

**Scenario:**

*You live in Mt. View and work in San Jose, 16 miles from home. At 7:30 AM you drop your 2 year old off at the Playland Child Development Center near your home. As usual, it took you 45 minutes to make your way down Highway 280 in the rush hour traffic. The route is so familiar that you did not notice the 16 cement overpasses along the way as you drove under them.*

*At 9:04 AM an earthquake registering 8.2 on the Richter scale hits the Bay Area with the epicenter just outside of Gilroy. You do not know the scientific measurement, of course, all you know is that this is the worst shaking you have ever felt and everything in your workplace is on the ground. You are not badly hurt, but the electricity is off and people are screaming. You have no way of knowing how widespread the damage is. Your first thought is to find out how bad this was and how your child is. You search through the rubble that was the contents of your desk and locate the telephone only to find that the line is dead.*

*Even though someone is warning people not to leave the building, you rush outside to get into your car. The situation is even more chaotic in the street. Cars have rolled into each other, there are large cracks in the street and traffic lights are out. Electric wires dangle in the road and the sidewalks are covered with broken glass and rubble that has fallen from the buildings. An aftershock hits and you instinctively run back into the building wondering how you can possibly get to your child. In the lobby, someone has turned on a battery operated radio and as the sketchy information comes in, you realize that the damage is spread across a 70 mile area and virtually all roads and telephones are unusable. People are being instructed to remain calm and stay where they are so that relief workers will not be obstructed any more than they already are. How can you be expected to remain calm when there are so many unanswered questions going through your mind.*

*"Was my child injured?"*

*"Is the Childcare Center standing? If not, where will the children be moved to?"*

*"When I can't get there to pick him up, what will he think?"*

*"Who will feed him dinner tonight?"*

*"How long will it be until I can find him?"*

*"Was the Childcare Center prepared for this?"*

All disaster preparation instructions from the Red Cross, FEMA, and local government, state clearly that people should be prepared to take care of themselves for at least 72 hours after a disaster. It is frightening to think of what this really means, so most people don't. The first impulse in a crisis is to fall back on our social support system, which is dependent on the continued functioning of lines of communication (telephones, FAX, mail), basic utilities (water, lights, heat), the ability to move about freely (roads open, traffic lights working) and the availability of outside resources (medical assistance, food).

For any business, earthquake preparedness is an exercise in frustration. It is the ultimate in contingency planning because earthquakes can strike without warning any day at any time. At that moment, the location and resources available to a person are pretty much fixed. But most business' need only worry about such things as minimizing damage

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to the facility, loss of inventory and supplies, customer and financial records, disruptions of communications and transportation, staffing needs.

### **What makes disaster planning for Childcare Centers so difficult?**

Add to this the responsibility of locating, calming, and organizing numerous preschoolers who have just been traumatized and possibly injured. It may be days before all of them are reunited with family. Who is legally and ethically responsible for them until that can be arranged? Presumably every licensed childcare provider in Santa Clara County has thought enough about a Disaster Plan to fill in the license application form, but many people consider this a formality and describe a limited plan that would only work in optimum circumstances. There is no systematic review of the plans that are submitted to see if they are realistic or feasible. Partially because the licensing council does not consist of experienced disaster planners and partially because no one wants to impose additional conditions on licensing (any major additions might result in increasing the already critical shortage of affordable childcare). Also, budget cuts have caused a shortage of oversight staff for routine inspections. It would be almost impossible to assure that supplies are stored, drills are practiced, staff is trained, etc.

For those who take their responsibility more seriously in this area, it means achieving and maintaining a level of preparedness that requires serious ongoing commitment on the part of the management. And still there are no guarantees with so many variables in disasters. Some of the components of a childcare disaster plan and the accompanying pitfalls include:

**DRILLS:** Drills are very good because small children remember things they have practiced. The main shortcoming of evacuation drills (even surprise drills) is that they are practiced with full staffing and while everything else remains stable. The evacuation route is not blocked with rubble, all children can be easily accounted for, and none of the staff or children are injured or traumatized. Even if regular drills have been held, in the actual event, some children may be hiding, everyone will be crying and no one will be listening calmly to instructions. But most importantly, no one has to figure out what to do with the children after they are outside (merely congratulate everyone on a good drill and go back inside). Staff, also may feel frightened and out of control, but for the sake of the children must take charge and remain calm.

**DISASTER SUPPLIES:** Disaster planning is not "cost effective" until there is a disaster. Extra supplies are expensive and so is the space to store them in. Assuming that the building is still structurally sound, what would it really mean to have a number of frightened children for a prolonged period of time? Quite possibly there could be no light, heat or water. Clean water for drinking and sanitation, food for all age groups, warm clothes and bedding, first aid supplies, flashlights, medication, etc. are bulky and require rotation. The string of recent disasters has spawned many consultants and companies offering disaster preparedness "kits" supplies which in many cases consist of common and relatively inexpensive items with incredible mark-ups. The value of purchasing the pre-made kits is in the fact that they are handy. While a less sophisticated kit can be put together for about half as much with a little training and some time, many people have procrastinated for years about putting together some supplies (with renewed enthusiasm after each earthquake). Realistically, with the welfare of children at stake, it is worth it to

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pay for the pre-packaged kits if no one is willing to take this on as a "personal mission". Otherwise it will never be done.

**MITIGATION:** Santa Clara County licensing proscribes some basic safety measures, such as attachment of cabinets to walls and attention to loose objects that could fall. But there are many additional levels of preparation that really should be addressed. The odds of such things as shattering windows and falling light fixtures can be greatly reduced. Non-structural mitigation efforts require a certain amount of expertise in both disaster and carpentry.

