

Tornado safety rules children should know



Understand the warning and act without delay

Children do not need to become weather experts, but they should understand that a tornado warning means dangerous weather has been detected or observed and that people should take shelter immediately. A tornado watch generally means conditions could support tornado development; a warning requires action. Families should explain these terms in age-appropriate language and identify which adults are responsible for giving instructions.

When an alert sounds, children should stop playing, leave windows and exterior doors, and move directly to the designated shelter. They should not wait to see whether the sky looks threatening, search online for videos, or assume that a quiet moment means the danger is over. Tornadoes can develop quickly, and weather conditions may change faster than a child expects.

Listen for the alert or an adult's instruction.

Go inside and move to the planned shelter.

Bring essential items only if they are immediately available and doing so does not delay sheltering.

Stay in position until an adult or reliable official information says it is safe to leave.

Caregivers can reduce panic by using a steady voice, short instructions, and reassuring language such as, "We know where to go, and we are going there together."

Choose the safest shelter at home

The best home shelter is a basement, storm shelter, or safe room designed to withstand severe weather. If these are unavailable, use a small interior room on the lowest practical floor, such as a hallway, bathroom, closet, or other room without windows. Put as many walls as possible between the child and the outside. Stay away from windows, skylights, glass doors, exterior walls, and rooms with a wide roof span.

Children should sit or kneel low and protect the head and neck with their arms. If available, they can use a mattress, sleeping bag, blanket, coat, or sturdy furniture to provide additional protection from debris, but they should not delay sheltering to gather supplies. A bicycle, sports, or other well-fitting protective helmet may provide another layer of head protection if it is close at hand; it does not replace a structurally safe shelter.

Keep the shelter area accessible. Do not block a basement route with storage boxes, and teach children how to reach the room in darkness or during a power outage. Store a flashlight, shoes, water, essential medications managed by an adult, a first-aid kit, and a battery-powered or hand-crank method for receiving official information nearby. Children should never be sent outside to retrieve these items once a warning is active.

Know what to do in different buildings

Tornado safety rules must work in places children visit regularly, not only at home. Families should ask schools, childcare centers, sports programs, and community organizations where children shelter and how adults account for everyone. Children should follow staff instructions, move in an orderly manner, and avoid running, pushing, shouting, or returning for a backpack or toy.

In a school or childcare building, the safest area is usually an interior hallway or designated shelter away from windows and large rooms such as gyms,

auditoriums, cafeterias, or libraries with broad roof spans. Children should crouch or kneel as directed, face away from glass, and cover the head and neck. They should remain with their group until staff give further instructions.

In an apartment or multi-story building, go to an interior room or designated shelter on a lower floor if it can be reached safely. Do not use an elevator during severe weather or a power interruption. In a shopping center, restaurant, or other public building, follow employees to an interior area and stay away from doors and glass storefronts.

Children should learn that different buildings may have different shelter locations. A practice walk-through helps them recognize the route without relying on memory during a stressful event.

Rules for mobile homes, vehicles, and the outdoors

Mobile homes and manufactured homes can be especially vulnerable to tornado winds. If a safe, sturdier building is nearby and officials or caregivers direct evacuation before the storm becomes dangerous, move there early. Children should never leave a mobile home during the warning simply to stand outside and look for a tornado. Adults should decide when and how to relocate, taking local emergency guidance into account.

If a child is in a car, the driver should seek a sturdy building whenever possible. A vehicle is not equivalent to a storm shelter. Children must stay secured according to the vehicle's safety system while the driver makes decisions. They should not be told to hide under a bridge or overpass, because these structures do not provide reliable protection and may expose people to wind, traffic, and debris.

When outdoors and unable to reach a sturdy building, children should move away from trees, power lines, poles, signs, and other objects that could fall. They should seek the lowest safe location available, avoid areas that could flood, and protect the head and neck with their arms. An adult should stay with the child whenever possible. No outdoor action is as protective as reaching a substantial, enclosed shelter before the tornado arrives.

