

Emergency plans in schools: Individualised disaster planning for students with impaired vision

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ABSTRACT

In light of recent disasters, families, schools and communities are developing plans to manage school response. Few students have individualised safety plans built into their IEPs and most schools do not have inclusive plans for safety in the event of disaster. Carefully considered emergency plans, which address the needs of all students, could bring peace of mind to families and school personnel, could prevent the exacerbation of disability and could save lives. Disabled children are at great risk for displacement during rapid evacuations and slowed reunification with families following a disaster, among other disaster related risks. The objective of this research is to provide literature based recommendations for research and practice for safety planning in schools for children with impaired vision.

Key words: *Disaster, emergency planning, vision impaired children*

Until recently, little attention has been paid to the development of school disaster plans for children with impairments, disabilities and health conditions. Disasters can be natural, such as blizzards, extreme heat, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, volcanic eruption and ash fall, hurricanes, cyclones, tornadoes, lightning strikes, avalanches, landslips, fires or human made and industrial disasters such as gas leaks, chemical spills, airline crashes, nuclear accidents, exposure to noxious agents or toxic waste, dam failures, electrical fires, construction or plant accidents, suspicious goods, bomb threats, gang behaviour, assaults, hostage situations, student riots, trespassers, violent intruders, shootings or other threats that require school lockdowns. Safety plans must be made carefully as it may be appropriate to have a plan that covers a span of 2-3 days in the event that a child is unable to be reunited with family.

A safe school environment is essential to well-being and families, schools and communities and decision makers need information to help them strategically coordinate a framework to make policies, programmes and practices comprehensive and coordinated to promote student health and school safety. It seems that disaster planning is more often than not overlooked in IEPs (Individualised Education Plans). Evacuation planning and emergency preparedness need much more attention at the individual student level. Students with impaired vision will have specific challenges in disasters that can include missing visual cues, such as new obstructions that can occur during an emergency. And those with multiple disabilities require more options or alternatives in the development of emergency and evacuation plans.

"The gaps in school disaster planning for children with disabilities are huge" (Boon et al., 2011, p. 233). It is reported that 22% of U.S. schools do not have disaster plan provisions for students with special needs (Council on School Health, 2008). The number of schools with and without such provisions in other parts of the world, including Australia and New Zealand is unknown. Strategies to enhance and individualise disaster planning for specific disability related needs of

a child include an Individualised Evacuation Emergency Plan (IEEP) (Asher & Pollak, 2009); a lockdown plan (IELP) (Clarke, Embury, Jones, & Yssel, 2014) and evacuation and sheltering plan (IESP) (Brunner & Lewis, 2004). Such attention to safety planning could save lives of individual students living with disabilities and their classmates, teachers and rescuers.

METHOD

A systemic approach to identifying literature has been utilised with a 12-step process outlined by Kable, Pich and Maslin-Prothero (2012). Papers were obtained through the following databases: Discover (Massey University's Library Discovery Layer searches multiple databases, including Web of Science, Web of Knowledge and PsychInfo) and Scopus. Google Scholar was used extensively in early exploration of the topics, but was determined to be too imprecise to accurately identify specific numbers of articles that met the set criteria. Searches were conducted in early 2014 and updated in August 2014. Included are original research studies and guidelines that were relevant to the need for individualised emergency preparation and disaster planning for school-aged children with disabilities. English language articles, published 2004-2014, available through Massey University in full-text were included in this review. Previously published systematic and literature reviews were excluded, as were any articles with a primary focus on adult or community emergency planning. The following search terms were used to search the databases with the titles, abstracts and key words and full text, in some instances, searched. Truncation was used to ensure all word variance was captured and thereby, no important research was excluded from consideration.

Search words and their variations were narrowed to the following:

- School
- Safety plan
- Disaster
- Disability
- IEP
- Vision impairment

Table 1 provides an overview of the search process for each database. The key findings of 12 papers related to individualised school disaster planning for children with impaired vision are summarised in Table 2.

RESULTS

Initial searches found extensive literature related to shootings, terrorism, drugs, violence and bullying. Some studies related to fires. Few studies emerged relating to natural disaster planning or to individualised planning for those with disabilities. Disaster research on vulnerable populations has two emerging tracks: 1) children and 2) adults with disabilities. Little empirical work emerged that examines the intersection of children with disabilities in disasters. Peek and Stough (2010) noted that both children and adults with disabilities are often excluded from emergency planning and disaster response professionals assume parents will protect children in disasters, even though children are often away from families, when in school, with friends or being cared for by others, and emergency management agencies often neglect the needs of those with disabilities in their planning.

