

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 to individuals or damage to the service's environment.

A service 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 or animal (for example, snake, swarm of bees or stray dog)
- incidents causing an injury or fatality (for example, electrocution).

Adopting a risk management approach

When developing procedures for dealing with emergencies, services 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 building fire. However, there may be different ways to deal with a fire depending on the service and its unique characteristics. For example, in rural areas services may need to develop emergency procedures to deal with bushfires, while a service located in an urban high rise may have emergency procedures imposed by the building's management body.

Other emergency procedures may be created in response to a specific service practice. For example, staff that regularly take children to visit a local park may need to develop procedures for managing an emergency during these excursions.

Developing procedures to manage emergencies

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

The following questions can assist services to develop effective procedures:

- What are the potential responses to particular types of emergencies? For example, evacuate the service or remain inside until further notice or to apply first aid or seek further medical assistance.
- Who is responsible for the children's emergency contact records?
- How does the service support staff 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 service keep in contact with during an emergency?
- How does the service 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 service use? For example, the Fire Protection Association, Australia.

Planning for emergencies on excursions

Services 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 service's expectations of emergency management?

- Does the venue have an evacuation procedure and how does this assist staff to plan for the excursion?
- If the service is using a vehicle, such as a bus, 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?
- Conduct evacuation drills regularly to keep everyone abreast of the sequence of events and each person's role.
- Implement evacuation drills using a range of scenarios such as different times of day, age of children and types of emergencies. For example, evacuating the service when children are playing and all staff have started work for the day is considerably different to an evacuation when children are resting and some staff are on lunch breaks.
- Document all drills and real-life evacuations.

Developing and practising emergency evacuation plans

One of the most effective ways to deal with many emergencies such as a building fire is to evacuate the service. When developing evacuation plans, services need to consider the following factors:

- type of emergency and its severity
- location and accessibility of the service's exits
- skills, knowledge and mobility of staff. What are the contingency plans when regular staff are on leave?
- external environment such as surrounding vegetation
- safe meeting point away from the service and location of emergency services such as hospitals.

Child care professionals 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. The service needs 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 the service's evacuation plan 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:

Understanding the impact of emergencies

Emergencies can affect individuals emotionally and psychologically. Children need to feel secure and safe during and after instances when they witness an emergency, and staff should provide children with opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings. Inviting visitors to the service to discuss emergencies can help to foster children's understanding and sense of control over these events. It may also be important to seek advice and support from counselling services for children and adults following an emergency.

Conclusion

When services plan to manage emergencies it prepares and builds the confidence of children, staff, families and visitors to cope in an emergency. The service's duty of care extends to anyone who accesses the service's indoor and outdoor environments and includes excursions or when people are being transported in vehicles.

Effectively communicating emergency procedures to stakeholders is crucial. Services can display signs and evacuation plans and discuss the procedures during employee inductions and family enrolments. There may also be opportunities to discuss emergencies with children through play and planned experiences and through visits from emergency services personnel such as police and fire officers ■

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

Principle: 5.5

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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