The recent tornado that hit the town of Moore, Okla., was a disaster that few of us could imagine, much less prepare for. In the news reports afterward, I was struck with a news clip of a mother overcome with relief when she found her child. They started out in the morning, little suspecting that by the end of the day they would be homeless and possibly not know where members of their own family are.

The thing about emergencies is that they never happen at a convenient time. There is a good chance that the emergency could hit during the day, when your kids are at school and you and your spouse are at work or home. In today’s fast-paced society, it is likely events will not occur when all family members are home or even in the same location. How will you prepare?

Although it is common for family members to have cellular phones, these are often the first method of communication to be interrupted in times of disasters because of the heavy use. Could you find your family members at any of these times? Where are they? How can you contact them? Obviously, you cannot possibly know where every member of your family is at every second of the day, but we should attempt to have some idea of regular schedules.

Your family may not be together when disaster strikes, so plan how you will contact one another. Think about how you will communicate in different situations.

Here are some things to think about in making your family communication plan.

Identify a contact such as a friend or relative who lives out of state for household members to notify they are safe. It may be easier to make a long distance phone call than to call across town, so an out-of-town contact may be in a better position to communicate among separated family members. Write this phone number on a card. Have family members keep these cards handy in a wallet, purse or briefcase, backpack or book bag, etc.
Be sure every member of your family has a cell phone, coins or a prepaid phone card to call the emergency contact. If you have a cell phone, program that person(s) as “ICE” (In Case of Emergency) in your phone. If you are in an accident, emergency personnel will often check your ICE listings in order to get in touch with someone you know. Make sure to tell your family and friends that you’ve listed them as emergency contacts.

Additionally, complete contact cards for each child with your cell phone or work number as well as appropriate numbers for each member of your family. If their cell phone is lost or damaged in the disaster, they may not be able to access phone numbers that are stored there. Have them written on an easy-to-retrieve card.

Teach family members to use text messaging. Text messages can often get around network disruptions when a phone call might not be able to get through. In low service areas, cell phones may not be able to make a call, but you can still text a message.

Subscribe to alert services. Locally, we have a reverse 911 system, but it is currently not signing up new clients. The borough is in the process of putting together an upgraded system, so keep watch on the Fairbanks North Star Borough Emergency Operations website for new developments in this area.

We often talk about the importance of a disaster kit holding food and supplies for a 72-hour period. It is just as important to have a family communication plan that will allow you to make sure everyone is safe.

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