



CLIMATE CONNECTION
Information and strategies
linking Climate and School Safety.

Supporting Students with Autism with Lockdown Drills

Climate Connection is a publication
of the NYS Center for School Safety.



Background on Learners with ASD

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability affecting 1 in 36 children on average in the United States (CDC). Characteristics of individuals with ASD can include differences in:

- Adjusting to social contexts
- Verbal and nonverbal communication
- Reactivity to sensory input (e.g., alarms, flashing lights)
- Motor movements

In the classroom, students with ASD are successful with tasks that engage their rote memory and visual processing abilities. They thrive with routine and structure and have a strong attention to details. Students with ASD may also have selected areas of interest, or patterned behaviors related to sensory processing (e.g. rocking back and forth, flapping hands). Students with autism may need support to plan and organize their thinking, complete multi-step or complex tasks, reflect and monitor their own learning, and summarize.

No two people with ASD are the same; the ability to communicate, socialize, learn, and more is different among individuals with ASD.



Collaborating with School Paraprofessionals

When planning for safety drills, it's important to involve the paraprofessionals and teaching assistants working directly with students who have ASD. Given that they often work closely with the students, they will have insights and ideas into what will work best to keep students safe and calm. Working together may help you consider accommodations that may be used during a drill such as ear plugs or calming items. Be sure to work with staff in advance to review the process, strategies, and important considerations that will support students during the drill and include relevant information in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).



Safety drills provide an opportunity to practice staff & student actions during an emergency. In New York State, schools are required to conduct 8 **Evacuation** and 4 **Lockdown** drills* each year.

When conducting a drill, it should ALWAYS be announced that it is a DRILL and NOT AN EMERGENCY. Trauma-informed drills avoid tactics that may introduce or activate prior trauma. Avoid the use of props or actors that mimic an incident of violence. Instead, focus on **practicing the actions** that should be taken during an emergency.

For more information about conducting Lockdown Drills, please visit [our website](#).

Learn more about Integrating the Needs of Students and Staff with Disabilities and Other Access and Functional Needs in [Training Module 3](#).

* EDN §807 Fire and emergency drills



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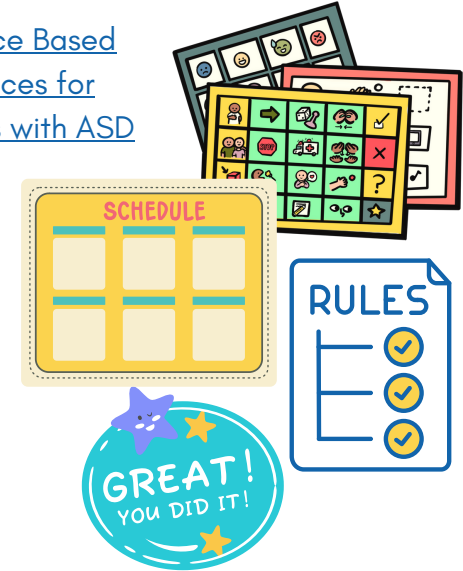
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Strategies

- **Task Analysis:** to break down the steps of the process
- **Social Stories:** to pre-set students with what to expect
- **Visual Supports:** to help students see each step and what to do
- **Modeling:** to show students what do during a drill
- **Prompting:** to give a reminder or cue of a step in the process
- **Self-management:** to practice strategies to stay calm
- **Reinforcement:** to build confidence and encourage
- **Generalization:** to connect to existing knowledge (e.g. fire drill)

Evidence Based Practices for Students with ASD



As a school professional, it can be stressful to teach and practice lockdown drill procedures with students, and equally challenging to anticipate when and how they will occur. This can make it difficult for educators to position themselves to best support the needs of their students with ASD. Staff can collaborate with building leadership to know the date in advance and potentially the period or time that the drill will occur. However, working toward authentic practice opportunities is recommended as students get older and more comfortable.

Social Stories for Lockdown Drills

View the example social stories (and a children’s book!) for safety situations, such as lockdown drills:

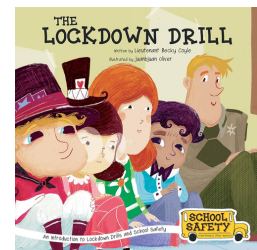


Our Lockdown Drill

[Lockdown Drill Social Story \(Carol Gray\)](#)



[Safety Preparation Stories \(Autism Little Learners\)](#)



[The Lockdown Drill Book by Becky Coyle](#)

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Lockdown Drills: What to Consider and Plan For

In research on conducting lockdown drills with students with autism, practitioners shared that drills are difficult for many, but not the same for their students. Generally, students struggled when drills were random or not known in advance; transitioning from normal classroom activities to being in lockdown was sometimes frustrating or upsetting to students, or (due to sensory needs) they struggled to sit still for the duration of the drill. While some students can understand the situation is not real, others took the drill literally and were distraught or fearful for their safety. In more extreme cases, some students had intensive behavior such as running out of the classroom, or beginning to fixate on safety drills (Jackson and Golini, 2024).

Students with ASD can be taught to participate in lockdown drills safely and calmly. The chart below provides considerations for before, during, and after a lockdown drill.

Each student is different. What to do to support each student is individualized and based on their needs and how they learn best.

Before

- Include a plan in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- Prepare helpful materials such as social stories, visual supports, or a "go bag."
- Directly teach and practice the steps of what to do during a drill.
- Introduce steps gradually and work up to a full drill.

During

- Follow the process as it was practiced (to the best of your ability).
- Model the behavior expected from students, including calming routines.
- Use prepared materials as planned or practiced with the student.
- Calmly prompt the student; avoid escalating.
- Follow the plan outlined in the student's IEP.

After

- Reinforce the student for positive behavior.
- Debrief and reflect with the student(s) to check in on their feelings before returning to the lesson.
- Have a transition activity planned to ease the student back into their routine.
- Communicate with families as needed.