

# ***Talking About Disaster: Guide for Standard Messages***

Produced by the National Disaster Education Coalition

## **Acknowledgments**

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This guide is the product of the hard work and collaboration of many professionals affiliated with the organizations composing the National Disaster Education Coalition, which represents the expertise and commitment of the following organizations:

- American Geological Institute
- American Red Cross
- Disability Preparedness Center
- Home Safety Council
- The Humane Society of the United States
- Institute for Business & Home Safety
- International Association of Emergency Managers
- National Fire Protection Association
- National SafeKids Campaign
- National Science Foundation
- U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
  - Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service
  - Food Safety and Inspection Service
- U.S. Department of Commerce
  - NOAA/National Weather Service
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
  - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  - Food and Drug Administration
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security
  - Federal Emergency Management Agency
  - U.S. Fire Administration
- U.S. Department of Interior
  - U.S. Geological Survey

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## Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to assist those who provide disaster safety information to the general public. The information presented is based on historical data for the United States and is appropriate for use in the United States and its territories. Some of the information may not apply to other countries. Users of this guide may include emergency managers, meteorologists, teachers, disaster (natural and human-caused) educators, public affairs/public relations personnel, mitigation specialists, media personnel, and communicators. If you would like more in-depth or scientific information, please contact your local emergency management office, local National Weather Service office, local American Red Cross chapter, state geological survey office, state foresters office, or local fire department.

The member organizations of the National Disaster Education Coalition, which work to deliver disaster preparedness information to the public, recognize that it is important for all agencies to provide consistent disaster safety messages. As a result, relevant messages in this guide have been reviewed and approved at the national level by the member organizations with expertise in those areas.

Many affiliates of the National Disaster Education Coalition's member organizations have contributed to this guide, and their national organizations encourage them and their members to use the messages.

The messages and the information that supports them are intended to be used in educational presentations, displays and bulletin boards, print and electronic media, radio and television, and any other medium in which disaster safety is communicated to the public. **The information is in the public domain and is intended to be used and shared without copyright restrictions.** If you wish to cite the source when you use this material, the following is suggested: From: *Talking About Disaster: Guide for Standard Messages*. Produced by the National Disaster Education Coalition, Washington, D.C., 2004.

## What Is in This Guide

This guide contains awareness and action messages intended to help people reduce their risk of injury or loss in the event of natural and human-caused disasters. Awareness messages provide general information about the threats presented by each type of disaster. These are found at the beginning of each chapter in a question-and-answer format. Action messages describe what people should do to prepare for and get safely through a disaster. These are found above detailed explanations of how to do it. Also included are statistics and other supporting information that reinforce the credibility and importance of each message.

New to this edition of the guide is a section in most chapters on "Facts and Fiction." This section describes some of the common folklore, or fiction, about hazards and provides factual information that refutes the fiction. "Facts and Fiction" will help you answer commonly asked questions and communicate accurate information to the public, as well as help you avoid unintentionally passing on information that is not true.

## Using This Guide

To use this guide, you should first get to know your intended audience. Consider the ages and socioeconomic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds of the audience members. Be sensitive: audience members who are struggling to provide food for their families may be unable to purchase supplies and foreign-born audience members who learned safety actions in their native countries may be wary of information that contradicts what they were previously told. Also, remember that persons with disabilities may have difficulty hearing, seeing, or understanding warnings and other critical messages. Announcements should be concise, clear, and calm. Open captions of verbal information should be used in emergency telecasts, and scrolling should not be allowed to block captions. Television announcers should provide clear, verbal descriptions of events for persons who are blind or have low vision. It is also important to consider your area's specific hazards and disaster history. The East Coast will not prepare for volcanic eruptions, and the West Coast will not prepare for hurricanes.

When you deliver "what to do" action messages, word them in a positive manner that helps those hearing or reading the message know how to act. For example, in fire education, instead of saying, "Do not panic," you might say, "Remain calm. Get out as quickly and safely as possible." This allows those hearing or reading the message to focus on what they can and should do in case of fire. For this message, you might next offer submessages on what "safely" means (crawl low under smoke to your exit; feel the doorknob and the space around the door with the back of your hand before opening the door; etc.).

