

# Codename: Safe Children

## How Secret Service Agents are Helping Centers Prepare for Emergencies

by Jason Russell

What does a child care teacher have in common with a Secret Service agent? Much more than immediately meets the eye. Child care workers and Secret Service agents are at their core, protectors, and this responsibility for keeping people other than themselves safe is what drives both groups.

I see the connection every day as the founder of Secure Education Consultants (SEC), a security consulting agency operated by former U.S. Secret Service agents, which aims to improve the security of child care centers across the country.

I founded SEC because I discovered that most child care centers are drastically underprepared for emergencies and critical incidents. This lack of preparation is no fault of operators or program directors, but rather a lack of expertise and process management. My wife, Kelly, owns Milestones Child Development Centers with four locations in Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo, Michigan. After the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012, I felt compelled to look more closely at Milestones' security plans. What I discovered frightened me.

While on the surface the planning and preparation looked adequate, a closer examination revealed significant weaknesses that I could not ignore. Using the lens of a Secret Service agent, I identified gaps in the center's physical security and emergency preparedness planning and training. A little research revealed that Milestones was not alone; many child care centers' security plans were not prepared by security professionals, and thus are lacking. There is a simple reason for this. Most centers do not follow a process when developing their security and emergency preparedness programs. Plans may be rushed or prepared by an already overworked staff member. However, following a process and harnessing expertise are critical to creating a well-developed safety and emergency preparedness plan.

As former Secret Service agents, we have been trained to approach security holistically. You can have the best laid emergency plans, but they are essentially useless unless your team is trained and fluent in implementing the plans. When Secret Service agents travel with the president, we bring the best equipment and spend countless hours strategizing about where, when, and how to ensure the safety of our protectee. The same principles should apply to child care centers. With children as protectees, child care centers must apply a holistic approach to emergency planning. We have found that a holistic approach involves three parts:

### S: Site Assessment

Look at your facility through the eyes of someone who might want to cause the children, staff, or property harm. Look at your emergency procedures and see if they match what is possible given your site. I have been to countless child care centers that have lockdown plans but have no locks, coded entries that are not used, and cameras that are not functioning. Do you have a policy for controlling access to the facility? Do you have a plan for lockdown, lockout, evacuation and shelter-in-place? These are the basic protocols that each program or



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Formerly a special agent with the United States Secret Service, Russell's career includes experience in protection of the President and Vice

President, instruction at the International Law Enforcement Academy, physical fitness coordination, and working as a member of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. Prior to his career in federal law enforcement, Russell served as a police officer with Lansing Police Department. He received a life saving award from Mothers Against Drunk Driving, worked on the U.S. Marshals Fugitive Task Force, and engaged in various multi-jurisdictional enforcement initiatives.

Russell is a frequent keynote speaker on the topics of emergency preparedness, active shooter response, and safety and security. Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Russell holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Western Michigan University and a master's degree in criminal justice and security management from Michigan State University.



center should develop and should train their staff to perform.

Do you have adequate supplies for emergency situations? Most centers have medical supplies but little else. As a starting point, we recommend pediatric tourniquets, evacuation ropes, mylar blankets, and food and water supplies to last several days.

Have you developed both a nearby and more remote relocation site, and have you determined how you will travel to those sites if needed? Centers should ensure they have both a nearby location and one that is at least one mile away that could be used as relocation sites during a severe emergency that requires completely evacuating the center.

Do you have the ability to quickly alert staff of an emergency via a PA and does that PA work outside to alert those on the playground?

These are but a few examples of the questions you should be asking. The time to ask these questions is not during the emergency.

Many schools are implementing more advanced physical security features, and some are implementing security in the design of new buildings, but keep in mind this is not necessary to have a secure building. Sometimes minor adjustments can make a world of difference. The Secret Service can travel essentially anywhere with the president and adapt the environment to be secure. In the same vein, all child care centers can tweak their physical security, without needing to drastically change their core or culture.

## E: Emergency Preparedness Planning

The Secret Service prepares for any contingency, and child care centers can set themselves apart from their competitors by doing the same. Most child care programs are required to create emergency plans, but we find that many plans are written by someone with no background in emergency response. Would you write a cookbook if you did not know how to cook? Hopefully you answered no, but we regularly see emergency plans written by people with zero expertise in responding to emergencies.

We recommend consulting someone with emergency response experience to ensure you have thoroughly considered all angles in an emergency plan. You may be able to find this type of expert among the parents in your program—security consultants, police officers or other first responders would be a great start. Ensure the plan has the primary response protocols of lockout, lockdown, evacuation and shelter-in-place and ensure these basic procedures are available and known by all staff.

In the event of an emergency, do you have a reunification plan? How will you alert teachers and parents? Does your plan use plain language alerts or code words? Have you thought of plans for those with language or disability issues? Once your plans are completed, make all emergency plans readily available and update them to reflect any renovations or changes to procedure. Share them not just with staff, but with parents, guardians, board members, student teachers and other program stakeholders.

## C: Critical Incident Response Training

We take a motto from the Navy Seals: “Under pressure, you don’t rise to the occasion, you sink to the level of your training. That’s why we train so hard.” Ensure your new emergency preparedness plan is put into action by spending time training your staff. Training should be thorough and should instruct staff in appropriate responses to everything ranging from evacuation to severe weather, to how to act in the event of a violent attack. Time and time again, we have found that staff members with strong training are more confident and feel more empowered to carry out emergency plans.

When your school has a strong security plan, your staff members will not be the only ones feeling more confident. The families that entrust your center with the care of their children count on the fact that you will be able to protect their child in an emergency. Parents find great peace of mind when they know their children are in a secure setting. Safety and security are major differentiating factors for many parents when they are deciding on a child care facility. Most security investments do not have a tangible return on investment, but with an investment in security the return will yield new enrollments, maintained enrollment, or even justifiable tuition increases.

While protecting the president seems a long way from providing child care, our staff at SEC have found that nothing has been more rewarding than the feeling of ensuring the safety and security of children. We truly hope an emergency never happens at any school. As a former Secret Service agent, and a parent of young children, the best advice I can offer is this: to avoid emergencies, be prepared long before they occur.

