



# Program Overview



FEMA



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# **YOUTH PREPAREDNESS EDUCATION**



# 1. YOUTH PREPAREDNESS EDUCATION

According to 2013 census estimates, children under age 18 make up nearly 25 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>1</sup> Disaster researchers have identified children as one of several groups considered more prone to damage, loss, suffering, injury, and death in the event of a disaster,<sup>2</sup> and the disaster impact can be disproportionately greater for children living in poverty—who are approximately 22 percent of all children in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

As adults, we want children to feel safe and not worry about potential emergencies, but we also know that disasters can happen, often without warning, and we want children to know what steps to take to be able to stay safe during and after an event. Because school attendance is mandated for every U.S. child, the school setting is an ideal place to implement effective emergency preparedness programs.

Children can also play an important role in disaster preparedness by being good messengers of preparedness information and advocates for action with their families. This role is particularly helpful in families that speak more than one language or when English is not the primary language in a household, or where one or more family members has a disability or access and functional needs.

These considerations led staff in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region I (which serves the New England area); the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency; and fourth-grade educators in North Providence, RI, to develop a classroom-based curriculum for emergency preparedness education, called Student Tools for Emergency Planning, or STEP. The program was piloted in February 2008 and grew to implementation in 17 states as of 2014. To support the continued growth and national distribution of STEP, FEMA assembled a working group of subject matter experts in youth disaster preparedness to review and update the materials.

The revised STEP curriculum and materials are based on years of promising practices and lessons learned in youth disaster preparedness education. Because the field of youth disaster preparedness education is still growing, however, robust, scientific assessments of proven practices are only now beginning to emerge. Amendments to the STEP curriculum will be provided when additional research findings provide greater insights.

FEMA strongly supports a focused effort on youth preparedness education. In 2010, FEMA published *Bringing Youth Preparedness Education to the Forefront: A Literature Review and Recommendations*, which summarizes research and evaluations in the field of youth disaster preparedness. It also includes best practices for school-based programs that you might find helpful in teaching the STEP program. FEMA also maintains the *Youth Preparedness Catalogue: Disaster Preparedness Education Programs and Resources*—a compilation of successful youth preparedness programs around the country—and in 2014 released the *National Strategy for Youth Preparedness Education: Empowering, Educating, and Building Resilience*. These publications and other resources are available at [www.ready.gov/youth-preparedness](http://www.ready.gov/youth-preparedness).

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau. (2013). *Current estimates data*. Retrieved November 5, 2014, from [www.census.gov/popest/data/](http://www.census.gov/popest/data/)

<sup>2</sup> Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., Davis, I., & Wisner, B. (2004). *At risk: Natural hazards, people's vulnerability, and disasters* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty. (2013). *Child poverty*. Retrieved November 5, 2014, from [www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html](http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html)





## **IMPLEMENTING STEP**



## 2. IMPLEMENTING STEP

The STEP program is a curriculum for fourth- and fifth-grade students to teach them how to prepare for emergencies and disasters, and to train them to become leaders in family preparedness. Your participation in teaching the STEP program can help children and families be better prepared and more resilient should a disaster occur in your area. Thank you for making time to discuss emergency planning with your class.

### STEP Overview

Grade Level: Grades 4–5

#### Teaching Objectives

- Provide general knowledge about disasters common to your area and strategies for how students can protect themselves and their families.
- Teach students how to create a family emergency communication plan.
- Teach students how to assemble disaster supply kits with their families.

#### Learning Outcomes

- Students are more knowledgeable, capable, and prepared in the event of a disaster.
- Students are positive influencers in helping their families be better prepared.

#### Structure

- Base Lesson (approximately 1 hour for videos, discussion, and activities): Introduction to Emergency Planning, Family Emergency Communication Plan and Disaster Supply Kit.
- Hazard Units (approximately 30 minutes for each video and discussion): Fire Emergencies, Severe Weather, Earthquakes.
- While only the Base Lesson is required to receive a STEP Certificate of Completion, FEMA encourages instructors to include the Hazard Units as part of their program. The units on fire emergencies and severe weather are applicable in all geographic areas; the earthquake unit can be added according to local risk.
- Supplemental Lessons (up to 10 hours of optional lessons): Emergency preparedness topics presented through lessons in geography, science, English, art, and mathematics.

#### Materials and Resources

- Participating schools receive ready-to-teach lesson materials, including instructor guides, STEP It Up with the Disaster Dodgers video series, student handouts, classroom activities, homework assignments, and graduation certificates. The STEP program also includes suggestions for how to involve family members and the larger community in STEP.

