

School Safety Drills and Exercises for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Tips and Resources for Educators

While high profile instances of violent crimes in American schools remain extremely rare, all schools must be prepared to respond to emergency situations as part of their school safety and crisis preparation. Current state laws already require certain types of drills (e.g., fire drills, lockdown drills) and some states are now requiring more intense preparation expectations such as armed assailant drills.

Students identified with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) can be especially vulnerable during safety drills and exercises, as they are often challenged by oversensitivity to sensory disruption and changes in routine. Naturally, many school drills and safety exercises often include significant noise, changing or chaotic visual stimuli, and alterations to the everyday schedule. These disruptions can make the process anxiety provoking and even dangerous for students with ASD and those around them. Fortunately, when educators working with students with ASD are prepared, they can help decrease the student's anxieties and related concerns in the moment. Careful school safety practices with students with ASD may also reduce the potential for an escalation of student challenges over time during school safety preparation practices.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Reauthorization of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), now called the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), has continued the mandate that all schools have a crisis plan with a focus on safety. Best practice recommendations include forming a school-based, multidisciplinary safety team that meets regularly during the academic year. Safety teams are encouraged to prioritize safety resource allocation based on probable needs, to practice responding to the most probable scenarios, and to plan for the needs of all students in schools. Importantly, school safety is not simply the responsibility of school administrators, law enforcement, and building groundskeepers. In order to ensure the unique needs of students with ASD are met, school safety teams must include at least one school-based mental health professional and a disability specialist. School psychologists can meet both needs.

There are numerous types of safety drills and exercises that require all students to develop a variety of knowledge and skills, including those with ASD and other disabilities. For example, lockdown drills require remaining still and being quiet; evacuation exercises typically require listening, following directions, and urgent physical movements; and shelter-in-place exercises may require increased patience and discomfort. Some types of armed assailant drills may necessitate movement through noisy or disordered circumstances. To develop those skills, many students with ASD will need frequent and direct skills-based practice with their individualized safety plan goals in mind. While not exhaustive, this document was designed to raise awareness about this topic, provide advocacy guidance for educators, and leave the reader with school safety drill and exercise ideas for students with ASD.

FOUNDATIONAL ADVOCACY POINTERS FOR THE SAFETY OF STUDENTS WITH ASD

- Educators can support best practice and legally defensible school safety efforts of their school by reminding colleagues about the requirements of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA; 1990). In the ADA, Chapter 7 Addendum 2, it is noted that emergency sheltering must not exclude or deny individuals with disabilities. Unprepared schools may be in violation of this ADA expectation.
- Students with ASD or other disabilities must have emergency preparedness objectives built into their Individualized Education Programs (IEP) or 504 plans. While the school's overall systematic school safety plan is a good starting point, the student's IEP or 504 plan must specify what each individual student may need in an emergency situation or during specific safety exercises such as an evacuation, lockdown, or shelter-in-place. As individualized safety and emergency plans are developed, IEP team members are encouraged to consider the student's cognitive ability,

communication ability, sensory needs, mobility, medical needs or medication, and ability to manage emotions. Notably, IEP planning meetings should include all individuals who interact with the student on a regular basis, including classroom aides or paraprofessionals who are likely to support the student during drills or exercises, but who may not typically attend an IEP meeting. Finally, emergency plan IEP goals and expectations for the student with ASD should be reviewed and revised as often as needed, perhaps even more frequently than what is required in the standard IEP review process.

