

This is not a drill!

When the fire alarm sounds, it's all too easy to go through the motions, particularly if you've been expecting it. **Wendy Bowkett** recounts how she stopped complacency creeping in...

I imagine - it's your third day as a student on work experience in a two-storey early years setting; you're beginning to find your feet, when there's a fire drill. You read the fire procedure document on arrival and you know that there's a similar notice in each room, but at this precise moment, apart from not running and collecting your belongings, you can't remember what it is you're supposed to do...

How lucky that you're not alone. There's a member of staff in the room, and all the children have begun to respond to the noise of the buzzing without any fuss or bother. Phew!

This was a situation that occurred in my setting. During the staff meeting the following evening, attended by the aforementioned student, it came to my attention that she was unaware of my ethos of 'putting yourself in another's shoes'. The student had been talking about nursery policies with other members of staff, and the fire drill and our precautions became the main topic of conversation.

Directly after the fire drill, the student had been shown the fire drill folder and was astounded by the number we had recorded. She felt that our nursery fire drills were excessive, as there were at least four a month!

I expressed the reasoning behind it: all the places in which I'd previously worked had one fire drill a term, usually on a Friday and often at two o'clock. Every member of staff was informed, registers kept in each classroom and afternoon activities planned that were simple and easily put down: story time, PE outdoors, writing or quiet reading, for example. Sometimes children were asked to go to the toilet straight after registration so that there would be no delay at two! As a result the fire drills were executed with precision - an empty school within three minutes.

I explained that fires do not happen like that. They are unannounced, coming out of the blue, and initially are often not observed, smouldering for several minutes before discovery.

Practice makes perfect

When I worked in a mainstream school, the nursery I was in charge of was located across the playground from the main building and we often had 'pretend' fire drills, especially when the emergency services uniforms were in the play corner. Our little ones were well prepared for leaving our small unit in an orderly and fun fashion. However, one Tuesday morning, one of the children said he could see smoke coming from the school's roof. We immediately buzzed through to the school to inform them that the roof was on fire. Initially, the secretary did not believe us and thought we were joking (the headteacher actually came out of the school to check), before ringing the fire service and evacuating the building.

It took over 15 minutes to empty the school. Most of the children in the Reception class had only been at school for a few weeks and had never taken part in a fire drill before. Other children had been wandering between rooms, taking registers to the office, going to the bathroom, changing for PE, etc. Not all registers were where they should have been, and many of the staff and children were distressed, anxious, scared and panicky.

So, on opening my own nursery a couple of years later, I decided to implement the practice of holding fire drills regularly so that every child or staff member would

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know what to do whenever they occurred. I reasoned that as not all of the children attending nursery came every morning or afternoon each day, and some staff were part-time, if a fire drill were always on the same day in the morning or afternoon, not everyone would have the opportunity to take part and know the routine in case of a real fire.

It was also clear to me that prior knowledge of date and time didn't really help prepare for the real thing! Someone helping a child change out of wet clothes in the bathroom will not be on hand to lift babies out of cots. The lunch may be delayed as the cook switches off ovens, etc. to join everyone outside. There are too many variables to life in a pre-school or nursery setting for a fire drill to go like clockwork - it's impossible to ensure everyone is in the right place at the right time. Of course, if all the children know what to do, life is much simpler. It becomes second nature to them; they hear the buzzer and know it's 'time to go!'.

be genuine and, hopefully, practical. You won't just go through the motions, you'll react to what may be a real situation and come away with a new insight into staff relationships, policy or decision making and understand how improvements can be made. You can put yourself in your staff's and children's shoes, and react as they may on hearing the buzzer and doing their best to make sure everyone is safe.

As it would not necessarily be me who would spot a fire should one occur, each member of staff was asked to decide when and where 'their' fire would start. I organised the fire drills so that only the member of staff running the drill in question knew in advance. We planned three months ahead. I wrote the names of the next three months four times each on scraps of paper, which went into a box. Staff would then select a scrap at random

until there were no scraps left, and would then organise a drill any morning, lunchtime or afternoon on any day in the month they had picked. I did my share and we all had 'fun' devising different places for our 'firestarting'.

Most children soon became so familiar with the routine that there was never any panic or rush. They guided 'new' and younger children through the rooms because they understood the importance of being calm during fire drills. A small group of 'full-timers' on their way out of a room one day called to an NNEB visiting tutor (who had continued her conversation with a student, knowing there was a fire drill) to get up off her chair and get into the garden quickly but without running, "because this is a fire drill!". The tutor actually said it was only a practice for a fire drill and not to worry about her, to which one of the more confident children replied, "But what if it's a real fire?" I would love to have been that sure of myself at four!



about the author

Wendy Bowkett has worked in early years settings for over 30 years, and ran her own private day nursery for 15 years. As well as contributing to *Teach Nursery*, she has written a number of books for those working with 0-5-year-olds.

Keep them guessing

It wasn't just my staff who were kept in the dark; I also wanted to be unaware of when fire drills might take place. I wanted to experience how it felt when the buzzer was first heard, how many seconds it took to react to the noise; to have to decide which route to take from wherever I was in the building; to ask myself whether extra help was needed anywhere, were our visitors being escorted from the building safely, would the students react well.

There are so many questions that go through your head when the alarm goes, the main one being, 'Is it a real fire this time?'. If, as a manager, head or officer-in-charge, you don't know, your reactions will

