

PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED



Preschool Preparedness for an **Active Shooter**

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Introduction

The Reasons for This Book

In the years leading up to this publication, the United States has endured numerous active-shooter incidents. The uptick in these tragic events has led to increased rules and regulations across states for specific entities, such as public institutions, to plan and train for responding to such scenarios. More recently, several states have enacted or are considering such regulations specifically for early childhood programs.

Recent research by Kendall Leser, Julie Looper-Coats, and Andrew Roszak relates that out of a sample of more than 600 child-care administrators nationwide, only 20 percent reported preparedness as a high-level priority for their child-care business. In this same study, when asked how prepared they were for various emergency situations, less than half of child-care administrators reported being prepared for an active shooter situation, while more than 90 percent reported being prepared for a fire. This finding makes sense given that child-care providers have been required to participate in fire drills for years, but not many providers have been required to prepare for and practice for active-shooter scenarios.

Given these new and proposed regulations requiring shooter/lockdown plans and conducting drills on a regular basis—and based on the concerns of early learning professionals—I have created this publication, the first of its kind, specifically tailored for the early learning community. This publication can serve as a starting point or review for early childhood professionals to empower themselves to address difficult and threatening situations.

Early Childhood Education: A Unique Setting

Preparing for an active-shooter scenario seems unimaginable to many—and even more so in the context of early education. At first, the thought of this type of preparation may be uncomfortable. After all, early childhood professionals care for the youngest and most vulnerable population: our children, the next generation. While many businesses, high schools, and universities have been preparing for shooter scenarios for years, the early childhood education community has largely been left out of such efforts. Sadly, this is not uncommon, as early childhood is often overshadowed or completely forgotten. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is that people believe we are just “babysitters.”

This could not be further from the truth.

Early childhood is an essential time in a child’s life. Not only is the brain developing at an astonishing rate, but vital social, emotional, and sensory skills are being formed, all of which will have life-long impacts. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, in children younger than three years, more than a million neural connections per second are being formed—more than at any other time of life. Our shared goal is to provide an environment that is nurturing, caring, healthy, and safe.

The challenge for us is balancing the security needs of our programs against the desire to ensure that our spaces are warm, open, and welcoming. It is not an easy task, especially considering that resources are often scarce in the early childhood setting. We attempt to balance these realities in the following pages, recognizing that child-care professionals are the first educators of emergency preparedness. Child-care providers are a foundational piece of emergency preparedness—and the reason why children already know what to do in emergencies when they reach elementary school.

Reading this publication is an important first step in your preparedness journey. The term *active shooter* is used throughout this publication for simplicity. However, the techniques described can be applied to a wide variety of situations and threats. For some, the term *active assailant* may be more appropriate. All of us hope that we will never find ourselves in a dangerous situation, especially one with a gunman. However, current realities underscore the importance of learning more about these scenarios and empowering ourselves with knowledge and the skills to prepare.

Currently, there is a gap between the threat that early childhood professionals may face and their level of preparedness to handle such scenarios. While the early learning community has a need for active-shooter planning, training, and education, few resources specifically address these unique environments, situations, and clientele.

DID YOU KNOW?

Every day in the United States, 69 million children under the age of eighteen are separated from their parents. These children are spending their time in child care, Head Start programs, school, or after-school programs (Hawa, 2014). That is about 20 percent of our nation’s population, including 12 million children under the age of five (FEMA, 2019). That’s a lot of kids and a lot of responsibility. But with proper training and planning, early childhood professionals can and do protect the children entrusted to their care.



By itself, reading this publication does not constitute being prepared. In addition, consider participating in classroom and hands-on training for this topic. That will truly help you put these concepts into practice. It is important, as well, to recognize the value of early mental-health and law enforcement intervention when parents, staff, or children display indicators that are worthy of immediate intervention.