Murray (2011) concurs that the issues for children with disabilities in disaster preparedness are neglected: "Disaster preparedness experts have overlooked the unique needs of children with special needs and disabilities when developing emergency evacuation plans and policies, leaving children and families ill-prepared for a catastrophic emergency" (p. 227). Boon et al., (2012) explain that planning ahead, planning for particular disasters, and planning for emotional and educational support after a disaster are all important components of managing potential life-threatening disasters.

SCHOOL SAFETY PLANNING IN GENERAL

Studies and guides for planning for disaster and school crisis planning were identified that were designed to promote and protect the health of individuals, families and communities (Geiger, Firsing, Beric, & Rogers, 2013). Much of this literature reflects on U.S. legislation designed to mandate drills, protocols and plans in schools.

Heath, Ryan, Dean, and Bingham (2007) provided a comprehensive historical overview of U.S. school disasters and how legislation has emerged to protect children in the wake of disasters. Fires, explosions, a school bus hijacking, earthquakes, shootings and terrorism events from 1851-2006 gave rise to various mandates for fire drills, duck and cover drills, Red Cross training specific to children's needs, the development of associations of school psychologists to support children, guidelines for the prevention of tragedies in schools, resource guides for safe schools, national conferences on school safety, and publication of government documents on school crises. Current U.S. education legislation (No Child Left Behind) states that each student has the right to learn in a safe environment (Heath et al., 2007 p. 216). Although disability was not mentioned in this article by Heath et al. it surely stands to reason that some students will require more attention in planning for safe schools.

SAFETY PLANNING AND THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable during emergencies. Research shows that the support disabled people receive from others is often interrupted during disasters (NZ Ministry of Education, 2010). The following factors make people with disabilities more vulnerable during an emergency situation:

- They tend to be invisible in emergency systems.
- They may not be able to comprehend the disaster and its consequences.
- They may be excluded from the disaster response efforts and may become particularly affected by changes in terrain resulting from the disaster.
- He or she may lose the ability to use a mobility aid and, as a result, lose access to a safe location, adequate shelter, water, sanitation and other services.
- They may experience emotional distress that has long-term consequences.
- He or she may misinterpret the situation.
- They may have communication difficulties, making them more vulnerable in disaster situations (NZ Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 28).

In recognition of the increased risks, the U.S. National Fire Protection Association (2007) has created a personal emergency evacuation planning tool for school students with disabilities. Here they present the argument for IEPs to contain plans for emergencies in schools.

Schools are required by federal law to develop “individual educational programs” (IEPs) that evaluate and consider many facets of a child’s condition in order to ensure that an equal education is provided to every student, regardless of disabilities. A portion of the IEP is to provide for related services. While not explicitly stated, the related services component must consider the particular needs of the child to ensure his or her safety during a building emergency that includes an evacuation. (p. 4)

Boon, Brown, and Pagliano (2014) conducted a postal survey with Australian schools and found that the needs of students with disabilities have not been adequately reflected in school emergency plans. They noted that children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable to disasters. Anticipatory, acute and recovery phases of emergencies were explored for five disability types (physical / mobility impairment; chronic conditions / special needs; sensory impairments; emotional /behavioural disability; and cognitive impairment). With an 18% response rate to their survey, the study could be criticised, yet the recommendations appear sound. They recommended that safety plans be individualised and that drills be practiced. Authors recommended that schools be represented in local Disaster Management Groups.

Black (2004b) noted that “schools should attend to an often overlooked item—the evacuation of severely impaired children, such as those in wheelchairs and on ventilators, and children who don’t speak fluent English” (p. 38). Black goes on to provide a “grab and go” emergency item list for teachers and administrators that includes keys with identification to all school doors; floor plans that identify exits, telephones and communication devices; staff roster that indicates those with first aid training, etc. (2004a).

Clarke et al. (2014) reflect: “After considering the needs of the school as a whole, special education teachers should focus on individual student learning needs and how they can teach students to be safe from a variety of dangers, including natural disasters and school violence” (p. 171). The authors propose a number of plans, including IELPs (individualised emergency lockdown plans) and skill assessments.

Brunner and Lewis (2004) state that “every student with a disability who could be adversely affected during an evacuation or in-place sheltering event should have an IESP. The IESP [evacuation and sheltering plan] should be an addendum to the school’s crisis management plan” (p. 65).