#### Alignment With National Content Standards

- The STEP Base Lesson, Hazard Units, and supplemental materials align with national content standards for several subject areas.

## Lessons Learned in Teaching STEP

The following recommendations have been provided by STEP instructors and students who participated in STEP over the past several years.

- **Keep class size below 50 to ensure interaction.**  
“As a former teacher and a STEP presenter, interactive is always the best way to teach a lesson. However, this doesn’t necessarily mean that the students need to play a game. [You could meet the objective] as long as there is the opportunity for the students to join in the discussion and to think about their own planning and next steps. Several schools bring in two fifth-grade classrooms into one, and it would take quite a bit of time and may not be logistically feasible. I think the maximum amount of students in the class should be 50. If there are only about 20 or so students in a class, doing a game may work really well.”—Stacey Hafen, Senior Director of Community Preparedness, American Red Cross
- **Be creative (and encourage students to be creative) about finding items to add to the disaster supply kits.** Enlist members of your community, such as your parent-teacher organizations or local businesses, to help donate containers or supplies. Consider sending students to a local grocery or general store as part of a presentation lesson to ask store managers for any donations of food and water.  
“I had to think about where I could get free things so that it wouldn’t be so expensive to make my family’s disaster supply kit. When I went to the dentist and when he gave me my free toothbrush, I asked him for an extra one for my kit.”—Elissa, fifth grade student
- **Include the families of students in as many ways as possible throughout the STEP program.** In Section 3, “Involving Families and the Larger Community,” you will find a Sample Letter to Family Members to introduce family members to the STEP program.  
“Students need to lead their family in action—in the form of building disaster supply kits and plans. The more you, as a teacher, can invest parents in this goal up front, the more likely students will be able to reach this goal. Incorporating STEP into the parent night we hold at the beginning of the year was one way we felt we were setting our students up for success.”—Ms. Coutre, fourth-grade teacher  
There has also been an overwhelming amount of positive response from parents and guardians. In fact, the one criticism parents had about STEP was that the program was only being taught to students in fourth and fifth grade, and not other grade levels. Parents were not nervous or fearful about their children learning about disasters—especially when the instructors were confident about their knowledge of and familiarity with the materials.
- **Engage community members in as many ways as possible through the STEP program.** Many instructors reached out to local and state representatives to include these emergency experts in the STEP process. Consider bringing fire chiefs into classrooms to guest speak to students, having an emergency management director speak to your school’s parent-teacher organization, inviting someone from a disability organization to speak with school administrators about disability inclusive emergency management, or taking students on a field trip to your state’s emergency management operations center.
- **Investigate the procedures that your school and city have for handling an emergency situation** so that you can make the connection between home and school preparedness. Many instructors found that the STEP curriculum helped them discuss with their students the need for emergency drills at school.

- **Consider the state standards that these lessons cover** and how learning can be extended across subject areas, including art and geography. Science, reading comprehension, and social studies units have all been built into the STEP curriculum.

## STEP Alignment With National Content Standards

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers work together to develop standards that “define the knowledge and skills students should have within their kindergarten to grade 12 education so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.” These organizations note that national standards meet the following criteria:

- Are aligned with college and work expectations;
- Are clear, understandable, and consistent;
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- Are informed by other top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and
- Are evidence-based.

Recognizing that there are increasing demands on classroom time, FEMA developed the STEP curriculum to align with national content standards for several subject areas. These linkages may help make it easier for you to incorporate the STEP curriculum into your school’s teaching requirements. For more information about your state’s standards, visit [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

## Customizing STEP

The STEP curriculum is meant to be tailored to your individual fourth- or fifth-grade class and students. Instructors are encouraged to put their own “stamp” on the program, as they know their school district and individual school best. FEMA also recommends that instructors focus on specific emergencies that are more likely to occur in your geographic area.

FEMA also has online emergency preparedness information developed specifically for children and youth, including interactive games, available at [www.ready.gov/kids](http://www.ready.gov/kids). You may wish to refer students to this website before or after you teach STEP or use some of the additional materials available in your STEP program.

## Preparing Students for STEP

The following activities will help introduce your students to STEP:

- Tell the students about the upcoming STEP lesson. Explain that they will learn more about disasters and how to become agents to help their families plan for emergencies.
- If desired, have your students produce artwork related to nature and natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, tornadoes, volcanoes, blizzards, and fires) to set the scene in the classroom.
- You also might have students create their own folders to hold the materials they will use during the STEP lessons.