Sometimes mitigation efforts demand that things are not laid out in the most convenient (or familiar) way for daily operations. Loose items on open shelving are more easily accessible than secured items in closed cupboards. Staff may find it easier to leave cupboards open during the day. And even if the facility meets current structural codes and all reasonable mitigation measures have been taken, a strong enough shake may make it unsafe to re-enter. Will the supplies be accessible and transportable?

**STAFF TRAINING:** Only recently did it become a requirement for childcare staff to have training in CPR and First Aid. Even though it is quite obviously essential knowledge for those caring for small children, this requirement was discussed for a long time before it was implemented. Why the delay? Strict staffing ratios make it difficult to send staff away for an 8 hour class during working hours. Small profit margins make it difficult to pay staff to go for training during their off hours. The training itself is not cheap (costing from \$25 - \$40 per person) and certification must be renewed annually.

Staff training in non-work related skills such as disaster response is one more distraction and expense. And unlike CPR and First Aid, it is not that easy to find knowledgeable earthquake preparedness trainers and consultants, particularly in the field of school and childcare center planning. Centers which are inquiring into professional planning may find the initial quotes prohibitive and give up. The smaller the company, the more overwhelming this may seem. This is often the case with childcare providers who typically operate at a very low profit margin and have virtually no discretionary staff time.

**NOTE:** It must also be clear to staff who will be expected to stay on and continue caring for the children after a disaster. It cannot be optional or discretionary and should be written into job descriptions where appropriate. Those who have been trained to prepare their homes and make pre-arrangements with their families will find it easier to perform their duties at the childcare center without returning home.

**REUNIFICATION WITH FAMILIES:** In the event of a major earthquake during working hours, there is the strong likelihood of parents being unable to retrieve their children from daycare centers. However, because of perceived expense and lack of coordination, most plans do not adequately address the very real possibility that it might be days instead of hours before parents are able to get to the childcare center (either due to personal injury or damage to roads).

Of course, the optimum would be to keep the children as long as possible if it is safe. Unless alternatives have been discussed with the parents, they will try to go back to the place where they left their children no matter how long it takes. But even if the building is

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not damaged, most childcare providers do not have sufficient provisions for more than 24 hours. So it is quite possible that after a major earthquake, a large number of children will have to be relocated - but how and where?

Consider the logistics of evacuating multiple frightened children on foot through streets filled with broken glass, live electrical wires, and debris. However, childcare centers with a large public facility could consider this alternative in their plans. Similarly, it is not recommended to drive anywhere immediately after a disaster. If at all possible, local authorities should be contacted and informed that assistance is needed to get the children to safety. However it is quite likely that it could take hours or even days because of other priorities.

Santa Clara County regulations state that children who are not picked up within an hour of the premiered time will be delivered to the County Child Protective Services. This rule was obviously written to address the individual child whose parent does not arrive to pick up their child on time on a normal day. It does not address the event of a major disaster because:

1. It would only be feasible only if one or two childcare centers were affected. The County does not have the staff or facilities to care for numerous infants and children for a prolonged period of time.
2. It also assumes that the children will be delivered to the county with full information, but structural damage to the premises may prevent retrieval of client records, including parent location information and child medical needs, allergies, etc. Unlike school children, many preschoolers cannot talk and give information about their needs and where they live.
3. The Red Cross will be opening shelters for evacuees as soon as possible, and while it is not written into their plan to accept large numbers of unaccompanied children, they will undoubtedly do whatever is necessary to accommodate the situation. (Cooperative Disaster Childcare, a national organization which comes in after disasters to care for the children, would probably be called to assist.)

In the case of preschool children, it would be imperative to attempt to reunite families as soon as possible for several reasons. Not only for the obvious physical reasons, but to reduce the psychological trauma to the child. All studies of short and long term effects of disaster on children have demonstrated that the fear of separation or abandonment ranks very high in the fears of small children.

### **SUMMARY:**

What can childcare providers do to prepare adequately with minimum expense and disruption of their daily operations?

1. The "Disaster Plan" portion of the licensing application should not be looked on as a space to be filled in as a formality. Real thought should be put into what could actually be done under various circumstances. Each disaster is different and even though it is impossible to prepare for every contingency, the more possibilities that have been considered in advance, the more likelihood of rational behavior after a disaster. Obtain

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professional assistance if possible, even if it is only to review and critique the effort.

2. Classes are necessary to teach some basic disaster preparation pointers and assist providers with on site mitigation at an affordable rate. Staff should be clear on their duties and trained in home preparation,
3. Costs that must be paid out should be planned and written into the budget over a fixed time period (not to exceed 5 years.) Networking should be done among non-profit childcare providers to obtain grants of goods or funding to obtain disaster supplies for storage. Some items (such as bedding or extra clothing) may be obtained from parents if appropriate.
4. Realistic plans should be made in the event of the need for relocation. Options should be examined and if there is no place within walking distance for small children, transportation should be considered. These plans should be discussed with parents.
5. Participation in coordinated offsite data storage. This should be accessible in time of disaster (even if the center is damaged or destroyed) and include information of parental contact points as well as an out of state relative or contact in case there has been damage to the parents' home and/or place of work.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Franci Collins has over 15 years of experience as a Red Cross Disaster Volunteer and is a certified instructor in Earthquake Preparedness as well as many disaster relief classes. Franci has also trained with Cooperative Disaster Childcare and on 1990 went to Puerto Rico after severe flooding to help care for the affected children. She also attended the FEMA Emergency Management Institute in Emitsburg, MD to participate in a one week pilot course in Earthquake Preparation for Schools.*