Much more attention needs to be directed at the needs of children with disabilities in the aftermath of a disaster. Life-threatening consequences can arise from separation from parents and caregivers, illness and disease, malnutrition and abuse, stigma, social distancing and purposeful abandonment (Peek & Stough, 2010), making careful disaster planning for disabled children in schools crucial.

SAFETY PLANNING SPECIFIC TO STUDENTS WITH IMPAIRED VISION

Very little literature seems to be available addressing the specific disaster planning needs of children in schools with impaired vision. In fact, no empirical studies were found related to the specific needs of blind children, or those with low vision, during a crisis or natural disaster. What are available are some very practical suggestions (see Burke, 2010; Clarke et al., 2014 and Geiger et al., 2013 for examples). Although these have not all been tested, the guidelines could provide parents, teachers and schools with some excellent resources for emergency preparedness.

Clarke et al. (2014) identified seven particular impairments and the specific issues that may need to be met in a crisis. For those with impaired vision she suggests the following, in relation to school lockdowns,

Multiple opportunities to explore the facility when it is in lockdown mode to understand which exits might not be available. Strobe lights or vibrating pagers to supplement audible alarms, Braille signage or audible directorial signage, pre-recorded directions on a CD (p. 174).

A model emergency plan for students with special needs from a California county school district (Burke, 2010) outlined detailed plans for emergency preparedness, emergency response and emergency recovery. It is a comprehensive document, complete with checklists, sample information forms, sample medical card, 72-hour medication forms and online resources.

Specific factors named to reduce risk in emergencies for blind students are "guidance from a sighted person" (p. 8). Those with visual impairments may have to depend on others to lead them to safety during a disaster and may be reluctant to leave familiar surroundings. Employ Braille signage or audible directions for students who are blind or have low vision. Emergency back-up lighting systems, especially in stairwells and other dark areas, will benefit those students with limited visual acuity. Mark emergency supplies with large print or Braille. Students should know where the nearest telephones and alarm boxes are located and how to describe their location. Preparedness kits should include:

- extra folding white cane,
- heavy gloves for feeling the way over glass or debris,
- coloured poncho worn for visibility, and
- comfort items (p.18).

Burke (2010) provided detailed suggestions for announcing the emergency for those who are vision impaired, suggesting that a helper

- touch the person on the elbow gently,
- identify yourself quickly and explain the situation,
- ask if the individual has any preferences regarding how to be guided,
- clearly describe where you are going and any approaching obstacles or protruding objects which will require a change in your walking path or pattern, and
- be protective of your space as there may be many people using the same route to evacuate (p. 22-23).

Burke (2010) then generally addressed considerations for all students with disabilities during evacuations and recovery.

Although designed for workplaces and not for schools, the U.S. National Fire Protection Association (2007) has produced an emergency evacuation planning guide for people with disabilities. It has a chapter dedicated to the needs of those with vision impairments. Here, a new technology in fire safety is introduced. "Directional sound" alarm systems communicate the location of exits using broadband noise and varying tones and intensities that offer cues for finding the way out). Such systems could be used effectively in schools. Murray (2011) identifies that children with impaired vision will need the opportunity to share feelings, have questions answered and have materials presented to them appropriately in relation to disaster planning.

Children with blindness and other impairments, including autism and communication issues are frequently at risk for "fleeing", "bolting", "eloping" or "running" and this can happen during times of stress, including during emergencies or disasters. There are toolkits available, for example, from the National Autism Association, <http://nationalautismassociation.org/docs/BigRedSafetyToolkit.pdf> to help schools and families make a plan to prevent wandering and to find a child who has disappeared. The first step listed is to Call 111 (or appropriate emergency number) and search nearby water first. A sample IEP letter is available in this toolkit that can help schools and families work together to create behaviour plans and set up parental notification systems. These toolkits, however, seem targeted to individual emergencies, and not to assist an individual when a whole school, classroom or community is experiencing an emergency or disaster.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This systematic review of scholarly research has revealed very few empirical studies on the topic of disaster preparedness in schools for children with impaired vision. And no empirical studies were found relating to individualising disaster plans for students. However, gleaned from both academic and more general sources the following recommendations can be made to practically promote inclusive disaster planning for students with and without disabilities in schools:

- Review emergency plans annually.
- Implement training in schools and for those responsible for children during transit to and from school and in before and after-school care.
- Implement training for school nurses who may need a better understanding of the longer term needs of specific students with disabilities should a disaster last several days.
- Consider enlisting the expertise of Occupational Therapists, paediatric healthcare professionals and others who may be ideally suited to lead schools in disaster plan development.
- Practice drills in schools.
- Set up communication systems within schools, with parents and to the wider community (including law enforcement, fire safety, public health, emergency services, paediatric and mental health professionals)
- Teach children about safety, well-being and natural disaster preparedness.

