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*Article*

## **KEEPING OUR STUDENTS SAFE DURING CRISIS**

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**Abstract:** As educators and parents of children with disabilities, we recognize that students with significant disabilities benefit from research-based strategies to support the development of academic and social learning. We regularly use systematic instruction and behavior supports to provide day-to-day instruction, yet this same detailed planning is not always carried through to support these students in preparation for school crises. Whether a student with a significant disability is in a weather-related event such as a tornado or a larger crisis such as a school shooting, she or he likely needs intensive instruction with research-based strategies in order to survive. In this article, we discuss the critical issue of systematically inquiring about the specific needs of students with significant disabilities as they pertain to staying safe in school crises and introduce why and how to write an Individual Emergency and Lockdown Plan (IELP) for these students.

**Keywords:** *school safety, individualized emergency and lockdown plan, crisis, school shooting, shelter in place, evacuation, crisis plan*

### **Introduction**

A crisis in our schools can occur at any time and natural disasters such as wildfires, tornadoes, hurricanes, or earthquakes can strike with limited or no warning. In times of increased violence in schools and little or slow change in legislation regarding access to guns and support for mental health, teachers, students, parents, and communities live with increased levels of stress and fear

for the safety of students and other personnel in schools. The crises in our schools vary in magnitude and cause, and for this reason, preparation is the key to survival for our students, teachers, and staff.

Increased drills and practices in schools may lessen some fears of many students, teachers, and communities; however, teachers and families of students with significant disabilities face greater challenges in the event of a crisis in school. Not all students have the skills to stay safe independently during a crisis. Additionally, teachers and Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams do not systematically consider this in their annual reviews and planning. In every situation, the teams that support students with significant disabilities need to plan for differences across domains such as physical abilities, receptive and expressive communication, social emotional, and cognitive abilities. Evaluating strengths and needs of students with significant disabilities as they relate to staying safe in the event of a crisis must become a part of the annual IEP process. For students whose crisis related skill levels are *not commensurate with peers*, a detailed plan for staying safe, for teaching the skills to be safe, and monitoring progress through instruction and opportunities for practicing those skills must be developed and implemented in order to give students the best chance of survival in the event of a school crisis (Clarke, Columbia Embury, Jones, Yssel, 2014).

This article is a call to parents, educators, and advocates to ensure that our IEP teams address crisis related skills in the annual review process by, a) assessing crisis related skills of the student at each annual review meeting and b) designing and implementing Individualized Emergency Lockdown Plans (IELP) (Clarke et al., 2014) for students who would need specially designed instruction to learn and implement crisis related skills. This article also provides specific guidance in understanding the need for, designing, and implementing Individualized Emergency Lockdown Plans (Clarke et al., 2014) for students with significant disabilities, recognizing the diverse range of developmental, intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs of students with disabilities.

### **Planning for Safety**

Policy, practice, and research demonstrates a need for more inclusive, thorough, and universal emergency plans, but individuals with disabilities, families, and educational professionals must advocate for and develop plans that will keep all students with significant disabilities safe in the event of a school crisis. At this time, a national model for school safety and emergency preparedness has not been implemented and existing district plans may not be adequate to keep all students in their schools safe (Chung, Danielson, & Shannon, 2008). Without consensus or collaboration across schools, districts, and the country, teachers, administrators, parents, students, and other community members are left to create plans to keep students safe. For students already identified as at-risk in the event of a life-threatening natural disasters or school intruder emergency, it is imperative that plans take into account the need for

modifications and specially designed instruction for students (Boon et al., 2011; Boon, Pagliano, Brown, & Tsey, 2012).

The current lack of national model for preparedness for school-based emergencies means that school districts can have an inadequate emergency preparedness program, or may lack a specific preparedness program entirely (Chung et al., 2008). Recent school shootings are a strong reminder that current schoolwide procedures and emergency plans must be reviewed and likely need to be revised to meet the needs of individual students with significant disabilities who may need significant support to follow or implement school safety procedures in the event of an emergency evacuation or lockdown (Boon et al., 2011). Some students may be physically unable to follow safety procedures, such as assuming a specific safety position on the floor or quickly exiting down a flight of stairs. Emergency situations require students to watch, listen, and process information likely to be unfamiliar or infrequent to them such as the sounds of gunshots, voices of intruders or safety officers. Actively problem solving during a crisis may be a difficult task for a student with a significant disability, therefore, planned and purposeful programming around crisis planning is critical for these students.

For many students, their ability to understand the sensory information (what is being said, visual signals, verbal alarms, physical sounds of danger such as gunfire or a natural disaster, etc.) is impaired or not present. Teachers must plan for students with significant disabilities to learn to recognize the sounds of danger *and* understand what next steps must happen in order to stay safe (Clarke et al., 2014). The importance of teaching students the specific language of emergencies in school must also be recognized and addressed (Minnesota School Safety Center, 2011). The terminology used in schools vary widely when referring to lockdowns or other emergency procedures (DHS, 2010). Schools may refer to *sheltering in place*, a *lock-in*, or even codes such as *level 1 lockdown* or *code yellow lockdown* to convey to the school community that a threat or danger is that danger is happening. Students and staff, in order to survive a crisis, must understand the language used to direct students to either seek shelter in a classroom or evacuating a building.

