

Safety Planning for Students with Disabilities

Practical Strategies to Protect and Support Diverse Learners

Creating a safe school environment means preparing for every student, not just the ones who fit typical emergency planning assumptions. Students with disabilities may face unique challenges during crises, and thoughtful, individualized planning ensures they are protected with dignity, equity, and care.



Types of Disabilities to Consider

Students may have:

- Physical disabilities
- Sensory disabilities (hearing, vision, sensory processing)
- Cognitive or intellectual disabilities
- Emotional or behavioral disabilities
- Developmental disabilities

Each category may require different supports during emergencies.

Try This!

Create a “Know Me in an Emergency” Card

This card would be a one-page snapshot for each student with disabilities that includes:

- Communication preferences
- Key supports
- Emergency-specific instructions
- Contact information for caregivers

Common Barriers in Emergencies

- Limited mobility or difficulty navigating crowded spaces
- Communication challenges, especially during high-stress moments
- Sensory overload from alarms, flashing lights, or chaotic environments
- Behavioral responses triggered by fear, confusion, or disrupted routines

Individualized Emergency Planning

A one-size-fits-all emergency plan may not work for students with disabilities. Individual Safety Plans (ISPs) help ensure each student receives the support they need. These plans can also be incorporated into IEPs or 504 plans rather than being a separate plan. Plans should clearly outline accommodations and supports tailored to the student's needs when an emergency or drill occurs.

Key Components of ISDs

- ☐ Evacuation procedures customized for mobility, sensory, or behavioral needs
- ☐ Communication methods, including AAC devices, visual supports, or simplified instructions
- ☐ Assigned support personnel with backups identified
- ☐ Medical or behavioral considerations, such as seizure protocols or calming strategies

Sensory and Behavioral Considerations

Sensory Supports

- Visual schedules showing what to expect during drills
- Noise-reducing tools to soften alarm sounds
- Calm spaces for recovery after an incident

Behavioral Supports

- De-escalation strategies tailored to the student
- Predictable routines that reduce anxiety
- Social stories explaining emergency procedures in accessible language

Helpful Tools and Aids

- Noise-canceling headphones
- Fidget items
- Visual cue cards or communication boards

Try This!

Build a Sensory Toolkit

Include headphones, fidgets, visual cards, and a small weighted item. Keep it in classroom emergency bags.



Environmental and Equipment Considerations

Accessible Routes and Exits

- Keep hallways clear
- Ensure ramps and elevators are functional and accessible
- Identify alternate routes for students using mobility devices



Emergency Equipment

- Evacuation chairs
- Visual alarms
- Communication boards or AAC-compatible tools

Classroom Setup

- Thoughtful furniture placement
- Sensory-friendly design elements
- Clear pathways for quick movement



Try This!

Walk the Classrooms or School Building with Accessibility in Mind

Do a 10-minute walk-through and evaluate:

- Are exits blocked?
- Are visual alarms working?
- Are mobility routes clear?

Roles and Partnerships

Effective emergency planning depends on the coordinated efforts of staff, caregivers, and students. Each group plays a distinct and essential role in ensuring safety, communication, and confidence during both drills and real events.

Staff

To prepare for drills and emergencies:

- Identify designated support personnel for individual students
- Assign backup staff to ensure consistent coverage
- Provide cross-training so multiple adults can assist when needed

During drills:

- Ensure students with disabilities can participate fully
- Modify drills to maintain comfort and reduce distress
- Debrief after each drill to identify improvements and refine procedures

Families and Caregivers

Caregivers bring essential insight into each student's needs, triggers, and effective strategies. Their involvement strengthens planning and ensures continuity between home and school.

They can be involved by:

- Sharing individualized information that supports safe responses
- Staying engaged in planning discussions and receiving regular updates
- Collaborating with staff to adjust strategies as students grow and change

Students

When appropriate, students can be active participants in their own safety planning. Empowering them can build confidence and reduce anxiety during emergencies.

Students can:

- Learn self-advocacy skills
- Practice using communication tools during emergencies
- Understand what to expect during drills and how to respond

Safety planning for students with disabilities is not a one-time task; it's an ongoing commitment to understanding, collaboration, and thoughtful preparation. By investing in inclusive planning today, we can create environments where every student is seen, supported, and safe, no matter what challenges arise.

