
Environmental safety

The keystone in program quality

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Editor's note: This is the first of two articles on safety guidelines. The second article will address accident prevention and response. Refer to articles on food and kitchen safety in the Spring 1998 and Summer 2000 issues of *Texas Child Care*.

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Safety concerns impact every aspect of program planning and maintenance. Whether you operate from a reconditioned warehouse, a converted house, a custom-built school, or your family's home, your primary obligation is to protect the safety of the children in your care. Diverse settings, program models, and the ages of the children enrolled demand specific evaluation and careful monitoring to ensure the environment supports and enhances intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development.

Basic considerations like the amount of usable floor space, classroom furniture arrangements, heating and cooling systems, lighting, access to bathrooms and the playground, and storage have impact on both children's safety and behavior. Additionally, accommodating special equipment for children with disabilities, eliminating exposure to toxic substances, maintaining and repairing equipment, and developing program-specific plans for handling emergencies demand your attention.

Through all aspects of early care and education, practicing four basic principles help ensure the safety of children and adults: plan ahead, enforce policies, supervise actively, and teach safety first.

Program-wide considerations

Some safety issues go beyond particular classrooms and affect the entire program. The well-being of both children and teachers depend on strictly—and faithfully—followed policies on fire, transportation, gun, and pet safety.

Fire safety

Having to respond to a fire is a teacher's nightmare. But careful fire prevention habits, well-defined emergency response procedures, and good mechanical tools can help keep the nightmare at bay.

Carelessness and ignorance are too often at the root of fires. Remove these common hazards:

- Cube taps that overload electrical outlets and wiring systems
- Furnishings, draperies, curtains, and carpet that aren't fire-resistant
- Appliances with frayed, brittle electrical cords
- Frayed, brittle extension cords
- Bulbs in light fixtures that exceed the fixture's wattage limit
- Piles of combustible papers, trash, and rags
- Burning candles, matches, lighters, and lighter fluid
- Loose clothing and dangling dish rags and pot holders in the kitchen
- Heat-generating appliances (electric skillets, lamps, and irons, for example) that aren't immediately turned off after use.

Develop emergency response procedures carefully. You should have an evacuation plan with a map, a plan for conducting fire and other emergency drills, and a system for parent notification. Start by drawing a floor plan of your facility. Identify two accessible exits from the building—if a door is blocked, it's not accessible in an emergency. Mark the location of interior rooms and doors, windows, fire extinguishers, exit doors, and the route to a safe gathering space outside the building. Then determine and mark two exits from each space children

use. (If you want to use a window as an exit, all of the children and adults in the space must be able to move through the window, get to the ground, and away from the building safely).

Carefully consider your designated safe place. If you plan to use one space for all emergencies—fire, weather, and gas leak, for example—plan ahead with the owner of that property. Many programs designate two different safe places: one for quick

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evacuation (get everyone out of the building and count heads) and one for relocation (a place to wait for parents or for the tornado to pass).

Teach stop, drop, and roll

Teach children to use this survival skill if clothing catches on fire. Help children understand that running fuels the fire; rolling snuffs out the flame.

Share copies of the evacuation map with all of the adults in the building, including the kitchen and custodial workers. Post maps in every classroom, the kitchen, near exit doors, and in the office area. Include a review of the evacuation plan in new staff orientation and in regular in-service meetings.

Plan and execute regular fire and emergency drills. In your planning, designate one adult to call for emergency assistance after the children are safe. Devise a system for making sure you have emergency care information for each child including appropriate contact numbers, medical release forms, and the day's attendance sheet. Many programs make copies of emergency information (or create a separate form with space for a parent's signature) on cards that are clipped next to the classroom door with the day's attendance sheet. In an emergency the teacher can easily grab the information while



leaving the room. Practice fire drills at least once a month at different times of the day including nap time. Practice hazardous weather and other emergency drills at least twice a year. Document your drills with notes indicating the date, time, and amount of time it took to evacuate. Endeavor to safely evacuate the building in less than three minutes. Remember, your first job is to get everyone to safety.

When you and families are consistent in your transportation procedures, children quickly learn behavioral limits that keep everyone safe.

Smoke detectors have made a serious dent in the incidence of destructive fires. But in order to do the job of alerting you to smoke, you need to place and maintain the device appropriately. Hang a detector in each room, the hall, and the kitchen of your facility. Make sure you locate the smoke detector out of drafty areas including near air-conditioning and heating registers.

