

Age-Appropriate Safety Drills

Building Students' Confidence with Intentional Emergency Preparedness

Preparing students for emergencies works best when the information matches their age and emotional needs. Safety drills, when taught calmly and clearly, help students understand what to do without feeling afraid. Just like other everyday safety habits, these routines give children confidence and help them trust that adults are there to keep them safe.

Younger Grades

Supporting young children through safety drills begins with creating an environment where the routine feels familiar, predictable, and calm. When students know what will happen and see adults modeling confidence, they are far less likely to feel scared or overwhelmed.

Family Support

Families play an important role in helping children feel comfortable and informed. Schools can support families by offering resources that explain drills in a calm, reassuring way. These materials might include discussion tips, sample phrases, or short explanations of what safety drills look like at school.

Adults can also remind children that practicing safety is something we already do in everyday life, such as wearing helmets, buckling seatbelts, washing hands, and looking both ways before crossing a street. Safety drills are simply another way we take care of ourselves and each other.

What Can Young Children Do?

Children in early elementary grades are still developing their understanding of danger and usually rely heavily on adults during an emergency. They are still able to participate in and understand simple safety practices, such as:

- **“Get Out”** – leaving the classroom or building when asked
- **“Hide Out”** – staying out of sight, turning off lights, and remaining quiet
- **“Keep Out”** – understanding that adults may lock or block doors to keep danger away

These concepts should be taught gently and simply, reinforcing that adults are in charge of keeping everyone safe.



Younger Grades: Age Appropriate Supports

Use Simple Language and Visual Supports

- Younger students respond best to straightforward, concrete instructions. During drills, teachers can focus on cues such as:
 - “Stay quiet.”
 - “Follow your teacher.”
 - “Find a safe spot.”
 - Visual aids, such as pictures, icons, or short videos, can help children understand what to do without feeling overwhelmed.
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Keep Explanations Brief and Reassuring

For young learners, long or detailed explanations can create unnecessary stress. A simple statement can go a long way, such as:

“Today we’re practicing a safety drill. The teacher’s job is to keep you safe. We’ll practice sitting still and being as quiet as we can while we listen for directions.”

This approach keeps the tone calm and the focus on adult responsibility rather than fear.

Prepare for Common Questions

It can be helpful to know some of the questions children often ask and simple ways to respond:

- What is a safety drill?
 - It’s a practice that helps us know what to do if someone who shouldn’t be at school is nearby.
- Why do we have to do this?
 - Our job is to keep you safe, and practicing helps us do that.
- Why do I have to be quiet?
 - Being quiet helps us hear important directions.
- When will it be over?
 - Most drills only last a few minutes, and adults will tell us when it is finished.

These responses can be adapted to each child’s age, temperament, and emotional needs.



Older Grades

As students grow older, their ability to make sense of safety procedures and to respond to them appropriately increases significantly. Middle and high school students may be capable of carrying out practiced safety actions on their own, without needing step-by-step direction from adults.

What Can Older Students Do?

Older students typically show a higher level of automaticity during drills. With repeated practice, they may learn to:

- Respond quickly and appropriately to familiar safety cues
- Apply safety skills in different types of situations
- Adapt their actions based on the scenario and information given

Age-Appropriate Supports and Information

Unlike younger children, older students can usually handle more detailed explanations about why drills exist and what kinds of dangers they are designed to address.

Schools may choose to:

- Offer more specific discussions about situational awareness
- Explain the purpose behind different safety responses
- Use more realistic examples during lessons or training sessions

This approach helps students feel informed and capable while still maintaining a supportive and controlled learning environment.

Balance Realism with Reassurance

Even though older students can manage more complexity, maintaining a thoughtful, calm tone remains essential. These conversations should empower students and help them understand that preparedness is about being aware and ready rather than being afraid.

No matter the grade level, safety drills are most effective when they're simple, supportive, and age-appropriate. Younger students need clear, calm guidance, while older students can handle more independence and detail. By being prepared, educators can make sure every child feels prepared and protected.

References

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