The Basis of This Book

This publication is the culmination of countless hours of research, and it offers an important primer for early childhood professionals to become comfortable with the concept of preparing for an active-shooter scenario. To develop this publication, I examined real-world incidents, trained and engaged with early childhood professionals, conducted focus groups to better understand the needs of center-based and family-home-based providers, trained with first responders, conducted and participated in exercises, and worked with a multidisciplinary group of professionals. All these efforts took place with one goal in mind: to provide early childhood professionals with a written resource for how to begin preparing to deal with this very sensitive topic.

This publication and the recommended strategies described within are grounded in real-world evidence, proven tactics, and strategies for responding to an active-shooter incident. Information is current as of the time of press; however, tactics and strategies to address these types of scenarios are constantly evolving. Often, active shooters have studied prior events to copy effective techniques and avoid ineffective ones. In turn, we must also be familiar with prior events to stay ahead of the curve and know how to react. Understanding prior events allows us to not only better respond to an incident, but in some cases, could also lead to preventing one from ever happening in the first place.

“

I thought those people who worshipped [the killers] were sick and twisted, but I too am now going down that path. When the time comes I hope to outdo my idols and make my mark on the world just like they did.”

—A fourteen-year-old active shooter who was successfully stopped and apprehended by a school resource officer after opening fire at a school in Socastee, South Carolina, in September 2010







Background on the Threat

No one wants to find herself caught in the middle of an active-shooter scenario. Unfortunately, these scenarios can and do happen. Just as we prepare for hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes, we must also prepare for active-shooter events. In planning for all types of disasters, including active-shooter scenarios, special consideration must be taken for our most vulnerable population: children. Understanding what constitutes an active-shooter event and who perpetrates this type of crime is important for preparedness efforts. On its webpage “Active Shooter Resources,” the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines an *active shooter* as one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area. Unfortunately, there is not one profile that fits or predicts who might become an active shooter. Shooters have come in all ages, sexes, races, backgrounds, and religions. Even though each potential shooter is different, a review of historical events points to some similarities that the majority of these criminals share. Many active shooters believe that they will gain popularity and notoriety for their heinous acts, which is why we purposefully omit the names of these individuals in this publication.

Most active shooters share the following characteristics:

- Personal grievance
- Interest in prior shootings
- Prior encounters with law enforcement
- Personal connection with the location
- Preplanning of the attack
- Single individual

Mass shootings are typically not carried out on a whim. Instead, most shootings are preplanned, and a majority of the shooters actually have personal connections to the sites that they attack. However, rarely do they make plans to escape from the scene or location. The majority of attackers do not plan to escape but rather plan to be killed by law enforcement, to commit suicide, or to be apprehended. These traits and characteristics are important to keep in mind when we begin to plan our response.



Jillian Peterson of Hamline University and James Densley of Metropolitan State University report further data on school shooters:

- 91 percent are students or former students
- 87 percent were in crisis before the shooting
- 80 percent were suicidal prior to the shooting
- 78 percent leaked their plans ahead of time, usually on social media

Characteristics that drive active shooters are important to understand as we prepare. First and foremost, the shooters recognize that they have a limited amount of time to inflict harm on others. The shooters know they have to act quickly before they run out of ammunition or are confronted by law enforcement officials. Ultimately, their goal is to kill as many people they can, as quickly as possible.

Prior shooters have chosen locations with weak or little security, referred to as *soft targets*. They chose these places because they offered easy access to unprotected individuals. Much like other criminals, they looked for locations with doors that were unlocked, individuals who were not paying attention, or places that lacked security measures. During a majority of past shootings, the incidents concluded quickly when the shooters were faced with obstacles or resistance.

Up against the constraints of time, most active shooters choose victims at random. Shooters often look for quick and easy targets, leading them to choose locations with large populations: nightclubs, movie theaters, sporting events, concerts, and schools. In many cases, these locations were chosen not at random but for their high concentration of potential victims.

While it is certainly important to prepare for active-shooter incidents, it's also important to keep the threat in perspective. Active-shooter events are still relatively infrequent. As with all hazards that we prepare for, we must take into account the likelihood and probability of these events occurring.

