



HOW TO IMPROVE SAFETY AT YOUR CHILDCARE CENTER

**Learn
practical
steps you can
implement
regardless of
your budget,
size,
or facility
constraints.**

Improving safety at your childcare center might look different than it does for another center in your community. Finding a plan that works for your unique setting and constraints is key.

But it would be best if you also were ready to pivot. Licensing requirements are constantly changing. Or an event occurs that changes policies and procedures. There are also outside factors, such as changes in neighboring businesses, technology advancements, etc.

Ultimately, the goal of documenting safety procedures is to protect children and provide parents peace of mind knowing that their child is in a safe place.

You might not get your security 100 percent right. Things might still happen that you can't predict. But you can be proactive in thinking through what you can foresee. New things will happen at some point but be thoughtful and intentional with what we know and are aware of.

This document will teach the following aspects of childcare center safety.

- 8 Policies and Procedures that Establish a Safe Community
- Technology That Improves Security
- Communicating Safety Measures and Procedures to Parents



8 POLICIES AND PROCEDURES THAT ESTABLISH A SAFE COMMUNITY

Childcare center safety might look different at different centers. And ultimately, there is no way to eliminate all risks. All you can do is create policies and procedures that mitigate foreseen risks and constantly update those policies based on new events and advancements.

The National Institute of Justice has this to say about school safety:

"There is no quick fix for school violence. No one intervention— technological or otherwise— can fully guarantee the security of schools or resolve the underlying causes of school violence. Instead, a holistic approach to developing a school safety plan seeks to understand and address to the degree possible what leads to school violence to promote 'situational awareness' among students, staff, and community members. The selection of technology should be in service of a larger school safety approach as outlined in the plan."

Here are eight policies and procedures you should consider for your childcare center. This is all free. But it does require time, persistence and high expectations. But these policies can go a long way in keeping your students safe and giving parents what they want.

1. STAFF IDENTIFICATION

Require that your staff wear a nametag or ID that clearly shows that they work for your center or, you could require that staff wear T-shirts or aprons that bear your company logo. That way, when new parents walk in and they aren't familiar with your full staff yet, they know who works for your school.

Or even for established parents, if they see someone walking around in the school that they've never seen, they know to look for the apparel with your logo on it or a lanyard around their neck with their ID.

You can do this in a variety of ways to meet your budget. Here's a look at some options.

- Lanyard ID
- Clip-on ID
- Uniform with a logo, such as a T-shirt, polo or apron that goes over the staff's normal clothes
- Photos and bios for staff at the entrance or near the door for each classroom
- Emails to parents when you welcome a new staff member with a photo, so parents feel acquainted with them

Allow parents to ask about who someone is so parents can keep children safe. In fact, encourage parents to ask front desk staff about anyone they don't recognize to protect children and report suspicious activity within your center.





2. PARENT AND VISITOR IDENTIFICATION

In addition to staff identification, parent and visitor IDs are also important. Require that parents write down who is authorized to pick up their child. Don't just allow verbal communication of this. Get it in writing or via a digital document and keep it in a secure place.

If someone arrives to pick up a child who is not a parent or a regular caregiver that you recognize, call the parent to make sure the person is authorized. Then check the person's ID to make sure they are who they claim to be.

Some childcare staff might feel uncomfortable asking for an ID. But your role is to keep children safe. You might even request an ID for new parents at your school who the teachers don't know yet. Most of the time, parents will be extremely willing to provide identification because it gives them peace of mind knowing you have clear policies in place to keep their child safe.

Make sure your staff knows that if they see someone wandering around your childcare center, they should request an ID and information about what the person is doing there. This is not just the job of the director because the director cannot be in all places at all times. Invite teachers to escort visitors to the classroom they are seeking to avoid suspicious activity.

While checking IDs for visitors you don't recognize might upset someone from time to time, it is a best practice and one that parents will appreciate because they know you take security seriously.

ATTENDANCE RECORD

3. THOROUGH ATTENDANCE TRACKING

School safety relies heavily on thorough attendance tracking. With strong tracking measures, you'll know who is always in your center. This can present some challenges because parents are hustling in the morning to get to their next destination. The smoother your check-in procedure is, the more likely parents will be to complete it.

Create a process to ensure children are signed in and out at the right time. This is important in case of a fire drill or emergency. That way teachers know who to account for.

Strong attendance tracking is vital for a variety of reasons. For schools with flexible scheduling, it can help with automated billing. But even at schools with flat fees, it can prevent situations of communication breakdown.