Because school-wide and district general emergency plans may not take into account individual learning needs, physical differences, medical, or emotional needs of individual students, students with significant disabilities are at an even greater risk in the event of a serious emergency at school (Boon et al., 2011; Boon et al., 2012). Planning specifically for the physical needs of students with disabilities affecting sensory, mobility needs, and for the instructional needs of students that need support with processing information and/or following single or multi-step directions becomes an imperative for IEP teams in an increasingly crisis-saturated world.

### **Who Needs an Individual Emergency and Lockdown Plan?**

Students with significant physiologic (e.g., breathing rate and skin permeability) or developmental needs (e.g., communication skills and self-preservation instincts) cause some children to be more vulnerable in the event of a natural disaster or crisis (Chung et al., 2008). The IEP team including parents/families, general education teachers, administrators, related service personnel and special education teachers should consider adding a question addressing emergency safety for the student during each Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. We recommend using specific language: “Is there a need for a specific plan for this student if there were a crisis in the building?” (p.2, Clarke et al., 2014). When the IEP team answers “yes” to this question, an Individual Emergency and Lockdown Plan (IELP) that takes into consideration the diverse range of intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development among children with disabilities, must be created (Clarke et al., 2014).

### **Components of the IELP**

The IELP is an individualized plan that addresses the unique strengths and needs of individual students with disabilities with regard to the skills needed to survive a life-threatening crisis in school. The IELP is made up of the following components:

1. Student information (age, grade, disability eligibility category)
2. Medical needs
3. Communication needs
4. Sensory needs
5. Other critical information
6. Specific supports or skills needed for both evacuation and shelter in place emergencies

The special education teacher must work together with the rest of the IEP team to plan for the safety of students with a disability during a lockdown or natural disaster. The IEP team understands the intellectual, physical, emotional, and health needs of students with significant disabilities and as a result, this team is best suited to design and realize the Individual Emergency Lockdown Plan (IELP) (Clarke et al., 2014). The interdisciplinary IEP team made up of special and general educators, administrators, related service providers, parent or guardians, the student, and others should also consider consulting with first responders, nursing staff, school social workers, or other personnel who may be in a situation to protect or assist a student in the event of a crisis at school when designing an IELP. Teachers should also, when appropriate, invite the student to share concerns or ideas about supports they would need in a crisis. For example, a student who uses oxygen might require additional tubing and supplies while a student with autism might need specific social narratives and “first, then” choices specific to a shelter in place or evacuation requirement. A student that requires specific positioning supports would need equipment in any room where the student engages in learning, and a student who requires medications or food at specific times of the day would need those items with him or her, as it is not possible to leave a shelter in place or evacuation to retrieve required and lifesaving supplies.

As with any plan, the IELP is effective only if school personnel are prepared to correctly implement it at a moment's notice. It is crucial that all IELPs be discussed and practiced by all possible support personnel within a given school or facility. Ensuring that plans and emergency supplies are easily understandable and in a place that everyone can access them is crucial. This is especially important when a substitute teacher or instructional assistant is part of the student's day. For students who engage in learning in more than one classroom, every teacher and room needs to be ready to provide needed supports should a shelter in place order be given (Clarke et al., 2014).

In developing an IELP, the team should focus on the individual's strengths and needs in order to create a strength-based plans that will safely and effectively support students with disabilities in the event of an actual crisis (Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007). The IELP offers an opportunity for teams to identify necessary accommodations for students as well as specific concerns that may arise for students in following directions and responding to new, dangerous, or frightening situations (Clarke et al., 2014).

**Development of the IELP: A data driven process**

The development of an IELP should follow the same steps teachers follow to develop an IEP. The first step is to assess student strengths in each domain. This should include the student's unique strengths and needs related to their ability to acquire skills (academic performance and cognitive functioning), current functional skills, communication style (and any communication supports such as an iPad with the Proloquo communication app). It should also address the student's current social/ emotional strengths and needs, including their ability to identify and communicate about events that are causing them distress. In addition, the student's ability to hear and/or see alarms, warning lights, or dangerous events (e.g. person with weapon, debris falling from a weather event) must be taken into account. Finally, the plan must include a student's current motor abilities, health, hearing, and vision as it relates to responding to crisis events. For example, could they shelter in place, go without medications or medical supplies for any length of time, position to the floor or in a small place, etc? Teachers may find it helpful to begin by using the Checklist in Table 1.

