



Emergency Preparedness

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When I was nine, my mom left me home with my 13 and eight-year-old brothers, to run another child to practice. My 18-year-old brother came home with his girlfriend unexpectedly and had only been there a few moments when disaster struck. Literally. The ground began shaking and I experienced the most intense earthquake I have ever felt: the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake.

We were left without power for two days, and many of the neighbors went for weeks without gas. Meanwhile, another brother was away at college in one of the areas that was hit the hardest, and we had no way of knowing if he was okay for days! Even though we had heard for years about how we had to be ready for “the next big one,” when it came, we were decidedly unprepared and learned some big lessons that day! When I spoke with my mom many years later, she offered advice to me and my family based on what we experienced that day.

The most important lesson my mom learned was to have an out-of-town and out-of-state contact. She agonized for two days about whether or not my brother was okay. When she finally got hold of him, she discovered that the university was fine and the students were taking advantage of time off from school by having afterquake parties!

While phone lines in the neighborhood may be busy, it is often easier to get hold of someone outside of your area. Also, there are apps and webpages that can help let your family members know you are safe after a disaster. Facebook will automatically prompt you to mark yourself safe, if you have an account. It will also send a push notification to your Facebook friends letting you know you are safe as well. The Red Cross runs a website called Safe and Well, where you can check in and let people know you are okay and leave notes. Unfortunately, this site does not send push notifications, so you will have to tell your family ahead of time to look for you there. Make sure they know the exact address and/or phone number you will register yourself under, as they will have to know one to find you.

Another lesson we learned is to know what to do in any type of possible disaster. After the quake, many people in the neighborhood debated about what they needed to do. Some people thought they needed to shut off their gas lines, just in case they were broken. In reality, the gas company recommended only shutting the gas off when you smell gas. As a result, they were flooded with people needing to get their gas turned on; some people had to wait two weeks.

In Texas, we most often see storms and flooding, tornadoes, hurricanes, and fire. Do you know what to do if one of these comes to your neighborhood or community? Have you thought about how you can help meet the needs of your child with a disability or special healthcare needs if you had to go for an extended time without electricity or fresh water? You can find out more about what preparation to expect in your community at Texas Prepares (<http://www.texasprepares.org/>). This site has a variety of videos, checklists, tools, and information about what to do when disaster strikes.

Texas Parent to Parent

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When I asked my mom about that day, she ended on one final note. She wished that she had prepared for things to keep us kids busy! After the earthquake hit, we were not able to go many places outside of our neighborhood. What's more, we kids were scared and so we tended to cling to my mom all in one room. We were all in one small place and bored, scared, and grumpy.

Now that I have children, she suggested that I pack into our disaster kit some new, interesting activities for us to do with our kids in an emergency setting. Even a fun pack of cards or a new coloring book can help ease the tension and make the time pass a little more quickly. One thing to consider is what you will do if you have no power and cannot charge phones, tablets, and other devices. Plan ahead to have other activities that your kids can do that do not need electricity.

As May rolls in, we will soon begin seeing more storms. The season can bring damaging thunderstorms, floods, and tornadoes. Take time before the disaster to plan ahead and be prepared. That way, should you experience a natural disaster or other emergency, you will be ready for what comes.

Log on to Texas Prepares (www.texasprepares.org) to find out more about what to expect in a disaster and how you can be ready. Also, check out the video on Navigate Life Texas that has tips for preparing families with children with disabilities for a disaster. Go to www.navigatelifetexas.org and type emergency preparedness into the search bar.

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