For example, parents might get their wires crossed and mom doesn't know that dad is picking up today. So, dad arrives at 4 to pick up the child and then when mom arrives everyone panics because the child isn't there. But if you've tracked attendance, you can tell mom that dad picked up the child at 4. This shifts the situation entirely and can calm everyone because you know where the child is and when they left.

While you might think that the teachers can remember who picked up a child, sometimes classrooms combine toward the end of the day due to staffing. Having documentation for drop-off and pickup will be helpful in this situation.



4. NO-SHOW CALL PLAN

By a certain time, each morning, teachers should review which children arrived based on scheduled attendance. And if a child did not show up that day despite being on the schedule, the teacher should call the parents to check-in.

This further helps document that a child was not in your care in case of an emergency. And it might be that parents believe that the child is at your center. Tragic situations have happened where parents forget their child is in the vehicle and go to work like normal.

This is just another level of checking to ensure everyone knows where the child is and there are clear expectations. It can help you stay ahead of a situation. Some centers struggle to maintain a policy like this due to teacher availability. In that case, teachers can review attendance and share the details with the front desk team who is then in charge of calling parents. Ultimately, your goal is to ensure nothing falls through the cracks.

5. HAVE FRONT DESK PERSONNEL



Front desk personnel are crucial to ensuring safety at your school. And while staffing is often exceedingly tight within childcare centers to where front desk staff members must cover a classroom to maintain child-teacher ratios, it's still helpful to try to maintain front desk staff during busy traffic times.

When you have that front desk personnel, it helps greet everyone and verifies who is coming and going from your center. The front desk staff can check IDs and review information based on what's in the system. Or maybe the visitor or parent is seeking a form that the front desk can supply, which provides great customer service.

Having someone there helps parents feel that someone is watching who is coming and going. Additionally, ensuring that someone is answering phone calls for parents can ease their minds knowing they can get in touch.

Parents might call with emergency family situations and having someone available for that phone call immediately is important.



6. BUILD AN EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN

When the emergency happens, what do you need to do? What do teachers need to do? What do additional staff on-site need to do? Who calls 911? Who stays with the child? Who stays with the other children and where do you take the other children?

Outlining roles during an emergency will help everyone know what to do even when tensions and emotions are running high. The child in need of attention should always come first and you don't want to waste time that could later prove valuable.

Make a plan to remove other children and take them to a calm spot to avoid them witnessing something that could be traumatic for them.

7. PRACTICE LOCKDOWN PROCEDURES

Who does what during a school lockdown? While you hope to never need to go under lockdown, you need a process, and you want staff to know exactly what that process is.

Consider all angles when making a lockdown procedure document. For example, cell service might be blocked due to the chaos and many people in the area trying to get in touch with loved ones.

Have a process for closing blinds, protecting children, keeping them calm, keeping visitors out, communicating with parents, etc.

Parent communication is essential because parents will of course be worried. Someone needs to send out the information immediately to let parents know what is happening and what to expect.

Reduce anxiety about the situation. You might not have the office staff for this, but you need to have a plan. No matter how many children and parents you need to contact, you need to have a communication plan.

Who calls 911 if someone is in the building that doesn't belong? Or what happens if an angry parent is out of line?

In emergency situations, people often step back and want someone else to take responsibility. So, it needs to be clear who is responsible for each job. You can also reinforce this verbally during the situation. Restate it all out loud so no one is just standing around waiting for someone to step up.



8. SAFETY TRAINING (AND RETRAINING) FOR STAFF



Staff training is essential. Even with the best handbook, it won't be enough if you aren't reminding teachers frequently what to do and running drills with students. Plans and handbooks are only good if your staff is aware of them and trained on how to implement them.

During regularly scheduled staff meetings, reiterate important aspects of your plans. You can do it in a fun way with scenarios and act out how staff would respond. This helps ingrain the material in your staff members' minds.

You can also make visuals and laminate and post them in the classroom so your staff can access them quickly. Identify when individual staff members are not reinforcing or implementing a policy. This is an opportunity to improve staff expectations and safety.

For example, if you see someone wandering the school who people don't know walk right by a teacher, stop and ask the teacher if they know who that person is. If they say no, ask that they go with you to ask the person for an ID so the teacher can learn how to handle the situation.

Maybe you need to do a policy review with teachers in a specific classroom who are struggling with a new situation, such as a restraining order on a parent. Sit down with the staff and discuss how to handle it.

Be real with staff. They need to know the info and how to handle it. Talk about things that have happened, maybe even in your state. Make sure they know the why behind the what to help make them buy into what the new policy is.



TECHNOLOGY THAT IMPROVES SECURITY

The technology you can afford and what works for your school will depend on the size, layout and budget. It also depends on whether you own the building or are renting because you can't make some changes as a lessee.