- Identify those who need an individualised plan for evacuation, sheltering lockdown or other disaster situation (not necessarily just those with IEPs) and be sure to include evacuation planning for severely disabled children.
- Ensure the school has supplies needed for up to 72 hours (food, medication, water) and prepared crisis response kits.
- Ensure children with individualised plans have a three-day supply of medications, medical equipment, identification and tools they need for communication at hand in case of emergency.
- Consider whether debris might obstruct the evacuation of staff and students, generally and those with disabilities specifically and plan alternative emergency shelter locations.
- Identify alternative, accessible, safe shelter locations and communicate these locations to emergency responders.
- Because many students who are blind are also hearing impaired, consider providing basic sign language training to designated school staff. (National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, 2008)
- Set up traumatic incident support teams.
- Have a plan for reunification with families for children with disabilities.
- Consider what training is needed to assist students with disabilities who may become upset when routines are disrupted.
- Add a simple question at the end of each individualised education program (IEP) meeting that simply asks “Is there a need for a specific plan for this student’s individual needs if there were a crisis in the building?” (Clarke, 2014, p. 140).
- Recognise that advanced planning for acute phases of a disaster as well as for post disaster education and support are needed.

CONCLUSION

After recent earthquakes in our region I attempted to get an individualised safety plan in place for my vision impaired son who also has additional learning needs, and recently started school. I was surprised to find no templates for individual safety plans available from the Ministry of Education, from the school, nor from the blindness agencies that provide services to my son. Informal discussion with other parents, with teachers and in social media revealed that in some instances physiotherapists assess student abilities and create emergency evacuation plans that all of the child’s teachers and teacher’s aides have access to (K. Henry, personal communication, July 14, 2014). Other parents reported that an aide helps during fire, tornado or other emergency drills. The teacher is then to ensure that the child is accounted for at the designated safe place. Bus safety plans have been devised too (S. White, personal communication, July 14, 2014). Another parent reported that although a plan is supposed to be in place, she gets vague answers when she asks about the details of a plan (G. Bearsley, personal communication, August 11, 2014). As a result of this evident lack of consistent safety planning, I intended to research scholarly studies on the subject. No empirical research was available that met the criteria of being related to individualised disaster planning in schools for children with disabilities. And so the search expanded to include policy documents, guides and sample emergency plans. Although disaster research is proliferating, very little literature addresses the needs of disabled children in schools. Some good models, mostly from the U.S., are available that could be adapted to the needs of vision impaired children and some good practical suggestions for disaster planning can be found in the literature. Research must be

undertaken, throughout the world, to help develop scholarly, empirical evidence and best practices in this area, in order to help schools and to save the lives of children in disasters.

No matter how well prepared an individual school may be, or how detailed a child's individual safety plan, a school's emergency preparation and disaster planning is most effective if a whole community approach to supporting schools is encouraged. Local law enforcement, first responders and entire communities can be involved and know the situation of the school. Likewise, individual children will likely be less vulnerable if they are integrated into their communities and schools. NZ research has shown that adults with impaired vision are less vulnerable in a disaster if they have built social supports and are well integrated into their local communities (Good, Phibbs, Williamson, & Chambers, 2012; Phibbs, Woodbury, Williamson, & Good, 2012). It is likely this is true for children too.

Having a child integrated into their community can be not only life-enhancing, but life-saving. Experience from the Great East Japan Earthquakes showed that those most helpful to severely disabled children were those who had day-to-day contact with them prior to the disasters:

Preparations for a disaster are connected to peace of mind in daily life. This is not something that can be created by medical treatment, welfare, government administrations and the family individually on their own; it is something that each part works together to build. Creating a support network from this normal daily life is the real disaster countermeasure (Tanaka, 2013, p. 213).

"Raising children as part of the local communities is the biggest factor in saving them from disasters" (Tanaka, 2013, p. 209).