In addition, you can use awareness messages to reinforce the importance of knowing what to do. Awareness messages help people realize that disasters do happen in their communities and that they can take steps to prepare for disaster and lessen its effects.

Everyone has seen the horrific results of disasters on the evening news, but viewers often do not perceive them as real or as local. In fact, seeing too much disaster news often causes people to "tune it out," because they feel there is nothing they can do to protect themselves or their property. For some people, testimonials from local residents about their personal experiences with disaster can bring the reality of disaster closer to home; for others, hearing statistics on area disasters can be a wake-up call.

If you are preparing a presentation, news release, or article about a particular type of disaster, consider selecting three to seven messages from the relevant chapter. Feature your chosen messages and add to them with submessages and supporting information from the guide.

If time or space is limited, evaluate your audience and the chosen topic to determine the most important messages. For disasters with little or no warning, what to do during the disaster is generally most important. For disasters with plenty of warning time, preparation may be most important.

Whatever your message, physical props will help you provide the greatest learning experience. Try to use, for example, photos or drawings for print materials, soundtracks

for radio presentations, videos for television, and aids like videos, posters, Disaster Supplies Kit items, and mock-ups to make presentations interactive. Keep in mind that your audience will include persons with disabilities who may have difficulty seeing, hearing, or understanding your messages.

If you would like further information, brochures, or materials about disaster safety or information about developing community disaster education presentations, you may contact any of the National Disaster Education Coalition member agencies or their local counterparts. Keep in mind that the local affiliates of these national agencies may have additional resources and information specific to your audience.

Remember, the five actions for emergency preparedness that everyone can take are:

1. Make a plan.
2. Build a kit.
3. Get trained.
4. Volunteer.
5. Give blood.

### **Talking to Children About Disasters**

You should not worry that talking about disasters will make children fearful. On the contrary, children are usually more frightened by what is whispered or not mentioned aloud than by matter-of-fact discussion. Let children speak freely about what scares or puzzles them—for example, “What will happen to my puppy if we have to evacuate?” “If there’s a flood and I’m at school, I won’t be able to find you.” Try to answer questions and address concerns with concrete, easy-to-follow information.

When helping children learn how to prepare for, respond safely during, and recover from a disaster, it is important to adapt your discussions, instructions, and practice drills to their skills and abilities. Be aware that young children can easily confuse messages such as “drop, cover, and hold on” (response during an earthquake) and “stop, drop, and roll” (response if your clothes catch on fire).

Tell children that a disaster is something that happens that could hurt people, cause damage, or cut off utilities, such as water, telephones, or electricity. Explain to them that nature sometimes provides “too much of a good thing”—fire, rain, wind, snow. Talk about typical effects of disasters that children can relate to, such as loss of electricity, water, and telephone service.

Give examples of several disasters that could happen in your community. Help children recognize the warning signs for each. Discussing disaster ahead of time reduces fear and anxiety and lets everyone know how to respond.

Be prepared to answer children’s questions about scary things that they have heard about or seen on television, such as terrorist attacks. Give constructive information about how they can be prepared to protect themselves.

Teach children how and when to call for help. Teach them to call 9-1-1 or your local emergency telephone number. At home, post emergency telephone numbers by all phones and explain when to call each number. Include the work numbers and cell phone numbers of household members. Even very young children can be taught how and when to call for emergency assistance. If a child cannot read, make an emergency phone number chart with pictures or icons for 911, “daddy,” and “mommy” that may help the child identify the correct number to call.

Tell children that in a disaster there are many people who can help them. Talk about ways that an emergency manager, American Red Cross volunteer, police officer, firefighter, teacher, neighbor, doctor, or utility worker might help after a disaster.

Teach children to call your out-of-town contact in case they are separated from the family and cannot reach family members in an emergency. Tell them, “If no one answers, leave a voice message if possible and then call the alternative contact.” Help them memorize the telephone numbers, and write them down on a card that they can keep with them.

Quiz your children every six months so they will remember where to meet, what phone numbers to call, and safety rules.

Explain that when people know what to do and practice in advance, everyone is able to take care of themselves better in emergencies.

By including all members of your household—regardless of age—in disaster preparedness discussions, you will emphasize each person’s importance as a member of the safety team.

<http://www.disastereducation.org/>