

The Secrets of Teaching Disaster Preparedness

Headlines are full of hurricanes, earthquakes, bird flu, terrorism, and other dangers of the world in which we live. However, most civilians aren't prepared to face a disaster or even a family emergency. This begs the question "Why not?" This article is intended for those who want to change this fact by teaching others, including their own families, to be better prepared, safer, and more self-reliant.

We've identified several "learning obstacles" that prevent individuals and families from being as emergency ready as they should be. We'll list them here quickly then cover each in more detail and discuss ways to jump these learning hurdles.

Since we're talking about educating **families** – the cornerstone of all reaction plans - let's use the acronym **F.A.M.I.L.I.E.S.**:

Fear – "It's too scary to think about."

Attention Span – "I'm too busy to learn or do anything new."

Media – "There's always a weatherman in the hurricane."

Info Levels Now – "A 72-hour kit is all I need."

Lifestyle Ties – "I don't want to change the way I live."

Income – "I can't afford to buy the gear or take the steps."

Ego – "I'm so important that others will look after me."

Selflessness – "I'm not worried about me, I want to help others."

Why is it important to increase the level of civilian preparedness training over what we have through sites like ready.gov? That question can be a series of articles on its own, but the 4-part short answer is one, most free websites have only the bare minimum info; two, the fewer victims we have in a disaster the better off we'll all be; three, all business continuity plans rest on the ability of employees to return to work; and four, the term "civilians" includes the families of first responders. The more prepared the family, the more able is the responder to report for duty.

As we cover each learning obstacle below, you'll find a brief description of the problem followed by a few specific tips on how to deal with that particular issue. When teaching, remember that people have different learning styles. **Visual** learners do best by watching. They are receptive to videos, PowerPoint, or live demos. **Auditory** learners prefer verbal communication such as podcasts, or books on tape. **Kinesthetic** learners benefit from hands-on experience. Try to incorporate a little of each into your presentations.

Fear

Fear is probably the number one reason people don't prepare. Too many people focus on the dangers they may face in disasters, rather than the benefits of self-reliance. Worse, many so-called experts dwell on nothing but the threat since they have little to no new preparedness information. Let's look at ways to teach readiness while avoiding fear:

1. Take a tip from insurance salespeople. They focus on the benefits of the policy rather than the reasons you might need one. Accentuate the positives of preparedness, not worst case scenarios.
2. Use "mundane" threats to get people to prepare for more dire situations. For example, people living on the coast understand hurricanes and are receptive to helpful tips regarding evacuation. However, you might get a negative reaction with a "nuke in the harbor" scenario.
3. Teach preparedness without mentioning a threat. For example, focus on financial planning. It's more economical to buy groceries in bulk and cook at home, and it's also healthier. Guess what? This means you'll have more food at home in a shelter-in-place situation. Also, encouraging families to take up camping as a hobby inadvertently helps prepare them for an evacuation.

Attention Span

With smart phones, microwave ovens, ATMs, email, and so forth, we live in a world of instant gratification. We have become a society whose mantra is "Just give me the condensed intro, not the whole pamphlet." We rarely take time to do a thorough and detailed job of anything, and the notion of adding things to the list, even

something life-saving, is out of the question. (This is also the reason that once something is no longer repeated on the nightly news, it becomes a forgotten issue.)

1. Most people don't realize that being prepared for disaster takes only subtle modifications to your life and doesn't require extensive study or training.
2. People in this category appreciate "helpful hints," so break things down into bite-size pieces. Use simple (though detailed and thorough) checklists and bulleted lists rather than wordy text or long speeches.
3. Show them how some aspects of preparedness can save time. For example, having more food in the pantry saves shopping time. Also, being current and comprehensive with your insurance policies and personal documentation will save months worth of time getting your life back on track after a disaster.

Media

News channels can be a double-edged sword. They're great for emergency warnings, but sometimes contradict themselves. For example, weather stations will pass along evacuation warnings in advance of a hurricane, but then they'll send a reporter out in the middle of it to give a live report. Some people see this and think hurricanes are no big deal. We've seen the same in minor chemical spills. Let your preparedness students know that:

1. Things are always smaller and friendlier on TV than in real life. A picture of a snake isn't the least bit alarming. However, turn one loose in your classroom.... (No, don't actually do this!)
2. News sources live and die on ratings, viewers, and subscribers, and therefore take risks. However, these are usually controlled risks, since, for example, the weather reporters are usually in a side area and not in the direct path of the eye of the hurricane. So don't do what they do, do what they say.