Check battery-operated smoke detectors monthly. A UL-marked smoke detector has a built-in testing button. Routinely replace batteries twice a year. Fire

departments recommend that you change batteries on the days the clock moves from daylight saving to standard time and back again. If you hear a periodic beep from the detector, replace that battery immediately.

Emergency lighting can have an impact on how quickly you can evacuate a building in an emergency. Some programs have emergency lighting systems and others rely on flashlights with batteries. If you use flashlights, make sure adults know where to find them quickly and that the batteries have enough charge to do the job.

A fire-extinguishing system (sprinklers) is desirable but at least one hand-held fire extinguisher is a must. Buy an extinguisher labeled 3A-40BC; the dry chemical will be effective on all types of fire, including grease. Mount the extinguisher in a universally accessible area—the main hall, for example—according to the manufacturer’s recommendation but no higher than 5 feet from the floor. Buy a second fire extinguisher for the kitchen as an additional precaution. Check the charge level on the extinguisher monthly and have it professionally checked at least once a year or after any use. Some extinguishers can be recharged but some must be replaced after use. Review operation procedures with all adults in the program; make sure you know how to use the extinguisher before a fire starts.

Transportation safety

Transportation safety applies not only to your program but to the families who come to you every day, transporting their children to your door. Share your safety procedures with families—and be a model of care and caution. When you and families are consis-

Buckle up

If the child is...

- Younger than 1 year and weighs less than 20 pounds
- At least 1 year old and weighs between 20 and 40 pounds
- Younger than 4 years old and less than 36 inches in height
- Younger than 4 years old and at least 36 inches in height
- At least 4 years old, and at least 36 inches, but younger than 17 years old

Then the child must be secured in...

- a rear-facing infant safety seat according to the manufacturer’s instructions that come with the seat;
- a child passenger safety seat according to the manufacturer’s instructions that come with the seat;
- a child passenger safety seat or booster seat according to the manufacturer’s instructions, anywhere a child sits in a passenger vehicle;
- a booster seat according to the manufacturer’s instructions or properly fitting safety belt, anywhere the child sits in the vehicle; and
- a safety belt, anywhere the child sits in the vehicle.



tent in your transportation procedures, children quickly learn behavioral limits that keep everyone safe.

Evaluate the driving patterns at your program. Does everyone enter from the same direction or is it a free-for-all of pulling in and backing out? Do teachers and staff have a parking area that is distinct, leaving easy access for parents? Do you clench your teeth every time you watch a child—with or without parents—dash across a street?

Work with staff to establish functional and safe routines for automobiles—both for families and program drivers.

In the parking lot. If possible designate the driveway as one-way with a separate entrance and exit. When all cars move in the same direction, fewer accidents happen. If street parking is necessary, establish the same one-way action that ensures that children exit and enter the car along the curb rather than in the street. Do not allow children to cross streets without an adult.

Devise a system for keeping everyone safe when exiting or entering a vehicle. For example, as children wait to climb in and buckle up, have them wait with one hand on the car at all times. This beats repeatedly asking children to “stay close” and “come here.”

On the road. Follow regulatory standards regarding seat belts, infant safety seats, and booster seats appropriate to a child’s age, height, and weight. Safety restraints must be used by all adults and children before starting a vehicle and whenever the vehicle is in motion. Make sure the restraints meet federal standards set by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and are properly secured in the vehicle.

Always try to have at least two adults in each vehicle—one driver and one in a back seat. Moving through traffic is an especially hard transition time. Bring along some pocket games and song ideas to help make children happy passengers.

Build a foolproof system for accounting for all of the children all of the time. Avoid trips until you know every child by name and face. Count heads as frequently in the car as you do on the playground. Use a written list to make sure everyone get into and out of the vehicle. Encourage children to be responsible for each other with a buddy system or group counting. Never leave a child alone in a vehicle.

And for safety’s sake, never hesitate to cut short a trip because of mechanical difficulties or a child’s unmanageable behavior.

In the event of an emergency or accident, never go on the road without the following:

- a sign identifying name of the program, and the name and phone number of an emergency contact
- a cell phone or message beeper
- a list of children's names, parents' names, and emergency contact numbers
- authorization forms for emergency transportation and medical treatment
- a fire extinguisher
- a first-aid kit

Gun and explosive safety

Guns, bows and arrows, hunting knives, BB guns, caps, darts, fireworks, and other projectile or exploding devices have no place in a child care facility. There is no foolproof—or childproof—way to make explosives safe in a child's environment. If necessary, consider renting an off-site storage unit. The cost (usually less than \$50 for a 4-foot by 8-foot space) is worth the cost of keeping children safe.