## Emotional Considerations

Because discussions about disasters and their impact can be upsetting, it is important that instructors pay close attention to the emotional reactions of individual students during instruction. Students who have experienced a disaster in the past may find the discussion particularly emotional, so you may want to ask about past experiences before you begin the STEP program. You may also want to use a less destructive, more common type of incident, such as a power outage, as the introduction to emergency preparedness. That way, as you add different content to the lesson, you can notice as soon as possible if any student expresses discomfort, anxiety, or any other type of negative reaction to the subject matter.

While this situation may be a rare occurrence, you may wish to have a backup plan or other activity that would allow you to change course to minimize a student's discomfort. You may want to include the school counselor in your plans to introduce the course materials. You also may then choose to reach out to the distressed student's parent or guardian after class to explain what happened. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Disaster Technical Assistance Center provides a host of materials for instructors and school personnel to use when discussing disasters with children.

These materials are available at [www.samhsa.gov/dtac](http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac). The American Red Cross and FEMA have written *Helping Children Cope with Disaster*, available at [www.fema.gov/pdf/library/children.pdf](http://www.fema.gov/pdf/library/children.pdf).

### **Want to Know More About Disasters and Emergency Preparedness Before You Begin?**

Before you begin teaching STEP, you might want to spend some time learning more about the types of disasters that occur in your area and emergency preparedness for those disasters. Typically, people don't think about emergency preparedness—until after an event has occurred. Chances are that each of us will be affected by at least one emergency or disaster in our lifetime.

FEMA provides information on different types of disasters and emergencies, maps that identify the locations of historic disaster activity, and what to do before, during, and after an incident at [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov).

## **INVOLVING FAMILIES AND THE LARGER COMMUNITY**





## 3. INVOLVING FAMILIES AND THE LARGER COMMUNITY

### Involving Families in STEP

People experienced with the STEP program recommend that schools engage the families of students early on and in as many ways as possible while teaching STEP. Family involvement will help students achieve the goals of the program and will help ensure that families are receiving important emergency preparedness information. Suggestions for how to involve families include:

- Sending a letter home to the family;
- Using other communication channels (e.g., emails, blog posts, website posts) to keep families informed;
- Involving families in homework assignments, including emergency supplies checklists and family emergency communication plans; and
- Holding a STEP Open House.

Ensure provision of reasonable accommodations to all family members and students with disabilities and others with access and functional needs, including sign language interpreting, Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART), and alternative format of materials in large print, Braille, or electronic format. For family members needing materials translated into other languages, consider providing translation. Work with school personnel who can advise in the provision of reasonable accommodation.

### Involving the Larger Community in STEP

Experienced STEP instructors recommend that the larger community also be engaged in supporting the STEP program; for example, by serving as guest speakers in the classroom, participants in a STEP Open House, or sponsors for “STEP Bags”—bags containing selected emergency preparedness items.

#### ***Guest Speakers***

Emergency management and first-responder organizations have a significant stake in emergency preparedness for the community. Consider contacting your local emergency management agency representative, representatives from your local Citizen Corps Council or Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program, or local first responders (such as fire, law enforcement, or public health agencies) to ask if someone would speak at an open house school event or speak to your class for 5 to 10 minutes about the importance of family emergency planning. This person may choose to bring flyers, handouts, or other materials to share with students and their families that will reinforce the STEP preparedness message. Points of contact for Citizen Corps Councils and CERT programs are available at: [www.ready.gov/citizen-corps/find-your-nearest-council](http://www.ready.gov/citizen-corps/find-your-nearest-council) and [www.fema.gov/community-emergency-response-teams](http://www.fema.gov/community-emergency-response-teams).

Also consider the needs of your community. If English is not the primary language spoken in many households, you may wish to invite someone who can communicate in the language spoken. You may also choose to invite someone who can communicate the importance of family emergency planning and provide guidance for people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs.

### ***Sponsor STEP Bags***

Some STEP instructors have been able to give students STEP Bags containing emergency preparedness items for the children and their families. In some cases, these have been funded by the school, but in other locations, local businesses (e.g., drug stores, grocery stores, or big box chain outlets) have sponsored the STEP Bags and donated some or all items for the bags. Ask your local emergency management representatives or first responders if they already have a partnership with potential donors. If no relationship exists, you or your school may wish to approach a potential donor to ask about donating items for the STEP Bags.

