they are solely responsible for removing children from danger.

When developing evacuation plans, schemes need to consider the following factors:

- type of emergency and its severity
- location and condition of exits from the home
- the external environment, such as surrounding vegetation
- safe meeting point away from the carer's home and location of emergency services
- implication of when two or more emergencies occur simultaneously such as evacuating due to a fire while administering first aid to burns.

Carers also need to consider the age of children in care and their capabilities. Babies will be unable to walk in an evacuation and toddlers may not comprehend some verbal instructions. Schemes need to consider how young children will be evacuated and the types of techniques which will minimise the risk of harm and distress.

Evacuation drills are crucial in supporting evacuation plans and measuring the effectiveness of emergency procedures. Drills can also strengthen the confidence of adults to cope with emergencies and be in control.

The following points are a useful guide when planning for evacuations and drills:

- Conduct evacuation drills regularly to keep everyone, including the carer's family members, aware of the sequence of events and each person's role.
- Implement evacuation drills using a range of scenarios such as different times of the day and types of emergencies. For example, consider evacuating the carer's home when children are sleeping/resting or during school holidays when additional children may be attending care.
- Document all drills and real life evacuations.

Understanding the impact of emergencies

Emergencies can affect individuals emotionally and psychologically. Children need to feel secure and safe during and after they have witnessed an emergency, and carers should provide children with opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings. It may also be important to seek the advice and support from counselling services for children and adults following an emergency.

Conclusion

When schemes develop, practice and communicate their emergency procedures they can be prepared to manage a range of emergency situations.

Effectively communicating emergency procedures to stakeholders is crucial. Carers should consistently communicate their emergency procedures to children and their families, especially at orientation, and display evacuation plans in the family day care home. Carers also need to discuss the procedures with their own families.

Coordination unit staff should discuss emergency procedures during carer recruitment and inductions, home visits, play sessions and support carers to discuss emergency procedures with their family members. There may also be opportunities to discuss the impact of emergencies with children at play sessions through planned experiences or visits from emergency services personnel such as police and fire officers ■

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principle: 4.3

References and further reading

- NCAC. (2007). *Sample emergency policy template*. Retrieved October 4, 2008, from http://www.ncac.gov.au/policy_development/emergency.PDF

Useful websites

- Fire Protection Association Australia: www.fpa.com.au
- State Emergency Services: www.australia.gov.au/320



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