Pet safety

Animals can be a special addition to the environment—if you follow basic safety precautions. Insist that all new pets have visited a vet and are free of

disease and infection before taking up residence in your program. Ask for a current vaccination certificate, if appropriate. Some animals, such as turtles and birds, carry diseases that are communicable to humans and are not appropriate in classrooms with young children. Some furry animals, including dogs, cats, hamsters, and guinea pigs may produce dander that causes allergies. If a child or adult has dander allergies, choose another animal for the classroom. Finally, always insist on careful hand-washing before and after handling pets and their cages, bedding, and food.

In the classroom

Plan for safety—every time you add a toy or material to the classroom, take a walk in the neighborhood, plan a cooking activity, feed the hamster, and arrange the environment. Let classroom management be guided by your attention to the safety of the children. Plan ahead—equipment, activities, and interactions. Establish and maintain rules for safe behaviors—and enforce them consistently. Supervise attentively—with your eyes, ears, and whole body. And model, guide, and teach safety.

The following practices will help keep children safe and minimize your liability risk.



- Turn down the water heater to a maximum of 120 degrees to minimize scalding.
- Childproof the space by removing blind and curtain cords, covering electrical outlets, locking away hazardous materials like cleaning chemicals, medicines, cosmetics, and adult-use supplies like craft knives, sharp, pointed scissors, and kitchen utensils.

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- Arrange furniture and materials for easy supervision. You should be able to see all areas of the classroom from wherever you stand.
- Stick decals on floor-length windows and doors.
- Keep electrical cords out of reach; eliminate extension cords. Arrange furniture to block children's access to electric outlets.
- Mount fans, heaters, and air conditioners out of children's reach.
- Provide equipment and materials that are appropriate to the ages, interests, and skills of the children in the group.
- Examine secondhand purchases and donations with extra care.
- Check toys and equipment daily. Remove, and replace or repair the material before sharing it with children. Schedule routine maintenance or work days to repaint, tighten, and clean equipment.
- Arrange materials and toys on low, child-accessible shelves. Avoid storage chests and trunks that children could crawl into.
- Use safety straps on high chairs, strollers, and diaper-changing surfaces.
- Provide a shock-absorbing floor covering under indoor climbing equipment and lofts more than 20 inches high. Climbers and loft ladders must have handrails and protective barriers that prevent accidental falls or entrapment.

Toxic substances

Exposure to pollutants affects the health of both children and adults. Evaluate your practices and work to eliminate all sources of toxic chemicals. Lead paint, asbestos, and mold infestations require expert intervention. If you suspect the presence of any of these substances, contact your health department. Other dangerous air pollutants include cigarette smoke, paint fumes, household cleaning chemical fumes, and formaldehyde in carpet and building materials. Exposure can result in increased respiratory illness including cough, congestion, and difficulty breathing.

- Never allow balloons, explosives, or projectile toys. The risk—and your liability—is too great.
- Purchase sturdily built toys and equipment. Look for durability, non-toxic paint, and stability. Don't buy materials with sharp corners and edges, pinch points, loose or dangling parts, or those made of glass or brittle plastic that could break.

Outdoor spaces

Outdoor play spaces offer an endless array of opportunities for discovery, creativity, and socialization. When you plan these spaces, think safety first. Use these guidelines to help keep children and adults engaged and safe in their outdoor learning.

- Offer a variety of surfaces that are appropriate to particular activities. Grassy lawns invite tumbling and running, wheel toys need hard tracks, and water play requires a water source and good drainage.
- Trees, greenery, and gardening spaces invite investigation and offer soothing shade. But make sure your plantings are safe for children to explore.
- Arrange equipment for easy supervision. You should be able to visually supervise all areas of the space from wherever you are.
- Anchor large equipment with metal pins or concrete. Refer to regulatory standards for guidance on the minimum space required for use (or fall) zones, ground cushioning depths, and entrapment hazards.
- Monitor water play carefully. Empty buckets, dish-pans, plant saucers, trays, and wading pools immediately after use. Standing water is the breeding ground for mosquitoes as well as a drowning hazard.

- Monitor the play yard for broken glass, wire, and other debris.
- Inspect equipment daily to identify hazards. Look for jagged or sharp edges, loose bolts or screws, and broken or missing parts. Remove dangerous equipment—repair it, replace it, or junk it.