Some suggested items for the STEP Bags are the following:

- Emergency blanket (also known as a space blanket or Mylar blanket)
- Flashlight
- Batteries
- Water bottle
- Small first aid kit
- Small comfort item (e.g., plush toy or crayons and paper)
- Toothbrush and toothpaste

While a STEP Bag is not a mandatory component of the program, it is a nice addition and serves as a visual reminder, both to students and their family members, of the importance of planning for disasters. It is also one way to engage the larger community in the STEP program and emergency preparedness.

### **America's PrepareAthon!**

America's PrepareAthon! is a national community-based campaign for action with an emphasis on group discussions, drills, and exercises. With National PrepareAthon! Days held every spring and fall, the campaign provides free resources and tools to help individuals, organizations, and communities be better prepared. The fall National PrepareAthon! Day culminates National Preparedness Month, held every September.

Teaching STEP can be counted as an America's PrepareAthon! activity, and FEMA encourages you to register your class participation at [www.ready.gov/prepare](http://www.ready.gov/prepare). In addition, FEMA encourages schools to conduct drills and preparedness education at all grade levels. There are America's PrepareAthon! Playbooks for different hazards to help school leaders and administrators review preparedness policies by holding a tabletop exercise.

## Sample Letter to Family Members

Dear Family Members,

As we all know, emergencies can strike quickly and without warning. These events can be traumatic, especially for children. To help your child and your family be better prepared and to learn what to do to stay safe, we will be teaching the Student Tools for Emergency Planning (STEP) program.

As part of this program, students will learn what steps to take now to prepare and how to stay safe during and after the types of disasters that might occur in our area. They will also learn how to help their families prepare for emergencies. This knowledge can decrease the anxiety they may feel when hearing about disasters happening nearby and around the world and give them an understanding of what to do in a similar situation.

The STEP program, sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is designed to be age appropriate and engaging for fourth- and fifth-graders. The goals of STEP are for your child to do the following:

1. Become familiar with the types of natural disasters that can occur in our area;
2. Work with you to assemble items for a disaster supply kit to use, should your family need to evacuate or stay at home without power; and
3. Work with you to form a family emergency communication plan so that everyone knows what to do and how to contact each other during emergencies.

We hope we do not have to deal with the effects of an emergency or large-scale disaster anytime soon. However, I'm pleased that we are providing our students with tools to help them and our community be ready in case of such an event. More emergency preparedness information for parents is available at [www.ready.gov/kids/parents](http://www.ready.gov/kids/parents).

We are excited about the STEP program and are happy to extend an invitation to you to observe your child's class while it is being taught. Please keep in mind that your child will have homework related to disaster preparedness, and he or she might need your help. Also, at the end of this program, you will receive an invitation to attend a graduation event where your child will receive a certificate for their participation in STEP. We hope to see you at the graduation ceremony!

Sincerely,

## STEP Introductory Open House

Another option for engaging families is to host an open house that lets parents know that their children will be participating in a project that involves the whole household. This can be held as part of a back-to-school night or a parent-teacher meeting. Consider engaging family members at the beginning of the year so they can be thinking about the concept before the lessons are taught. Although the chart below provides different options for you to consider, you can work with your school and administrators to tailor the event and course so that it fits your curriculum and suits your needs.

Speakers	Event/Timing	Messages
<b>Option 1: Events held outside the school day, with community representatives</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Principal</li> <li>▪ Teachers/instructors</li> <li>▪ Emergency management representatives</li> <li>▪ School board members</li> <li>▪ Other civic organizations or community centers</li> <li>▪ Local Citizen Corps or CERT representatives</li> <li>▪ Red Cross representatives</li> <li>▪ Disability organization or independent living center representatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ School open house</li> <li>▪ PTA meeting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The principal announces the STEP program at a school event near the beginning of the academic year, stressing September as National Preparedness Month.</li> <li>▪ A local emergency management agency representative or a first responder could speak briefly about the need for all families to make plans to protect themselves in case of an emergency and may provide handouts with local contacts. He/she will include the fact that students in the STEP program will be learning more about what items to have ready if they need to leave their homes suddenly, and how to stay in contact with family members if they are separated. Teachers will reinforce this message in their individual classrooms.</li> <li>▪ The PTA might host an event and include some information about the STEP program.</li> </ul>
<b>Option 2: Events held during the school day, with community representative</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teachers/instructors</li> <li>▪ Emergency management representatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ During the school day, in the classroom, or at an assembly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The local emergency management agency representative speaks briefly about the need for families to make plans to protect themselves, etc. (see above). Teachers reinforce this message.</li> </ul>
<b>Option 3: Events held during the school day, with school staff</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teachers deliver the message (see above). This message may be augmented by poster displays that relate to the theme or other materials available from FEMA or other sources.</li> </ul>