

Reunification Following School Evacuation: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Response Teams

An essential component of school crisis response is the reunification of students with their primary caregivers. This process is crucial as the reestablishment of social supports is often the only mental health crisis intervention needed and is especially important for younger children. The sooner students are reunited with their caregivers, the less likely they are to exhibit traumatic stress. In addition, schools must be accountable for maintaining the chain of custody for every student during and after a crisis. A predetermined and practiced reunification process helps to ensure that reunification will not add to the anxiety and trauma of the crisis. This handout addresses key considerations to this process in the event that a school has been evacuated. However, it is important to note that this handout also provides guidance for student and caregiver reunifications that take place at school (when evacuation is not required).

Key Components of the Reunification Process

Planning for reunification requires consideration of a number of factors. Each of these components must be planned for and shared with the school community, especially caregivers and families once established.

Reunification Site/Location

If the school had been evacuated, then the reunification will take place at evacuation facilities. Often these sites include nearby schools; however, they may also include other facilities such as large churches and recreation centers. Regardless, the site must be large enough to accommodate the entire student body and all school staff, as well as caregivers and additional volunteers as needed. Ideally, the site will have a number of large rooms so that students can be divided up and grouped by grade level. This facilitates a more efficient process of finding individual children and reuniting them with their respective caregivers. Floor plans of the reunification site(s) should be included in the school's crisis response plan and placed within a "reunification go-kit." Entrances/exits, windows, rooms for groups of students (including any specific staging areas for those with special needs), mental health crisis intervention rooms, caregiver check-in, and student-release locations should be designated on the plan well in advance of any crisis. It is important to have at least one backup site identified in case the original evacuation/reunification site cannot be used (e.g., the site had been damaged by the same crisis/disaster).

Caregiver Emergency/Contact Cards

Having up-to-date, accurate contact information for parents and legal guardians is critical to the reunification process. Ideally, hard copies of these contact cards should be kept in binders in case access to electronic information is not possible (e.g., due to an evacuation, power outage, lack of available computer). These cards should be placed in alphabetical order, and organized by classroom and grade level to facilitate easier retrieval of individual students and family information. In addition, it can be incredibly helpful in the immediate

aftermath of a crisis to have not only lists of caregivers who are authorized to pick up each student, but also a list of those with custodial and/or contact restrictions to ensure that students are only released to legal guardians and authorized caregivers. For those schools in communities wherein families frequently move and/or those in lower SES areas, maintaining up-to-date contact information will be challenging. Providing students and/or caregivers with regular opportunities to share the best ways of contacting them in the event of an emergency can be helpful in this regard.

Transportation

Ideally, the reunification site should be within walking distance so that the school is not dependent on other means of transportation as arranging for buses in the immediate aftermath of a crisis or disaster that requires evacuation can be very challenging. However, in some situations it may be best to evacuate students further away from the site, thus coordination must occur with district and/or community transportation personnel to plan for the use of district transportation in emergency situations. Transportation to and from the reunification site must include explicit consideration of students with disabilities and special needs. For some of these students, an individual evacuation plan may be necessary.

In addition to the means of transportation to potential evacuation sites, the reunification plan should also include predetermined routes for getting students, school staff, security, first responders, and other support personnel to and from the site. Caregivers need to be informed in advance of the best way to get to the designated evacuation sites. Consideration of the best routes to nearby hospitals and fire stations should also be included in the plan.

Notification/Communication with Parents/Primary Caregivers

Clearly, schools will need to determine in advance how to notify caregivers their children have been evacuated and need to be picked up at the reunification/evacuation site. This process of notification will vary from school to school depending on available resources. For example, reverse 911 or automated telephone or text notification may be effective in some communities, while in others (e.g., those where many families live in poverty and may not have cell phones and/or consistent phone service) different means of notifying caregivers will be needed. One important thing to keep in mind is the content of the notification message. Providing only the most pertinent information is best. For example, "The school has been evacuated. Students can be picked up at X location at X time. Please bring your identification."