Table 1
Search Results 2004-2013

Data Base	Discover (searches multiple databases including Web of Knowledge, Web of Science and PsychInfo)		Scopus	
	# retrieved (full text search)	Table 2 article ID	# retrieved (all field search)	Table 2 article ID
School, "safety plan"	184 (3060)	#2, 3, 7, 10	25 (908)	#10
School, "safety plan", disaster	3 (523)	#10	2 (72)	#1, 9, 10
School, "safety plan", disaster, disabilit*	0 (226)	#4, 5, 6, 11,12	0 (7)	#1
School, "safety plan", IEP	1 (11)	#8	0 (0)	
School, "safety plan" "vision impair"	0 (0)		0 (0)	

Table 2

Summary of Articles: School disaster planning for children with disabilities 2004-2014

	Authors, year, country	Method/design	Sample size /scope of project	Comments/key findings related to disaster planning for children with disabilities in schools
1	Asher & Pollak (2009) USA	Case examples and evaluation of IEEP (individualised emergency evacuation plan) forms	7 case examples	OT expertise is ideally suited to assume leadership within school teams in the development of IEEPs. A framework is provided for reliable emergency evacuation plans that consider the safety of students with special needs.
2	Black (2004a) USA	Examination of school attack protection policies	Three categories of plans identified: risk reduction/prevention and intervention plans; response plans; recovery plans	Effective crisis planning requires planning at both a macro- and micro-level. Current debriefing protocols are questioned. Schools often overlook evacuation planning for severely disabled children.
3	Black (2004b) USA	Examination of safety laws	Three categories of plans revisited; risk reduction; response and recovery.	Crisis-response kit suggestions provided.
4	Boon, Brown & Pagliano (2014) Australia	Postal survey with schools	80 survey responses from schools. Descriptive statistics of responses.	The needs of students with disabilities are not adequately reflected in school emergency plans. These plans must be individualised and practiced. Most schools were not represented in a local Disaster Management Group.
5	Boon, Pagliano, Brown & Tsey (2012) Australia	Content analysis of policies of Australian State Education Departments and their policies, guidelines and frameworks and how inclusive disaster plans are for students with disabilities.	132 documents analysed.	Consistency needed across States and countries to ensure effective and equitable emergency management policies. Disruption to schooling can increase disaster related trauma experienced by children with disabilities. Advanced planning, planning for the acute phase of a disaster and planning for educational provision post-disaster, specific to needs of disabled students are recommended.

Table 2 (cont.)

6	Brunner & Lewis (2004) USA	Plan development	Proposal of an IESP, an individualised evacuation and sheltering plan, specifically for school children with disabilities.	Authors provide lists of considerations for evacuation plans. Authors highlight the importance of developing and practicing evacuation and sheltering plans.
7	Burke (2010) USA	Plan proposal	Plan is designed to meet the mandates of 3 Federal Laws.	A plan for school emergencies and disasters is proposed. Detailed ideas for supporting blind and deaf/blind students are provided.
8	Clarke, Embury, Jones & Yssel (2014) USA	Development of a teacher's guide to supporting students with disabilities during school crises.	Sample emergency and lockdown plans and procedural checklist proposed.	Special education teachers must know and include best practices to assist students with basic survival skills. Students can learn what to do in fires, tornadoes, or lockdowns. Community planning must include development of IELPs (lockdown plans) explicit instruction, practice and annual review of crisis plans.
9	Geiger, Firsing, Beric & Rogers (2013) USA	Five-step guide presented for emergency readiness.	Guide developed from Coalition of National Health Education Organizations.	Promoting and protecting the health of individuals, families and communities and providing education and services reduce premature deaths and disability.
10	Heath, Ryan, Dean & Bingham (2007) USA	Historical review of school disasters and evaluation school crisis planning.	50 U.S. State policies evaluated. International, national, community and school-related disasters highlighted.	32 of 50 States have legislated mandates requiring safety plans that guarantee each child has an education in a safe setting. No discussion of individualized plans.

Table 2 (cont.)

11	Murray, J.S. (2011) USA	Research based answers to practice based questions posed by journal readers	Response to question: What considerations should be given to children with special healthcare needs and disabilities in the context of disaster preparedness?	Paediatric healthcare professionals can minimize the effects of disasters on children with disabilities by developing specific continuity of care mechanisms such as an EIF (emergency information form).
12	Peek & Stough (2010). USA	Theoretically informed critical review	Exploration of two disaster research tracks: children and adults with disabilities. Underpinned by social vulnerability theory.	Children with disabilities are physically, psychologically and educationally vulnerable in disasters. Disasters are not just transient, but enduring risk factors for children with disabilities.

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