

As a former classroom teacher, I remember well the times when we would have tornado and fire drills to ensure that our students were comfortable and confident with the safety procedures we followed.

The purpose in having these drills is to ensure your children are safe and protected at school. The more prepared the students are in advance, the more successful school staff can be with ensuring their safety.

As a parent, I find comfort in knowing that my children practice the school's procedures to follow in case of an unexpected disaster. However, it was not until a natural disaster struck our farm in 2010 that I realized the importance of practicing these same drills at home. Sure, just like many of you, I had read articles and listened to public service announcement explaining that families need disaster plans in place that are practiced and reviewed periodically. I guess human nature is to discount such things until they become relevant to you, personally.

The recent tornadoes here in Kansas and across the south, as well as the flooding, are a stark reminder of the importance of preparation and planning when it comes to natural disasters. To make sure your family is prepared in the case of an emergency (natural disaster or other), you should first plan a family meeting to create your family's response plan. Because families differ so greatly, each family should create their own unique plan and make sure that everyone knows what the plan is. Family emergency plans needs to include the following critical pieces:

Escape Routes: Draw up a simple floor plan of your home or apartment. If you have more than one level, you will need to create a sketch for each floor of your living space. Everyone in the family needs to know the escape route from the various rooms of the home. Each room should have two exit points. In our farm house, we have told our boys that they will have to go out a bedroom window if they are unable to escape through their door. A friend of mine, who used to foster children, shared that she and her husband actually had a fake fire made from colored tissue paper. They would stage fire drills and change the location of the fake fire so that everyone in the home would have to adjust their escape routes as needed.

Another key part of the escape is to pre-determine a meeting location that is safe and accessible to all the family members after they have left the home. In some cases, such as flooding, you should consider sketching out the street layout in your neighborhood so that you know where to go if authorities tell you to evacuate.

Communication with Family: You need to plan for the how communication will be made should your family get separated during the emergency. Make family contact cards with phone numbers on it that everyone keeps in their purse, wallet, or book bag. Include a reliable family member or friend on the contact card who lives outside of your community that each member could report to in case local communication lines are unavailable.

If you have been injured as a result of the emergency, paramedics and other medical staff often attempt to get information from you cell phone so that they can contact family. One way to assist them in their efforts is to enter an "ICE" number in your contact list. "ICE" is an acronym for **I**n **C**ase of **E**mergency. The phone number and name associated to this contact should be the person you would want

emergency personnel to contact on your behalf. You can add a second contact “ICE2” to serve as a backup contact person. In my case, my husband is ICE and my sister is ICE2. Since she lives in another community, she would likely be a reliable contact in the event of a natural disaster or family emergency.

Utility Shut-off and Safety: In some cases of disaster, you may need to shut off utility services to your home. Most fires that occur after a natural disaster are caused by natural gas leaks. If you are unsure how to do this, contact your utility service provider. When it is time to turn the utilities back on, you should contact the utility company to do this. They have equipment and training to ensure this is done safely and that there are no leaks remaining in your home.

Insurance and Other Important Records: You may not have time to collect important documents in the midst of an emergency. Make sure you have copies of your insurance policy numbers, contact information, medication lists, credit card numbers and contact information as well as other important documents safely and securely stored in a location away from your home.

Other Considerations: There are other factors that may influence your personalized family emergency plan. For example, you will need to adjust your plans for anyone in your home that has a physical disability or other medical needs. House pets need to be included in the plan, as well.

K-State Research and Extension has a website dedicated to family and community emergency and disaster preparedness. Check it out at <http://www.kseden.ksu.edu>. You will find helpful resources and additional links that will help you create a family emergency plan.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Homeland security has developed a family-friendly website that can assist your family in creating an emergency preparedness plan. The site includes downloads for contact cards and other important information. You can access this information at <http://www.ready.gov/kids/make-a-plan>.

For more information on creating a family emergency plan, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!