According to FBI data, between 2000 and 2017 there were 250 mass shootings in the United States, killing a total of 799 people. For comparison, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that in any given year about 610,000 Americans die of heart disease. The fact is that we are much more likely to die from heart disease than from an active-shooter incident.

In any given year, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), more than 10 million men and women in the United States are physically abused by an intimate partner. Intimate-partner violence accounts for 15 percent of all violent crime in this country. The effects of domestic violence are not confined to adults: One in fifteen children is exposed to such violence each year, and 90 percent of these children are eyewitnesses to the violence. Another type of violence that is a significant public health concern, according to Healthline, is suicide, the tenth-leading cause of death in the United States. Beyond



violence and chronic disease, accidents or unintentional injuries are a leading health concern in the United States, especially for people ages one to forty-four. Accidents lead to 28 million emergency room visits each year and are the third-leading cause of death in this country.

We hear a lot about active-shooter incidents at schools, and our inclination is likely to think that children are more at risk than adults. However, when examining the odds of our children dying from an active-shooter incident, we see figures similar to those for adults. For example, students are 250 times more likely to die at home from domestic violence, 350 times more likely to die in a car wreck, and 150 times more likely to die from suicide than from an active-shooter incident (ChildTrends, 2019). So while it is important for students to be prepared and learn response techniques, the chance of dying from an active-shoot incident remains relatively low (Ropeik, 2018).

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

According to the National Safety Council, an American's lifetime odds of dying in a mass shooting committed in any location are 1 in 11,125. For comparison, the odds of dying in a car accident are 1 in 491; of drowning, 1 in 1,133; of being struck by lightning, 1 in 3,000; and of choking on food, 1 in 3,461. The odds of a student being a victim of a school-associated shooting are 1 in 2.5 million.

These statistics are provided to give you some peace of mind. While it may seem like active-shooter events are happening very frequently, the likelihood of being involved in one of these situations is extremely low. As with all of our preparedness activities, we want to ensure we are aware of the scope and risk. The purpose of this book is not to cause anxiety or fear but to empower the reader through discussion of tools and techniques and an examination of leading practices for active-shooter response.

To summarize, active shooters are criminals with the intent to inflict harm or kill others, but they do not necessarily have a relationship to their target location. In the context of early childhood education, there could be people familiar with locations who plan to inflict harm. This could be an estranged parent, a disgruntled or recently fired employee, or even someone with ill intent toward children.

It is important to be discreet about sharing preparedness plans and about updating and revising those procedures. In the early childhood workforce, according to researcher Noriko Porter, each year we have a 30 percent national

turnover rate. Employees, parents, and others come and go from child-care locations, and it's important to bear in mind that a small percentage of people could have ill intent.

Throughout this publication, we offer recommendations and strategies on how to address active-shooter scenarios, as well as provide examples from prior scenarios for context. As we've discussed, much can be learned from previous tragedies, and the goal is to stay one step ahead of potential future shooters. The shooters are reviewing and sometimes idolizing earlier tragedies. However, as child-care professionals look to prepare themselves and their facilities, these prior events can offer many lessons and opportunities to think differently about how to respond to such scenarios in the future.





Don't be scared. Be prepared.™

No education professional wants to think about an active shooter on the property. But recent tragic events have illustrated a clear and imminent need to prepare educators for these threats. Public institutions are required by law to follow rules and regulations to plan and train for emergency responses, and several U.S. states have enacted or are considering enacting regulations specific to early childhood programs. **Are you and your school prepared?**

Preschool Preparedness for an Active Shooter, the first book in the new Preparing for the Unexpected series, acknowledges and balances the harsh realities and challenges of emergency preparedness. It will prepare and empower you to manage life-threatening situations, while also giving you the tools you need to teach young children disaster preparedness for the first time.

Learn how to:

- Develop situational awareness
- Create rings of security in your facility
- Promote a culture of safety
- Respond in an emergency
- Conduct drills
- Instill emergency practices in children that will last a lifetime


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