- Schools are encouraged to host periodic information sharing nights related to safety planning for parents and caregivers of students with disabilities. As part of this process, school leaders can be ready to summarize the school's overall safety plan and what is being done generally to support students with ASD and other disabilities. School leaders should be prepared to respond to questions about how the school's staff is prepared to address the safety needs of students with ASD. For example, what modifications or special considerations for students with ASD are typically in place when conducting safety drills? How are the students' skills practiced and mastered over time? What special school safety training do teachers and paraprofessionals have? How can parents and caregivers most effectively advocate for the individual needs of their children with ASD?
- Schools are encouraged to collaborate with community-based first responders, ensuring they know how to respond to individuals with ASD in emergency response scenarios. For example, first responders need to know in which schools and classrooms students with ASD may be found, and what limitations those students may have in a stressful emergency situation. To facilitate this knowledge and these skills, first responders can be invited to participate periodically in safety drills and exercises with school-based professionals.
- Run-Hide-Fight protocols have become increasingly common for addressing school intruder or armed assailant situations. Indeed, while the U.S. Dept of Education has supported schools considering options-based approaches when facing school intruders, such protocols remain controversial, even for the general population of students (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP] and National Association of School Resource Officers [NASRO], 2017). Often, a Run-Hide-Fight approach will be even more challenging for most students with ASD, as those students may struggle to meet the active participation expectations of the drill (e.g., run away, fighting back or countering an intruder). Even for the general population of students, educators are encouraged to advocate for extremely careful review and cautious consideration of Run-Hide-Fight protocols before adopting (NASP and NASRO, 2017). Emergency protocols that prioritize quick lockdown procedures as a first option during school intruder events are encouraged (as opposed to running or fighting first), as locking a classroom whenever possible in American schools has been found to be a highly effective protector of students during intruder events (only one known breach of a locked classroom as of the year 2020, which occurred in Red Lake, MN, in 2005). As such, Run-Hide-Fight protocols must be considered with extreme caution for the general student and staff population, and they remain a highly problematic expectation for many students with ASD.

PREPARING STUDENTS WITH ASD FOR SAFETY DRILLS AND EXERCISES

- Beyond simply developing and adding safety expectations into the IEP or 504 plans of students with ASD, purposeful and regular practice of the individualized plan will be essential. Most students with ASD will need significant practice with the concrete procedures involved in lockdown drills, evacuation, and other safety exercises. Students with ASD may often need one-on-one support as they learn the best way to respond to drill expectations over time. This will likely involve practice well beyond whatever drill frequency may be required by state laws for schools. Moreover, generalization of developing skills will be vital, often requiring frequent adult-guided practice in multiple settings (e.g., various classrooms, hallway, bathroom, cafeteria). Simply talking to the student with ASD about what is necessary will not likely be sufficient, nor will infrequent walkthroughs of expectations.
- As recommended for all school populations in *Conducting Crisis Exercises and Drills: Guidelines for Schools* (NASP, 2013) educators working with students with ASD are especially encouraged to begin safety skill development by starting with simple exercises prior to considering any highly sensorial functional or full-scale exercises. For example, social stories or other pictorial guides are highly encouraged for teaching drill expectations to most students with ASD. The social story can be discussed and then practiced in actual locations with the student. Strong emergency protocol social stories often include pictures related to waiting, listening, being quiet, and how to achieve positive results (e.g., the teacher will like it when ...). One published social story example, at www.teacherspayteachers.com, is a resource titled *Social Stories for Children with Autism: Special Events and Emergencies*. It is available for a nominal cost.
- Engaging the student with ASD in a review of the drill social story and a practice drill early on the day of an actual scheduled drill may facilitate increased awareness and ability to follow through. Depending on the individual student's

needs, practice may begin without peers present, but student skills will likely develop best when practice can include addressing some distractions that will be present in real crisis events.