Share the plan with families

Parents choose a child care program wanting to be assured that their children are safe. They want and need to know what happens to their children during their time with you. You can best, and most easily, satisfy parents by preparing forms and charts that record unusual events—minor cuts and scratches as well as injuries that require professional attention. All parents realize accidents happen; no parent wants to be surprised by a child’s bandaged leg at supertime, long after you have gone home.

Let parents know that they will always be given a written record of accidents and incidents that cause injury or place children at risk.

Be prepared. At the time of enrollment, spend time with parents describing your program’s safety plan. Reinforce the information when you ask parents to sign forms giving you permission to seek emergency medical attention; review your safety procedures for field trips and water play when you present those permission forms. Let parents know that they will always be given a written record of accidents and incidents that cause injury or place children at risk.

Review regulatory standards for your area and include any required information on the permission and reporting forms you provide parents for signature. Make sure you have multiple copies of the forms: one for the office file, one in the classroom, and one that travels on field trips and any away-from-facility events.

Follow up. If it becomes necessary to report an

accident or risk event, make sure you are prepared to answer parents’ questions and concerns. Telephone the parent immediately. Rely on a written description of the event (where and when it happened, and who was involved), the name of the teacher who witnessed the incident, and a description of any first aid provided. If appropriate, provide your program’s liability insurance information. Make a copy of the incident report for the parent and ask for a signature acknowledging receipt.

In programs that serve young children, healthy environments—and accident prevention—reflect

Caution with plants

Greenery softens the environment, helps buffer noise, and adds beauty. But many plants are also toxic when ingested or cause dermatitis or skin sores when handled. Additionally, treating a non-toxic plant with insecticide can make it toxic. The following plants may cause toxic symptoms and should be removed from areas accessible to children.

House plants

Asparagus fern, Avocado, Blue Gum, Buddhist Pine, Cactus, Caladium, Century Plant, Crown of Thorns, Cyclamen, Dieffenbachia, Holly, Ivy (including Cape, English, German, Glacier, and Needlepoint), Jerusalem Cherry, Mistletoe, Philodendron, Poinsettia, Umbrella Plant, Wisteria

Garden plants

Azalea, Bleeding Heart, Calla Lily, Carnation, Castor-oil plant, Chinese or Japanese Lantern, Chrysanthemum, Clematis, Crocus, Daffodil, Delphinium, Foxglove, Gladiola, Hyacinth, Iris, Jonquil, Lily of the Valley, Morning Glory, Narcissus, Oleander, Pansy (seeds), Peony (root), Primrose, Sweet Pea, Sweet William

Wild mushrooms

All mushrooms and toadstools should be considered toxic.

Vegetables

Potato (leaves and green patches on tubers), Rhubarb leaves, Tomato greens

Hedges and bushes

Black Locust, Buckthorn, Cherry Laurel, Daphne, Elderberry, Horse Chestnut, Hydrangea, Laburnum, Privet, Virginia Creeper



four basic principles: planning ahead, establishing and maintaining clear, consistent policies, supervising diligently, and teaching safety. It's not possible to prevent all accidents—a slip on a wet sidewalk, a hollow block dropped on a finger, or a tumble over a floor toy—but adherence to these principles will minimize your liability risk and reassure parents that you are equipped to protect the safety of their children.

Resources

Chang, Albert. *Caring for Your Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care Programs, 2nd Edition*. Washington, D.C.: American Public Health Association, 2002.

Marotz, L.R., M. Cross, and J.M. Rush. *Health, Safety, and Nutrition for the Young Child, 3rd Edition*. Albany: Delmar, 1993.

Avoid plant poisoning with these rules

- Become familiar with the dangerous plants in your area. Know them by sight and name.
- Teach children at an early age to keep unknown plants and plant parts out of their mouths and away from their bodies.
- Do not eat wild greens or mushrooms.
- Do not rely on heating or cooking to destroy toxic substances.
- Store plants, seeds, and bulbs away from children. Supervise gardening activities carefully.
- Teach children to recognize poison ivy, oak and sumac.
- Do not allow children to suck nectar from flowers or make "tea" from leaves.
- Do not rely on pets, birds, or squirrels to indicate non-poisonous plants.
- Remember, there are no safe tests or rules of thumb for distinguishing edible from poisonous plants.
- Keep your plants and playground chemical free.