

National Preparedness Month – September 2008:

THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE:

Terrorism Preparedness in Schools

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many schools have adopted new safety procedures to guard against terrorist attacks. The majority of our nation's schools, however, have not yet begun to address this potential threat. It is the responsibility of parents, teachers, and administrators to work together to establish heightened security procedures to follow during terrorist threats or when the Department of Homeland Security issues a heightened alert.

How Is Terrorism Different from Other School Emergencies?

Unlike school shootings, schools subjected to terrorist attacks would be chosen at random. With alertness to warning signs of school violence, it has become easier to identify students at risk for violent behavior; not so with terrorists. Also, the perpetrators of terrorism are not likely to be students at the school being attacked. In other types of teenage violence, administrators have the ability to discipline the students involved but, naturally, terrorists are out of their jurisdiction. Terrorist attacks involving schools will probably involve explosions, or chemical or biological attacks. The extent of the casualties and damage might be far more extensive than even the most lethal occurrence of school violence to date. The destruction will probably directly affect the surrounding community. Schools cannot act alone in preventing terrorism in their facilities, since they do not have the tools available to the U.S. government. Emergency preparedness, however, can be initiated and planned by the school itself.\

Talking to Kids about Terrorism in Schools

It is necessary to talk to young people about the possibility of dealing with an emergency such as terrorism. Many parents and school officials are afraid to talk about or prepare for terrorist attacks because they don't want to create a panic.

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But fear is best conquered by being informed and prepared. And if parents and teachers are prepared, they can educate kids in turn. (Of course, the age and maturity level of a child is a factor in any discussion of terrorism.)

In a non-frightening, calm manner, you should speak with your children about what they should do if they are in a building that sustains an explosion. Tell children that they must try to remain calm. If possible, they should get out of the building as quickly as they can, without stopping to take along books, toys or even to make a phone call. If things are falling, they should get under a sturdy table or desk until it is clear. As they exit the building, they must watch out for weakened floors or stairs.

If there is a fire along with the explosion:

1. Stay low to the ground, since poisonous smoke rises and will gather along the ceiling.
2. If possible, cover your nose and mouth with a wet cloth.
3. If you come to a closed door, feel the door with the back of your hand. If the door is not hot, open it slowly and make sure that fire or smoke are not blocking your exit path. If the path is clear, keep moving. If not, close the door quickly and find another way out. If the door is hot, do not open it. Find a window to climb out of or signal to firefighters that you need help.

If you are trapped under falling debris:

1. Do not move around a lot. You might kick up dust that is harmful to inhale. Cover your mouth with a handkerchief or a piece of clothing.
2. Tap repeatedly on a pipe or wall. The rescuers will hear this and be able to find you more easily. Shout only when you hear rescuers coming. Excessive shouting might cause you to breathe in more harmful dust.
3. Try to think of things that make you feel happy and calm. Remember that rescuers are on their way.

If a school is targeted for terrorism, the surrounding community will be affected. Find out if your community has a disaster plan in place and talk to your kids about it. If there is no plan in place, as is the case in many communities, talk

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about that too. Kids may have some good ideas themselves, so include them in the planning process. Parents, teachers, administrators, and kids all need to work together in order to best prepare themselves for the grim possibility of a terrorist attack in our schools.

Resources – Schools and Terrorisms

<http://www.schoolsafety.us/Schools-amp-Terrorism-p-13.html>

This resource is a free downloadable document presented by the National School Safety Center in order to help law enforcement and school partners recognize and understand the role of schools in homeland security and readiness.

About The Authors

John Cavanagh is Communications Director for Bridge Multimedia and Chief Researcher for Emergency Preparedness Online.

Anne Malia writes about technology and emergency preparedness for people with special needs and has contributed to the production of EmergencyPrepOnline.org and EdTechOnline.org.

Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com.**