Student Rosters

Keeping track of who is at school and who is not is critical to minimizing chaos and anxiety during reunification. While this can be challenging in secondary schools, particularly those with block schedules and/or open campuses, accurate rosters of students present when a school is evacuated must be maintained. Similarly, taking attendance at the reunification site is the only way to account for students. The plan should include procedures for locating missing students.

Security

District security and/or law enforcement personnel should be at the reunification site to ensure a safe and orderly reunification process. In addition, having these individuals visible can facilitate a sense of safety and security.

Supplies/Go-Kit

Essential reunification resources and supplies should be collected into go-kits that can be easily transported and accessed following an evacuation. In addition to an “evacuation go-kit,” schools should have two identical “reunification go-kits,” one that is kept at the school and a second at an offsite location (ideally the evacuation site). Go-kit contents should include reunification site floor plans; copies of emergency contact cards; directional signs; flashlights; a bullhorn with extra batteries; pens, pencils, and paper; and any other materials that might be needed and not available at the reunification site.

Reunification Cards

Utilizing reunification cards can help to ensure a smooth reunification process. When caregivers arrive on site, they fill out a card for each child they are picking up. Reunification cards should have duplicate information on the top and bottom portions that include student name and grade. The top part should also ask for the name of the person picking up the student, their relationship with the student, and their phone number. The bottom part of the card should also include the student’s date of birth. Once completed the card is separated and the bottom part is taken by a “runner” who will retrieve students. The caregiver retains the top part that is collected when the student is released to the caregiver and they are allowed to leave the site.

Mental Health Crisis Intervention

An adequate number of school-employed mental health professionals trained in mental health crisis intervention should be available at the reunification site to assist in meeting immediate crisis-related needs. This will be dependent on the level of impact experienced by students, staff and the community. In addition, written materials that provide information regarding mental health support available, typical crisis reactions and effective coping should be on hand and made available to parents and caregivers. Depending upon the nature of the crisis event, mental health crisis interveners may conduct some type of caregiver training to help ensure that parents and other legal guardians know how to best support their children.

Release Process

Students gather in their respective staging areas typically based on grade level or class where attendance is taken. Parents and legal guardians arrive at the designated check-in location and form lines based on alphabetical order or how students are organized within the evacuation site. For example, if they are in classroom or grade-level groupings, then caregivers would line up based upon their child’s grade level (NOTE: If caregivers are there to pick up more than one child they should be directed to retrieve their developmentally younger children first). Here, they are greeted by school personnel, provide identification and complete a reunification card for each student they are picking up. Once custody rights are confirmed, the top part of the reunification card is given to a runner who goes to the student’s staging area to retrieve them. The caregiver waits in a “reunification area” where reunification cards are matched and they are reunited with their child. A protocol for informing parents and caregivers that their children are missing, injured, or deceased

must also be developed. This protocol should include details regarding how and where this information will be shared. All such communications must take place in a quiet and private area that is separate from the general caregiver waiting area.

Practice/Drills

As with any other procedure included in a crisis response plan, the reunification process should be rehearsed. There are a variety of strategies that can be used. Informal tabletop exercises can be helpful in clarifying roles and responsibilities of crisis response team members and school personnel during reunification. Emergency drills involve actual practice of reunification protocols, while functional exercises involve responding to a simulated event within realistic time frames. Full-scale drills are rarely conducted as they involve deploying all necessary resources and require much in the way of planning and financial resources. School crisis response teams are encouraged to schedule and conduct some type of reunification practice at least once a year, at different times of the day and year. Evaluation of these exercises is required to ensure that areas of improvement are identified and addressed.

Summary

Reunification of students with their primary caregivers following a crisis event is of critical importance. These procedures help to ensure that all students are accounted for and can establish a sense of safety and security. Consequently, reunification protocols should be included in all comprehensive school crisis plans and should be rehearsed on a regular basis.

Resources:

- [PREP_aRE: School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum](#) – Featured in the Best Practices Registry of the Suicide Prevention Resource Center
- [The I Luv u Guys Foundation](#)

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