

What you will learn in this module

How to maintain a safe environment for children with disabilities

New safety concerns come up when early childhood programs enroll children with disabilities. Some safety rules may need to change. Teachers may need to learn how to use specialized equipment. Outdoor play areas may need to be more accessible so children with physical disabilities can safely use them.

How to talk about safety to children with disabilities

Talking to children about rules is an important part of keeping them safe. Some children with disabilities may not understand why safety rules are important. They may need special accommodations to learn how to apply safety rules and protect themselves from danger.

How to manage special safety concerns

Keeping early childhood programs safe means being prepared for any emergency. When teachers anticipate what could go wrong, they know what to do when the unexpected happens. Sometimes this means knowing how to respond to a natural disaster. At other times it means knowing how to manage the additional risks associated with children's special equipment or behaviors related to their disability.

You already know a lot about keeping children safe

You know that keeping children safe requires careful attention to the physical environment.

Children are less likely to get hurt when teachers pay attention to safety risks. Proper adult child ratios help teachers keep an eye out for safety risks. It is easy to see where children are and what they are doing. Teaching children how to safely play with toys and outdoor equipment reduces the risk of falls or other injuries. Rules and routines that remind them to walk on stairs or that limit the number of children playing on the slide or platform swing, helps everyone relax and have a good time.

Sometimes including children with disabilities brings new safety concerns. Teachers may need to learn how to use special equipment. Or learn to recognize how a non-verbal child signals pain. Outdoor play areas may need to be made more accessible so children with physical disabilities can safely use them.

You know how to talk to children about staying safe and recognizing danger.

Safety rules teach children how to recognize danger and what to do if they feel unsafe. When children know and follow safety rules they are less likely to behave in risky ways.

Children with disabilities may find it harder to recognize danger. They don't generalize safety rules from one environment to another.

Sometimes they don't understand the consequences of their behavior. They learn best when talking about safety rules is reinforced with pictures and practice.

You know that you need to be prepared for the unexpected.

Practicing emergency procedures helps keep children safe. Enrolling children with disabilities may require expanding your safety plans. Accommodating to their special safety needs is necessary. For example, Epi-pens or nebulizers need to be available at the evacuation site. If a child uses a wheelchair an evacuation plan should be on file with the local fire department.

Safety risks can be further reduced when parents are invited to survey early childhood environments with their own child's needs in mind. Children with disabilities sometimes behave like younger children. Others are more impulsive than their typical peers. Or they display behaviors that can pose safety concerns in a preschool classroom. Parents can point these out and work with teachers to eliminate any risks they might entail.



“I always invite parents to come in and do a mini-survey of my program,” said Ms. Walker. “They let you know if their child is still mouthing toys. Or if they can’t use scissors safely.”

“Not too long ago we enrolled a four-year-old who didn’t talk,” said Ms. Khang. “The parents showed us how he signals pain.”

“That’s like the time we had a child who used a walker and wheelchair,” said Ms. Creegan. “Her parents helped us re-arrange the classroom so she could move around safely. They told us she was frightened by fire alarms. They gave us ideas so we could help her stay calm.”



State regulators, military child care, and organizations like the Red Cross publish safety standards for early childhood programs. Knowing and practicing these procedures make them easy to follow in an emergency.

Human risk factors

A good safety policy addresses anything that threatens children’s safety. Human error puts children at risk. When teachers are tired, they are less attentive. They make more mistakes. It is important to be especially careful at the end of the day, during outdoor play, and during transitions. It is easy to be distracted during shift changes, or when parents are dropping off children. Extra precautions need to be in place to keep children safe during those high-risk times.