- To ensure quick access, educators are encouraged to have predeveloped social story materials located in readily available locations, wherever they may be needed (e.g., at the doorway or exit of each classroom, or other spaces where the students with ASD may be). Having a prepared visual support that can be quickly provided to and carried by the student during a drill or actual emergency can help provide needed structure and focus.
- Avoid assuming the student with ASD comprehends the vocabulary that may arise during school safety drills and exercises. During practice and preparation, supporting educators may need to define new or unfamiliar terms, even ensuring understanding of common yet infrequently used words. For example, “An emergency is when you need help right away because of something that can hurt you.”
- Educators can emphasize how knowing how to follow the procedures can make the drills less scary. For example, “Sometimes these things will happen, and we won’t know it ahead of time (they are unpredictable). When that happens, we will need to use what we have learned from the drills to be safe.”
- Educators can make the drills and exercises more predictable by emphasizing what students with ASD should do and where they should go for each response. For example, “Sometimes you will be asked to go somewhere to hide. For example, right here. If that happens, the lights will be out, you will stay quiet, and you will sit down. When sitting, you may be very close to others and your arms may be touching. Some students may sit in front of you or next to you.”
- Some students with ASD may need a graduated exposure to full drill or safety exercise expectations. For example, during the first evacuation drill of the year, the student with ASD may need to start by being outside the building with a supervising adult present before the drill begins. This can help facilitate the student’s observation of other students appropriately evacuating during the actual drill. Then, during future evacuation drills, the student with ASD may be able to stand at a school exit and observe as student peers evacuate, joining them as they go. Over time, the goal will be to start the drill with the student with ASD in the classroom alongside classroom peers, proceeding with them as the drill commences.
- As an additional option, some schools may wish to record fire alarms or other drill noises, gradually introducing them to students with ASD at increasing volumes while a supportive adult guides drill expectations and helps soothe the student with ASD along the way. Prerecorded sounds are also available for purchase from some outlets (e.g., the School-Eaze CD from therapysshoppe.com).
- Educators are encouraged to assist the student with ASD in the identification of who may be helping in an emergency (e.g., teacher, police, firefighter, paramedic, nurse). This may involve highlighting how to identify various helpers (e.g., uniform, other visual identifiers). Have students with ASD practice identifying those adults who are regularly in the building and who are there to protect them.
- Communicate in advance with parents and caregivers about safety drill or exercise expectations and what is being done to support their child with ASD. Include the overall reason for drills, describe the types of drills held by a district and, as necessary, identify legislation that requires the drills. This communication can be sent at the start of each school year (via letters, social media posts, phone messaging, or other means).

WHAT TO DO DURING SAFETY DRILLS AND EXERCISES

- Adults are encouraged to practice projecting a serious yet calm demeanor during drills or other emergency situations. Most students in the general population will look to the adults in the room for verbal and nonverbal emotional modeling of expectations during a response. While reading social cues can be a challenge for most students with ASD, a calm, measured, and practiced approach modeled by adults will help convey the emotional self-regulation expected.
- Each student with ASD should have an assigned “go kit” (or small emergency bag). This resource could include noise cancelling headphones, favorite comfort items, snacks, and stress relief or sensory fidget items. Ear plugs or noise-cancelling headphones to be worn during the drill or actual emergency can reduce overstimulation for many students with ASD. If this kit cannot follow students with ASD throughout the day, several versions of the kit may be required in various classroom or other school spaces. IEP teams can help determine the logistics for this process.
- Other resources that may serve to soothe the student during a drill or exercise (e.g., a weighted vest or backpack) should also be readily available for “grab and go” situations such as an evacuation or lockdown. Some educators have even recommended having a small pop-up tent (or similar structure) available in the corner of a classroom, one that can be quickly popped up for a student with ASD to crawl inside during lockdown drills or shelter-in-place exercises.

This could be used in combination with a comfort item or other “go kit” materials, helping to shield the students from overstimulation. Careful monitoring of this type of approach would be critical in case eventual evacuation is warranted.

POSTDRILL DEBRIEFING WITH STUDENTS WITH ASD

- Allow time for student questions following all drills and exercises or related practices. Upon completion, remind the student that during a practice exercise or actual emergency, we must always remember to remain quiet, listen to the adult with us, and follow adult directions. It is important to stop what is being done, stop talking, listen, and follow the directions of the adult with them (even if they are not a known teacher or adult who is typically with them).
- Students with ASD may become overly interested in the topic of drills after learning about or experiencing them. They may begin to seek additional information or perseverate on the topic. While educators can never promise absolute safety, they can remind students with ASD what the adults in the building are doing regularly to keep them and all students safe. Additionally, educators can remind students with ASD that learning what to do and practicing what to do in emergency situations are ways to be prepared and protect each other.

CONCLUSION

The guidance in this document is not a substitute for crisis team training, planning, and more in-depth knowledge of the school crisis prevention and intervention process. For more extensive school crisis prevention and intervention information, please refer to Brock et al. (2016) or visit www.nasponline.org/prepare for details about the PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum. For detailed guidance on planning, conducting, and evaluating crisis exercises and drills specifically, review FEMA’s Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) at https://hseep.dhs.gov/pages/1001_HSEEP7.aspx.

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