



HOW TO CONDUCT A MISSING CHILD DRILL

A guide to plan, conduct, and evaluate a missing child drill at your church



SafetySabbath.com



BEFORE THE DRILL

A Child is Missing! How Do You Respond?

Familiar settings make it easy to let down our guard and ignore or miss altogether the warning signs of possible unsafe situations. Parents may not supervise their children in a church setting as closely as they do at the mall or grocery store. Surrounded by church family, parents can be lulled into a false sense of safety.

Suddenly a parent realizes their child isn't nearby! The "alarm" is sounded. Adrenaline begins pumping! Keeping a level head and implementing a pre-planned search protocol when a child is missing maintains calm and can often help locate the missing child quickly.

A missing child drill will prepare your crisis team to be alert to insufficient supervision situations and to eliminate them from your church. Encourage your leadership team and church members to become more aware of their surroundings by regularly organizing missing child and other safety drills.

Other benefits of holding a missing child drill include:

- ▶ Your church will have an up-to-date, realistic response plan prepared for future incidents of missing children and other emergency scenarios.
- ▶ Children who become lost will know what to do when they are separated and can find comfort in knowing that someone is looking for them.
- ▶ You will identify changes to be implemented so your church is prepared to supervise and protect the children at your church properly.
- ▶ If your church hasn't previously conducted an emergency drill, don't expect everything to operate correctly the first time. The more you plan ahead of time, the smoother the exercise will flow.

Here's your planning checklist:

- Review your written Emergency Plan. If your church doesn't have a written plan, now is the time to create one.
- Outline each step of the response you plan to enact once you've been notified that a child is missing. Some questions to consider when planning are:
 - a) Who will assist in the search?
 - b) How will you announce it to the congregation?
 - c) Who will make the 9-1-1 call if it becomes necessary to report a missing child?
 - i) When reporting a missing child, be prepared with the following information.
 - (a) Name of the missing person
 - (b) Date of birth
 - (c) Birthplace
 - (d) Height
 - (e) Weight
 - (f) Age
 - (g) Build
 - (h) Hair color/length of hair
 - (i) Eye color
 - (j) Description of what the child was wearing when last seen
 - (k) Any distinguishing marks (birthmarks, scars, etc.)
 - (l) Recent photo
 - (m) Known medical conditions/medications/allergies
- Design a grid search pattern and review it with the safety committee. Include both the church building and church grounds. Consider:
 - ▶ Are there any internal closets or rooms that may have been accessible?
 - ▶ Do you have outbuildings, such as maintenance sheds, that should be included in the search?

- ▶ Is a school attached to your church building or located on the grounds?
- ▶ During an actual search, the search party should start from the point where the child was last seen and continue searching in all directions originating from that point. Take this into consideration when designing the grid pattern.

○ Discuss plans for the drill with the pastor, church board, and safety committee. The church board should approve the exercise. Once you've outlined a plan, ask for input on ways to improve the missing child drill.

○ If your church has an active Pathfinder club, you may want to discuss the drill plans with the club leadership. They often receive specialized training on how to address a missing child situation. Use their input as an additional resource.

○ Review the membership of your crisis response team and the roles of each. Consider:

- ▶ Does it include people with police, military, or medical training?
- ▶ Is there an individual trained in crisis communication protocols for your conference and union who can serve as a crisis communications liaison between the conference, local church, its members, and local media?
- ▶ How will you include deacons, elders, and other church leaders in the drill and search?

○ Create or update your written plan of what to do if a child is reported missing. Your plan should include:

- ▶ Talking to the last person who saw the child to determine the child's last known location, what the child was doing, and whom the child was talking to.
- ▶ Speaking to the child's parent or guardian to obtain a description of the child and what they were wearing.
- ▶ If it is believed the child is in danger or has been abducted, notify local authorities immediately. Do not wait to do this.
- ▶ Informing the congregation of the child's disappearance. Instruct them whom to contact if they find the child or saw anything relating to where the child was last seen.
- ▶ Leading the congregation in searching the church

building(s) and grounds in a grid-search pattern.

- ▶ If you do not find the child on church grounds, notify local authorities and provide a complete description of the child, along with contact information for the child's parent/guardian and the church's crisis communication team member.

○ Create a missing child scenario with your crisis response team to simulate during the drill. Scenarios could include:

- ▶ A child leaves Sabbath School to use the restroom and does not return.
- ▶ A parent chatting with friends during Sabbath lunch realizes they have not seen their child for a while. After investigating, the parent realizes no one else has seen them either.
- ▶ Children playing hide-and-go-seek at a church social event cannot find one of their friends. The game ends, but their friend has still not come out of hiding.
- ▶ A teen was supposed to sit with friends during the worship service, but no one has seen them since Sabbath School.

○ Plan your drill and designate duties for your emergency response team members to perform during the drill. These can include:

- a) Informing the congregation that the drill is taking place and what to do.
- b) Directing a grid-search pattern to cover all of the church buildings and property in an organized manner.
- c) Speaking with the parent/guardian of the "missing" child and those who last saw the child to gather information and a description of the child.
- d) Leading the remainder of the congregation while the search is taking place.
- e) Observing the drill and reporting back any problems they noted.



CONDUCTING THE DRILL

Announce to your congregation a week or two before the drill of your intent to hold a missing child drill. Tell them when the exercise will take place and what is expected of them. This is especially important if this will be the first missing child drill at your church.

EDUCATE YOUR CONGREGATION

- 1.** Select a child from your congregation to play the “missing” child. Coordinate with their parents to select an appropriate place for the child to hide and tell the child to stay hidden until someone from the church finds them. Have someone from your crisis response team stationed near the child’s location to be sure the child is safe during the drill.
- 2.** At the designated time during the service, have a member of the crisis response team announce to the congregation that a missing child drill is now in progress.
- 3.** Tell the congregation you do not believe the child was abducted or in danger, but you need to find the child as quickly as possible.
- 4.** Describe to the congregation what the missing child is wearing and instruct them who to contact should they have any information regarding the missing child.
- 5.** Have your crisis response team members and church personnel on duty conduct a grid sweep of the church building. If church members are willing to assist, provide specific instructions about how they can participate in the search.
- 6.** Start your timer to see how long it takes to find the missing child.
- 7.** After the child is found, share with the congregation how long it took to find the missing child and what lessons were learned.



AFTER THE DRILL



- Ask for feedback from the congregation and those who assisted with the drill.
- Identify problems and weaknesses.
- Make notes of what went well and what didn't. Your record should include:
 - ▶ *The date and time of the drill.*
 - ▶ *The name of the person who conducted the drill.*
 - ▶ *The elapsed time required to vacate the facility.*
 - ▶ *Notes and observations regarding problems with the drill or areas of needed improvement.*

Maintaining records and other notes will provide you with the benefit of information gleaned from past events.

- After reviewing all notes, revise your emergency response plan as needed. Don't forget to set the date of your next drill!

It is best to conduct multiple drills in the first year to prepare your team and congregation for different emergencies under different circumstances. Schedule drills of various types and at various times. Consider holding them before, during, and after: Sabbath School, the announcement period, and the worship service. You may plan one for a church social event or during a weekly Pathfinder meeting. Children can go missing at any time. Preparing today will help you be ready to respond when emergencies happen.

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