Info Levels Now

Most "emergency" sites on the internet with "readiness information" have nothing but variations of the 72-hour kit checklist. The other end of the spectrum finds all the "survivalist" info concerning edible plants and living off the land. These two extremes can mislead the public in two distinct ways. One, the simplistic info might tell people that a 72-hour kit is all they'll need and the government will come protect them. Two, the other extreme relates to fear since it tends to tell people that "things will be so bad that you'll need these survival skills." The extremes should be avoided. Shoot for the more realistic middle ground.

1. "72-hour" kits are the absolute minimum. Recommending only a 72-hour kit is like telling a family on a vacation road-trip to get only enough gas to get to the next exit where there might be another station.
2. If you teach outdoor survival skills, remind people that these skills aren't the very next option after their 72-hour kit runs out. They're there for the most severe cases in isolated incidents.
3. Bridge the gap between these extremes by providing instruction on how families can use simple measures to stay safe and secure for up to four weeks, either during an evacuation or extended shelter-in-place. A good example is the four weeks of food and water stored in the pantry. Four weeks is a more realistic figure and fills the void between simple kits and survival skills.
4. For more thoughts, see "The Disaster Dozen: The Top Twelve Myths of Disaster Preparedness" at <http://www.disasterprep101.com/news.htm>.

Lifestyle Ties

Essentially, this is another form of fear. It's the fear of changing one's lifestyle to incorporate readiness, and it's the fear of losing one's current lifestyle in the wake of a disaster. Two points come into play here.

1. One of the main goals of true readiness training is the preservation of our lifestyle as we know it, and not just mere physical survival. Therefore when discussing disasters, cover their aftermath and what it will take for families to return to normal. Don't cut the subject short.
2. Realistic preparedness doesn't involve major changes, but incorporates subtle modifications to the things we already have and do. For example, the simple habit of topping off your vehicle's gas tank three times a week is easy to develop and ensures you have as much fuel as possible in an emergency. Simple task, powerful results, no appreciable change in your lifestyle.

Income

Many people see ads for high-priced “disaster” goods and gear and assume that protecting their family will be a major financial investment. This isn’t necessarily the case. If done correctly, protective measures can actually save a family money, or at least zero itself out on your household budget.

1. In our discussion of the 4-week pantry we pointed out how storing this much food could actually save time and money.
2. You don’t need to buy expensive gear. In fact, we recommend finding things you need at thrift stores or yard sales, and in other cases, making your own gear. For example, our “mess kits” were made with leftover plastic dishes from microwave dinners.
3. Part of any comprehensive family preparedness training should include a section on frugality, or how a family might save money by reducing expenses and through better household budgeting.

Ego

Ego can also be called self-esteem, and this can either go high or low. In the case of high self-esteem, some people may think, “I’m so important that others will take care of me.” Low self-esteem carries its own peculiarities as well. These folks might think, “No one will help me,” or “Nothing exciting ever happens here, so why prepare?” Though not directly ego-related, many people hold that same belief that “Nothing will happen here. Things happen to other people.”

1. Since we want to avoid generating fear, don’t fight the “I’ll be taken care of” attitude with stories of how bad things could get. Instead, use this high self-esteem by pointing out that one reason people don’t prepare is because their friends don’t. Therefore, tell this group the truth that they can help get others to prepare by being prepared themselves, and setting an example.
2. People with low self-esteem should be shown that self-reliance really is possible for them. These folks have low confidence levels. Once they see examples of how easy it is to be far more prepared and protected than they are, they’ll appreciate their new confidence and may continue their education on their own.

Selflessness

Many people are so concerned about others that they neglect themselves. This is one of the reasons we see incidents of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) in people that were never in the actual emergency. This type of distant stress is caused when these folks see bad things happen to other people but they can’t do anything about it.

1. A good reminder for this group is that you’re more able to help others if you yourself are well prepared. And guess what? “Others” includes pets!
2. In the stocked pantry example, you’ve helped others by already having your supplies, which makes for shorter lines and more stock on the shelves when the unprepared make that last-minute scramble for supplies at the grocery store.
3. You also help others by setting the example that preparedness is socially acceptable, much in the same way that we wear our seatbelts so our children will.

The most important point of all is that your main goal is to teach both the importance and techniques of disaster preparedness in order to make our world safer. So, we have one last acronym for you; the word T.E.A.C.H.

Treat each family member as unique.

Emphasize the benefits and not the threat.

Allow for different learning styles and speeds.

Confidence building is goal number one.

Help others to help themselves, and to then help others in turn.

About the author: Paul Purcell is a security analyst and preparedness consultant and the author of “Disaster Prep 101.” More articles can be found at: www.disasterprep101.com. Copyright 2006 / 2011 Paul Purcell.

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