Table 1. Teacher IELP Checklist

<b>IELP Checklist</b>		
Yes	Does Not Apply	<i>After the team has created an IELP, this checklist can serve as a final check to ensure the IELP meets the needs of the student.</i>

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Does the IELP created for <i>the student</i> address mobility or other physical needs?</b> Have accommodations been made to safely evacuate or shelter in place if necessary?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Does the IELP address medication needs?</b> How and when medication will be secured and administered in the event of an emergency?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Does the IELP address sensory needs?</b> Are sensory items kept in the classroom, student pack, etc.?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Does the IELP address communication needs?</b> Is there a communication board, PECs cards, or other communication method available?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Does the IELP address emotional and/or behavior needs?</b> What tools are needed or going to be implemented?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Is the student able to explain her or his IELP and/or what she or he may need in a crisis?</b> If not, how will the team address this?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Have all teachers and paraprofessionals working with the student reviewed the IELP?</b> If the student requires the support of an adult to evacuate or shelter in place, have all teachers and paraprofessionals who <i>may</i> work with the student been trained on how to support the student in a crisis?

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As in the IEP process, teachers must collect relevant data in pertinent areas. Data should be collected to support a student through a multiple-hour lockdown or crisis, so the overarching question should be: What does this student need to be safe during an emergency in my school? Given this question, teachers should collect relevant information that can be used to develop the IELP. In developing an IELP, a team-centered approach is preferable. The IELP team can include some of the same people who are on the IEP team, including parents, the student, teachers who know the student, and therapists. Other key individuals who should be considered for team membership include the school nurse, counselor, behavior therapist, local medical and rescue personnel. The team should include individuals who can speak to each specific need of the student and provide suggestions for helping keep that student safe.

After the student's strengths and needs have been established, the IELP should be developed and shared the student, adults who come into contact with the student, and the student's family. The team will develop an emergency kit which should, at a minimum, include a copy of the IELP and should be with the student at all times.

### **Implementing the IELP**

To implement the IELP, the team should plan for regular (at least annual) review of the plan and provide as many practice opportunities as the student and/or student's team needs to be successful. Evidence-based instructional strategies should be used for specific skill instruction (e.g., waiting, staying quiet,), practice should occur across all school settings and any off-campus settings (including transportation as applicable), and changes to the plan are made as a result of student performance. progress data should be collected and analyzed.

Many students with significant disabilities have limited working memory, struggle to independently complete complex tasks, are more distracted/ forgetful and need more redirection than peers (Smith, Saez, & Doabler, 2016). To support these specific learning needs, instruction and new information should be presented one skill at a time or with small amounts of content and practice opportunities after each skill. Explicit and systematic instruction that includes clear adult explanations, modeling, multiple examples and practice opportunities, and immediate feedback are recommended teaching strategies (Smith et al., 2016). In addition, the plan should take into account the student's unique academic, behavioral, physical, medical, social, and emotional needs. For example, many plans help the student survive the immediate crisis but do not take into account the student's very significant needs related to managing any trauma after-effects that a student might experience after surviving a school crisis. In an effort for crisis plans to have the greatest impact, it is recommended that the student's needs before, during, and after any potential crisis are thoroughly discussed and recorded.

Preventive interventions such as teaching students how to respond during a crisis should include the establishment of specific expectations, teaching explicit expectations, and reinforcing established and taught expectations. Effective instructional strategies such as frequent comprehension checks, provide additional wait time during instruction, use of social stories and visual supports (Nagro, Hooks, Fraser, & Cornelius, 2016), are the same strategies teachers can use to teach and assess crisis related skills.

Teachers should set reasonable goals that take into account the reality that many students have significant deficits in working memory that often limit student responses to instruction. To support this deficit, instruction should target specific skills. Through strategies including forward and backward chaining and direct instruction with modeling, teachers can support student mastery within the scope and sequence of needed lifesaving skills. As with all instruction for students with significant disabilities, the goal for instruction should be to increase independence. The key to instruction of the components of each students' IELP is to set meaningful, measurable goals that will work towards ensuring the student is safe. It is important to note that changing practices around IEP development certainly takes time. Another option for planning and outlining crisis procedures for a student could be documented in a student's meeting notes.

To support acquisition of skills, teachers should collect and analyze data to guide instruction and adaptations to interventions. Great IELPs will involve service providers and family members in additional opportunities for learning once initial instruction has been implemented by Special Education teacher (Lemons, Allor, Otaiba, & LeJeune, 2016). Many classrooms that support students with significant disabilities incorporate instructional assistants in the teaching of skills. For instruction to be conducted successfully by instructional assistants, teachers should provide specific training in the instructional practice, complete fidelity checks, and give performance feedback (Brock, Seaman, & Downing, 2017). With any IELP that requires instruction, teachers should follow the principles of high-quality practices which include data collection and analysis to monitor student progress and determine needed intensity of the intervention.

### **Final Thoughts**

When looking at considerations that can impact the safety of a student with significant a disability, families, students, and advocates must work together with school teams to routinely consider the crisis-related skills needed to stay safe in a school crisis; whether or not students have those skills; and to design and implement a plan to teach those skills when needed. We must plan for the best way to support individual students with disabilities in a crisis situation and developing and implementing an IELP may be critical for the safety of some students with significant disabilities. Whether a student experiences a weather-related event or human-made crisis, the adults supporting that student need to have a clearly developed plan that they practiced, taught to the student, and continue to keep current so everyone has the best chance to go home safe every day.



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