1. SECURED ACCESS

Do you have a buzzer or code at the door to let parents in? You can secure your building using a scan card, key code or individualized family code.

People who don't have a keycode would need to ring the doorbell and be personally greeted. Having an intercom system can be good because that way your front desk staff can interact with the visitor before giving them access. Then you can check IDs before they get too far into the building.

Consider how often you'll change access codes. You might do it annually or update the codes when you experience a staff or parent issue. While you're deciding how often to change codes, also think about how you'll get that information to parents and staff once you make the change. Some systems allow parents to self-manage changing their access codes.

Educate parents and staff members about ensuring that they don't let someone walk in behind them that they don't recognize. This is so important and parents will often know the people who are in the building around the same time as them. They should know who should not be there.

2. CHILD DATA ACCESS

You want child data to be secure but accessible. If someone arrives saying they are a child's family member who is picking up today, you don't want to be digging through filing cabinets looking for information on who is approved to pick up the child.

Digital access is essential because it allows you to have all info in one place that you can pull up on your computer or tablet. The teacher can pull it up in the classroom so they don't have to go find the director or disrupt another lesson. Or you can just get medical info quickly if a child is having an allergic reaction. That way they have the info at their fingertips when they need it.

3. SECURITY CAMERAS

Security cameras can allow you to have an extra set of eyes to view specific areas of your school.

Common places to place security cameras include:

- Front door
- Hallways
- Common spaces
- Playground

If you have a system where you can have those images up and available at the front office or accessible on a tablet it gives you a set of eyes to show you what's happening.

You could find a child that got separated from their class to reunite them. It helps you in situations you might not expect. Some cameras might offer the capability to record in case of questions about what happened in your school so you can respond accordingly.

Separate from those security cameras throughout the school, you might have classroom cameras as well. These help parents get a glimpse of their child throughout the day. They want to see their child smiling and happy. These types of cameras are not for security.



The catch with in-classroom cameras is that parents can misinterpret them. They might see a moment when a child is not engaging in an activity and sitting by themselves.

But these classroom cameras can give parents peace of mind seeing their child during the day. If you use these it's important to share with parents what to expect.

4. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

While paper can serve as a constant reminder, digital communication is so important because it's immediate, accessible and pretty much everyone has a smartphone.

You might want to get in touch with parents immediately. Childcare software lets you look up a child to learn vital data and email or text a parent. Or if you need to email all parents in a classroom or all in the school you can click and choose a group to do that with.

If you need to make a phone call, you can pull up a phone number quickly in your software to communicate fast. Digital communication with families saves you time and money on printing communication or making dozens of phone calls.

Additionally, digital communication can aid in document management, such as doctor forms and state licensing requirements. Get these forms in a system that is easily accessible and secure so you can do your job and the peace of mind for families so they know you have these important features.

COMMUNICATING SAFETY MEASURES AND PROCEDURES TO PARENTS

Once you've implemented these safety practices, you need to communicate them to parents. This helps you show your value and sell your center as the best in the area.

1. SHARE SAFETY MEASURES DURING TOURS

When parents come in to tour your school, this is your chance to sell yourself. Try not to leave it so that parents must ask you questions about safety policies. They will likely be anxious and have lots going on in their minds.

As you tour, make sure you point out all the safety and security features. Identify the security measures that you take and give parents handouts and paperwork to take with them in case they forget the information.

Point out all features, such as phones in classrooms for quick access to you or 911, cameras in key locations on the playground as an extra set of eyes and the front door keypad to lock the door at all times so no one can just stroll into your school.



2. SHARE SAFETY REQUIREMENTS FROM YOUR LICENSING BODY

Let parents get educated about where your policies come from. Tell them that this is where they can find regulations so they know what to expect from your school.

But then be sure that you highlight what you do that goes above and beyond your state's licensing requirements to ensure a child's safety.

There are times when parents ask questions and expectations that might not be realistic or legal for your program. Take time to explain to parents why you can't issue certain student information or fulfill a parent's request.

3. SHARE PARENT REFERENCES

Share parent references so prospective parents know you aren't just a salesperson. Allow parents with children enrolled in your center to share that these safety measures are actually happening so they can vouch for you.



4. SHARE THIRD-PARTY CHECKLISTS FOR CHILDCARE SECURITY

By sharing this information, you can make it clear that you meet or exceed industry standards. But don't just write these lists yourself because that won't have the same effect as having another organization state these things.

This type of info helps so that parents know what to expect from any childcare setting and know that having their child enrolled at your school is the right move.



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