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## **Technical Assistance on Emergency Drills for Students with Autism**

**November 1, 2017**

### **The purpose of this Technical Assistance (TA) document is to:**

- Advise on how to prepare a student with autism for a fire drill
- Clarify the role of Emergency Safety Interventions in a case where a student refuses to participate in a fire drill

### **The Importance of Emergency Drills**

Emergency drills in schools allow students and teachers to prepare for real emergency situations such as a fire, earthquake, or intruder. Effectively preparing school staff and students is important to ensure safety for everyone in an unlikely emergency event.

These preparations, while important for everyone, are especially important for students with disabilities, including students with autism, who may not otherwise have the prerequisite knowledge or skills to know what to do in the case of an emergency.

### **Characteristics of Students with Autism**

The Utah State Board of Education Special Education Rules characterize autism as a disability that involves, “engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. (Utah State Board of Education Special Education Rules II.J.1.a)” Without support, students with autism can have great difficulty in coping with an emergency drill and everything that it entails. Not only does an emergency drill interrupt a student’s routine and daily schedule, but it is often an unpleasant sensory experience, even for people without disabilities. If left unattended, challenges with emergency drills can escalate for students with autism. Ongoing anxiety and fear of an impending fire drill that he or she cannot predict can cause



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students with autism to have trouble paying attention in class or behaving appropriately in the school environment.

### **How to Prepare a Student with Autism for a Fire Drill**

With the appropriate support and interventions in place ahead of a drill, students with autism or other significant disabilities can be taught to not only cope with the stress of an emergency drill, but they can be taught what to do in the case of an emergency drill or in the case of a real emergency. The following strategies, many of them currently used by schools in Utah, can assist in supporting students and staff in having successful experiences with emergency drills:

- Give teacher of student(s) with disabilities prior notice of a drill so that they can fully prepare students using the strategies below, or others.
- Use social narratives to teach students what to do in the case of a drill. More information on social narratives can be found [here](#).
- Use video modeling to show students what it looks like to respond appropriately in an emergency drill situation. More information on video modeling can be found [here](#).
- Allow the student(s) to practice the fire drill procedure when there was not actually a fire drill prior to an actual drill using a task analysis with prompting and reinforcement strategies. More information on using a task analysis, prompting or reinforcement can be found [here](#).
- Desensitization strategies can also be used to help students to get accustomed to the sensory stimuli involved in an emergency drill. This could look as simple as a teacher, who knows about a fire drill ahead of time, arranging for a student to be outside when the drill starts, allowing him or her to hear the siren from far off and watch other students walk outside and line up appropriately. On the next drill, the teacher might arrange for the student to be right next to an outside door in the hallway, allowing them to hear the drill close up and still be able to walk



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outside and line up the way they have been taught. On the next drill, that teacher might have the student walking in the hallway, further away from the door, and then they may move to have the student in the classroom. An additional strategy that could be used in conjunction with desensitization would be to allow the student to use headphones to mute the sound.

### **Emergency Safety Interventions**

In the case of any student who demonstrates refusal to participate in fire drill procedures, there are not allowable procedures which would enable school staff to safely and ethically remove a resisting student from the school. According to the Least Restrictive Behavior Intervention Manual guidelines, the only time physical restraint could be used is as an Emergency Safety Intervention, which is only allowable when the “student’s behavior poses an imminent danger to the himself/herself and/or others (Utah State Office of Education, 2015).” Physical restraint does not include the ability to move a student, only to safely restrain them. Since refusal to participate in a fire drill does not inherently place a student or others in immediate danger or damage property, any Emergency Safety Interventions would not be ethical to use.

For questions, please contact Tanya Semerad at [tanya.semerad@schools.utah.gov](mailto:tanya.semerad@schools.utah.gov) .

### References

Utah State Board of Education (USBE). (2016). [Special Education Rules](#). Utah State Board of Education. SLC, UT.

Utah State Office of Education. (2015). [Least Restrictive Behavioral Interventions Technical Assistance Manual](#). Retrieved