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What is the School Nurse's Role in Disaster Preparedness?

By Marilyn E. Kent, MSN, RN, New Jersey

In the present climate in our country, we are all looking for ways to enhance the security of the children in our schools. Because we are often told to prepare for another potentially disastrous event, we all scramble for ways to increase capacity for security in schools. To overlook the school nurse in this area is a glaring mistake. The school nurse is in a unique position to contribute to both the planning and implementation of a system for dealing with school-wide emergencies, including disaster and trauma events. By using the nursing process, the nurse is best prepared to accept this challenge.

A model that school districts could follow is to develop a general framework for a crisis plan. This framework should include an inventory of supportive resources that leads to development of comprehensive school safety plans and programs. The district board of education should establish policies and procedures to deal with crises. The superintendent must designate a Crisis Management Team, which will act as a source of information, as a vehicle through which direct services may be delivered, and as an advisory body to the superintendent or his or her designee and other agents or agencies dealing with the crisis situation. This Crisis Management Team should include:

- The superintendent.
- An administrator from each school in the district.
- A representative from the school psychologists, guidance counselors, or school social workers.
- The school nurse and the lead school physician.
- Director of special services.
- Director of buildings and grounds.
- Representatives from the local or state police, the local medical facility or hospital, the fire department, and emergency medical services.
- A member of the school staff, community, and parent-

teacher organization.

This team should be convened at least on an annual basis to review established policy and procedures, to orient new members to their responsibilities, and to maintain and reinforce lines of communication between the various disciplines and specialists who make up the Crisis Management Team. It is so important to take this planning seriously and to share information between disciplines. An excellent idea is to have on file a copy of the disaster and emergency evacuation plan, the facilities blueprint, and contact information for the local and state police and fire departments.

It is extremely important to define roles clearly in the planning stage. While all the stakeholders are at the table, think about:

- Who would be the first responders in a crisis in the school setting?
- What staff members would be available to help?
- Who would be available if the first line of response is rendered unable to respond?
- Who would be in charge?
- Communication is a critical issue. A decision must be made as to what type of communication will be used—beepers, cell phones, walkie-talkies, even a megaphone? Is someone designated as a “runner” as an alternate method of communication?
- There must be a person designated to speak with the press, and a backup person just in case.
- Is there a way to communicate with parents?
- Would you know how to contact the local TV station as a way to communicate with parents? Where would students and staff be sheltered in case of a disaster?
- Where would parents come to pick up their children?

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- Is there a designated area for students whose child may have been lost in the event to receive support?
- Is there an agency in the community that could assist in this support?
- Would the Red Cross be available to help?
- In the event of a mass casualty, is there a designated area for the bodies prior to identification? Involve the local funeral directors to assist with the storage of bodies after identification.
- What other buildings would be appropriate and within a reasonable area to evacuate the entire staff and student body?
- Consider bomb threats, lockdowns, or chemical or biological threats. Would you know how to shut down the heating and ventilation systems? Would you know who to call to do this?
- Have you ever practiced this? Drills and exercises are so important. They reveal planning weaknesses, resources needed, and ways to improve coordination within the community. They should occur on a regular basis.

A prime responsibility of the school nurse is to assemble a GO BOX. In this box or bag should be:

- A list of students and staff.
- A list of students and staff with significant health problems.
- A medication list.
- Medications for special needs students, including asthma and seizure medications, insulin, and food snacks.
- Cell phone or walkie-talkies.
- Individual students' emergency or crisis plans with relevant phone numbers.
- A blueprint of the school, school yard, fields, track, bleachers, etc.
- Equipment and supplies for a lockdown situation, including food, water, and additional medical supplies.
- Supplies for a chemical or bioterrorism incident, including plans for change of clothes and isolation.

- A current yearbook and a current daily absentee list.

An excellent idea is to have two identical bags or boxes in separate locations. The nurse would be responsible to take one bag with her, and someone else in a different location would take the other one.

We have learned many lessons from September 11. Nurses are in the first line in coping with a disaster event. Nurses are instrumental in minimizing the effects of a disaster event. Nurses are in a strategic position to assist in the short-term and long-term recovery phases after a disastrous event occurs.

Nurses need to take care of themselves. Compassion fatigue is common in nurses. Nurses need to rejuvenate their spirits or they will not be able to give all the care and compassion that they deliver so diligently every day. All things considered, most schools are safe places for children and adolescents. National events in recent years have shown that no school is immune to disaster. Prevention is number one: build on already existing capacity, develop infrastructure, partner wherever possible, practice, and evaluate. Be proactive, have a plan, and hope that you will not need to use it. If we plan for a mass casualty event, we will be more than prepared for the minor events that might happen.

An excellent resource for all school nurses is available free of charge. It is called **IMPACT OF DISASTER ON CHILDREN IN OUR SCHOOLS: A PROGRAM FOR SCHOOL NURSES**. It is available through a grant from Johnson & Johnson to Rutgers University. **To obtain a copy of either the video or the CD, call 732-445-4317.**

Editors Note:

Interested in learning more about Disaster Preparedness? NASN currently offers the following: the Disaster Preparedness Guidelines for School Nurses manual and a Disaster Preparedness for School Nurses educational offering. Please see the NASN website at www.nasn.org or contact the Western Office at 1-866-627-6767 for more information.