



**Guidelines for Instituting Safety Drills for Elementary School Children  
Emotionally Responsive Practice at *Bank Street*  
February 2013**

## **Statement**

After the tragic event that occurred in Newtown at the end of last year, elementary schools throughout the country have instituted drills intended to heighten their community's ability to protect children in the event that such a tragedy were to happen in their own communities. These drills are given different names in different school districts including "Lock Down Drills", "Active Shooter Drill", and "Lock In Drills". Many of the drills involve coaching children to hide under desks, chairs, etc. and to maintain silence. Some of the drills actually instruct children to imagine terrifying threats as the drill is occurring.

ERP at *Bank Street* strongly encourages schools to think about the effects that these kinds of drills have on emotional well being and learning in young children! Certainly, schools need a way of communicating with classrooms if they feel that someone dangerous has entered the building, and teachers need a way to lock their doors when given the alert. However, in the absence of a specific threat, giving children instructions that include encouraging them to imagine a dangerous intruder in their everyday space may have unintended and far-reaching negative consequences.

When drills are deemed necessary but are coded in language usually used in prison or other dangerous places, children can easily begin to feel unsafe in school and become highly anxious and confused about whether a threat is imminent. These feelings may undo months of work done by parents and early grade teachers to build trust in the school environment so that children can be comfortable, attentive and engaged in classroom activities. Children who have traumatic histories may become overwhelmed with stress hormones during such a drill. This physiologic reaction can inhibit deep thinking and heighten reactivity when children are told to imagine a disaster unfolding within their everyday space.

## **Safety Drill Process in the Early Grades**

If elementary school communities need to institute drills as a protective measure, the following guidelines are recommended:

1) Use the term “Safety Drill” to describe the process to children and parents.

2) Compare safety drills to fire drills. If there is a fire drill, kids have to practice being quiet and finding a safe place to be outside of the building. When there is a safety drill, kids have to practice being quiet and finding a safe place to be inside of the classroom. In both fire drills and safety drills, it is important for kids and teachers to be quiet and stay together. \*Be mindful that in fire drills, kids are often told ahead of time that a fire drill may occur that day. It should be the same with a safety drill. During a fire drill, the emphasis is placed on the need to be quiet and move in an orderly fashion. Children are not encouraged to think about flames engulfing their beloved school! Safety drills should be done with a similar tone.

3) Early grade teachers might introduce or follow the events of fire drills and safety drills by reading a story about safe places. (see below)

4) After a fire drill or safety drill has occurred, early grade teachers should give kids an avenue for self-expression about what that experience was like for them. This can be a group discussion, a journal entry, a drawing, story writing or dictating, etc. Without this invitation, children who have experienced trauma may act out to express their distress or become preoccupied and inattentive.

5) Older kids may refer to specific dangers such as Sandy Hook, earthquakes, hurricanes, etc. The teacher can acknowledge these realities and how scary they are, but assure children that they are safe in their schools and most likely always will be. Kids who remain preoccupied can study the safety features of their school buildings that are already in place. (security guards, fire alarms, sprinklers, P.A. systems, etc.) They can also become the classroom “safety patrol”, inventing ways that they can make themselves and their friends feel safer. Their ideas can be shared with and acknowledged by the school principal.

## **Examples of Books That Support Children After Safety Drills**

### **Pre-K and Kindergarten**

***I Will Keep You Safe*** and ***Sound*** by Lori Haskins Houran

***Safe, Warm and Snug*** by Stephen Swinburne

***Inch and Roly and the Very Small Hiding Place*** by Melissa Wiley

***Bear Feels Scared*** by Karma Wilson

### **1st, 2nd and 3rd Grade**

***The Best Nest*** by Doris L. Mueller

***Over and Under the Snow*** by Kate Messner

***Sometimes I'm Scared*** by Jane Annunziata and Marc Nemiroff

Discussions: Teachers can ask kids what the story reminds them of. After kids talk, teachers can ask kids what helped the characters in the story to feel safe. They can then focus the discussion on what helps the children feel safe. They can ask, “ Do you have favorite places where you feel safe? Who are the people who make you feel safe?”

Kids can follow this up with writing stories with illustrations.