

Are you preparing to send your son or daughter away to college? Parents are spending money on new computers, backpacks, toiletries, clothes and items for the college housing unit (we used to call them Dorm rooms). We are preparing our children for life away at school, but are we really doing a good job of preparing them for life “on their own”?

As parents, you have trust in some institutions, small or large, to take care of the well-being of your child. Does the school have disaster plans in place? Have you looked on the website? Is this a question you asked, or were you more concerned if your child could switch majors at the end of a year without penalty? If your child is going to the Northeast, they are probably prepared for winter storms. If it is the Southeast, I am sure the school has hurricane preparedness plans, and in the Midwest, we all know that tornado alley causes problems. I am sure that you have been advised of all the health and safety plans the school has in place. You have been advised about school security and preventative measures for drinking, drugs, theft and various other criminal activities. As wise parents, we all know that we need to advise our children about the various issues surrounding intimate relationships, and especially when you combine alcohol and these issues.

Every school has plans for all of these various issues, and by law these issues must be reported and publicly available. However, what if a major storm hits your child’s school the day after you drop them off? What if there is a major fire, power outage, ice storm or gas leak? Or, it’s February and it has snowed for three days and your child is stuck in their housing unit. What if the event is a manmade disaster? Does the school, and more importantly, do you and your child have a plan for these events? In today’s emergency management world, our goal is to have as many people as possible prepared for disasters to take the burden off of an already overburdened emergency service community. The better prepared you are, and the more people that are self-sufficient, the better the systems will work for everyone.

Take the time to create a Student Disaster Plan and make sure your child understands it and understands the importance of the plan. Remember, when you were eighteen to twenty-two and away at college? You thought you were invincible. So, put together an Action Plan. You can get one from the Millersville University’s Center for Disaster Research and Education website: <http://www.millersville.edu/cdre/files/StudentEmergencyPlan.pdf>, or you can go to www.Ready.gov or various other sites to download your free template and guide.

Why is this important? Even at a small school, there will be thousands of students looking for guidance in a disaster and this can quickly overwhelm even the best prepared schools. Using the massive snow storm as an example, maybe the school’s staff can’t get in to prepare meals, and even if they can, what if the roads are blocked and the trucks bringing the school its supplies can’t get through to the school. Get a plastic sealable tub and put in a few days of supplies—canned food and a can opener, some granola bars or other energy bars, a small first aid kit, a packet of moist towelettes, a battery operated radio, a flashlight and spare batteries, just to name a few important items. NEVER let your child use candles or any type of open flames for their lighting or heat if the power goes out.

When your children were small they were taught EDITH, Exit Drill in the Home, as a method for getting out when a fire strikes. Using this same principle, we need to have a plan for

our children if they need to evacuate their student housing or apartment. Many schools have plans and shelters, but what if your child can't get to the shelter, or the school has to completely be evacuated? Have two locations for your child to meet roommates, and/or you. Why two different locations? Because you never know where a disaster will strike, and how large an area it will encompass. Therefore, have meetings spots in two different directions, so your child can meet his friends, roommates and you. These locations should probably be at least a mile away from the school, as a safe distance. In major disasters cell phones are normally not usable due to the lines being jammed by the thousands of calls, so have your meeting spots designated in advance. Studies have shown that text messaging, and some social media does work during disaster events.

Another important issue is that of fire safety both here in the United States and especially when Studying Abroad. Most schools, if not all, have smoke detectors in their housing units. Many now have sprinkler systems due to fires and student deaths in non-sprinklered housing units over the past decade. You should still send along a battery powered smoke detector for additional safety. In addition, explain to your child the problem with false alarms, which makes people complacent, and the need to always take every fire alarm seriously.

In Paris in 2011, a young college student died during her Study Abroad program because the apartment where she lived did not have smoke detectors. Many schools are now being proactive with fire safety, which goes hand in hand with the crime prevention training that students receive before traveling. A simple fifteen dollar smoke detector can be the difference between living and dying. Check before your child travels to see what plans the school has in place to deal with not only fire safety but also disaster preparedness.

Eventually your child will probably live in off campus housing. Make sure the local jurisdiction has good fire safety and building codes that are enforced. Take the time to make sure your child's apartment or house has smoke alarms, and if the property is heated by natural gas or oil, make sure there is a working Carbon Monoxide detector. You can now purchase combination smoke/CO detectors.

Your child means the world to you. You are sending them away to the care of another for the next four or five years. Schools are established to educate our children and are responsible for keeping them safe from harm. However, remember that the school may have a thousand to sixty thousand young adults to protect, so the more you can do to prepare your child and yourself, the greater your chances of a good outcome no matter what the disaster, natural or manmade.

Habits can keep you alive or kill you in a disaster, teach your child good habits, such as those above to make sure that their health and safety are always a priority. In a disaster, people revert back to whatever their habit is, make sure your child has these good habits!