Podcast #3 Transcript: Developing and Implementing a Safety Training Plan

Welcome, listeners, to the third Y4Y podcast in our series on safety planning and practices. My name is Sherri, and I'm proud to be a 21st Century Community Learning Centers project director. In podcast two, I shared some tips I've learned over the years about reviewing your host organization's existing Safety Plan and working with the Safety Lead to make sure it addresses the circumstances particular to your program. Once you've completed that first step, your next step is to prepare your staff. In this podcast, I'll share my process for developing and implementing a Safety Training Plan.

First, let me say, I know how busy you are. You might be tempted to hand out copies of the Safety Plan at your next staff meeting, highlight the main points and hope for the best. But that approach puts the health and safety of children, staff, volunteers and visitors at risk because, as you know, emergencies happen, ready or not. A student has a nosebleed that just won't stop. A stranger shows up at pick-up time, claiming she's Allie's aunt, but she's not on the pre-approved pick-up list. The tornado warning siren goes off.

Your staff needs to be able to respond appropriately "in the moment." To do that, they need preparation and practice. Safety drills and exercises create a mental map and conditioned responses that can kick in under stressful circumstances. Think of the classic school fire drill. As soon as the fire bell sounds, students respond because they already know how to line up, where to exit and where to assemble. To this day, I can still recall the process from my own school days. You can use drills to help your staff and students achieve this same kind of automatic response.

Start by creating a Safety Training Calendar. To do this, I first list any drills, exercises and procedures that are legally mandated. I then put those drills and exercises in the order in which they should occur. My order always matches the host organization's safety practice calendar. Y4Y offers a tool called the Drill Modification Plan that shows how to create a drill practice calendar aligned with the host site's calendar. I encourage programs to practice drills on the same day as the host organization. For example, when the site is housed in a school building, we practice the same drills during program hours that students practiced earlier during the school day. This helps students recognize the similarities and differences between the drills, and staff can explain why they may not be the same.

The next thing I do as I'm creating my Safety Training Calendar is mark which events involve staff only, which ones involve staff and students, and which ones additionally involve families and first responders. Because of the unique staffing schedule of afterschool programs, it's important to note on which days each staff member works. All staff should be trained on all procedures. But when it comes to assigning specific roles or tasks that staff will do during those procedures, I ensure the staff assigned are present every day of the week, or in some cases the assignment is shared among staff with compatible schedules.

I try to have my Safety Training Calendar in place before the school year or summer session starts. There are two other things I do at that point. First, I mark all the drills that will require staff training before they can be done with students. For example, the sample Y4Y Drill Modification Plan includes drills on how staff and students should respond to a fire, a danger inside the facility, and a danger outside the facility. You'd want to train staff in these areas before you do any drills with students present. The second thing I do early on is check to see whether staff have

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certifications in CPR, First Aid, Stop the Bleed, and Automated External Defibrillators or AEDs. That way, staff with lapsed certifications, or those who haven't yet earned these certifications, can receive training before the program starts.

Initially, staff need to know the basics, such as general procedures for various kinds of dangers, taking attendance during a fire drill or turning off the lights during a lockdown. I start each safety drill with a quick review of the procedure, and I give each staff member time to read through all steps. Reading or hearing the procedure isn't enough to prepare them for implementation, of course, so next we walk through the drill, physically completing every step in the procedure.

It's important to prepare staff for things like a lockdown and shelter in place, but I also make room on the agenda to review and practice everyday procedures — things like recording and communicating minor and major incidents, ensuring that only approved adults are picking up students, monitoring bathrooms and outdoor activities, and following safety protocols for field trips.

Once staff are familiar with a basic procedure, like a fire drill, you can improve the odds that they'll perform well under pressure by providing repeated practice and by deepening their understanding of the "why" behind each procedure. I often use table-top exercises when I briefly describe an emergency scenario and staff members give verbal responses. For example, I might say, "You look out your classroom window and see a stranger entering the main door of the building, which you thought was locked. What do you do?" Then I transition to more advanced exercises, like role-plays or simulated incidents that involve first responders, such as police officers, firefighters or paramedics.

As you plan drills and exercises, remember: What solidifies the learning isn't just repetition alone, but the combination of repetition, physical movement and practice in "thinking on your feet." For example, after we had a staff-only fire drill and they practiced using the quickest exit route, I transitioned to a staff-only fire exercise. This time, I had a volunteer block a stairway along the route to simulate what might happen in a real emergency. When staff members reached the stairway, they had to figure out an alternative route. Oh, and as I reminded them during the exercise, if this were a real emergency, they'd also need to stay calm and redirect students toward a safe exit. No emergency will occur exactly the way we envision, but practice and preparation can prepare us physically and mentally to rise to the challenge when the time comes.

I find it works best if drills and exercises are short but frequent. Consider dedicating a few minutes of each staff meeting to a safety procedure with a drill or exercise. You may have noticed that I've mentioned staff more often than students, families, and first responders. That's because my Training and Practice Plan is almost entirely developed with staff as the intended audience. They need to be trained and confident about their role before you involve students or others in drills and exercises.

After each drill or exercise, I document what we practiced. I also conduct a debriefing to discuss with staff and students what worked well and whether there are areas for improvement.

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Once you and your staff are prepared to involve others in drills and exercises, there are several things to keep in mind. Make sure staff and families know what communication channels you'll use if an emergency arises, where relocation and pick-up sites are located in the event of a disaster, and how the organization plans on processing and healing after a traumatic incident. Include communication and reunification procedures in practice sessions. Also, before and after you do drills or exercises with students, let families know, and provide specifics about what happens during the practice session. That way, there are "no surprises," and family members can support your work by continuing conversations on safety with students at home.

As important as it is to implement a Safety Training Plan, I'm always mindful that safety drills and exercises may be a trigger for students and families who've experienced trauma. Or, practicing for an emergency may scare some students or make them uncomfortable. An effective plan is sensitive to these possibilities. For more about this important aspect of safety preparedness, listen to podcast number four in the series. Thank you.

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