Protect the head, neck, and body from debris

Most tornado injuries are related to flying or falling debris, broken glass, structural damage, and falls. That is why children should not stand near windows, look through doors, or lie beneath a window. Once in the shelter, they should get low, face away from potential debris, and cover the head and neck with both arms. They should remain still and listen for instructions.

Teach children to keep their mouths and noses covered only if an adult directs them to do so because of dust or debris, while still prioritizing breathing and rapid movement to safety. They should not try to hold doors shut, rescue pets during the warning, or investigate unusual sounds. Adults can plan ahead for pets and accessibility needs so children are not placed in danger.

Children with mobility, sensory, communication, or medical needs may require an individualized emergency plan. Caregivers should coordinate with healthcare professionals, schools, and emergency planners about mobility equipment, prescribed medicines, communication supports, and supervision. A child who uses medical technology or needs regular treatment should have an adult-managed emergency supply plan; children should not be expected to manage prescription medicines independently unless their healthcare team and caregivers have specifically established that plan.

Practice a family tornado drill calmly

Practice turns a frightening emergency into a familiar routine. A drill can begin with a simple explanation: "We are practicing how to get safe if strong rotating winds are nearby." Walk children to the shelter, show them how to crouch, and rehearse covering the head and neck. Keep the tone serious but not alarming. Praise following directions, staying with the group, and helping younger children only when an adult says it is safe.

Make the drill realistic but not overwhelming. Practice during daylight first, then discuss what would change if the power went out. Let children ask questions, and correct misconceptions gently. They should know their full address, how to identify trusted adults, and how to contact emergency services when an adult is unable to do so. Very young children may remember one short phrase, such as "Inside, low, cover."

Review the plan as seasons, homes, schools, and caregivers change. Check alerts, flashlights, batteries, water, shoes, and first-aid supplies. Adults should also plan for infants, children with disabilities, pets, and family members who may be away from home. A written contact plan can reduce confusion if phones are busy or family members are separated.

After the tornado: stay cautious and get help

The danger may continue after the wind becomes quiet. Children should remain sheltered until an adult confirms that the warning has ended and the route out is safe. They should not touch fallen power lines, damaged electrical equipment, broken glass, leaking containers, sharp debris, or unfamiliar objects. They should avoid damaged buildings, since weakened walls, ceilings, and floors can collapse without warning. Floodwater may conceal holes, contamination, or electrical hazards.

Children should stay with their caregiver or assigned adult and avoid wandering to find friends, pets, or belongings. If separated, they should go to the prearranged meeting place or ask a uniformed emergency responder, teacher, or other trusted adult for help. They should not share personal information with strangers or enter a damaged structure to look for someone.

Tell an adult promptly about pain, bleeding, difficulty breathing, dizziness, confusion, weakness, a head impact, or an injury caused by debris. Emergency services should be contacted for severe bleeding, trouble breathing, loss of consciousness, suspected spinal injury, major burns, or any immediate threat to life. Even when an injury appears minor, a caregiver should assess it and seek medical advice when needed. Dust, smoke, stress, and disrupted routines can also affect children after a disaster; persistent fear, nightmares, withdrawal, or difficulty functioning should be discussed with a pediatrician or qualified mental health professional.

Help children feel informed rather than frightened

Children may respond to tornadoes with fear, clinginess, irritability, sleep disturbance, or repeated questions. These reactions can occur even when a child was physically unharmed. Adults can support recovery by listening without dismissing concerns, offering honest age-appropriate information, preserving

meals and bedtime routines, and limiting repeated exposure to upsetting storm footage. Avoid promising that a tornado will never happen; instead, explain that adults and emergency services prepare to reduce risk.

Use concrete language rather than dramatic descriptions. For example: "The warning means we go to our safe room now," is more useful than telling a child to "panic" or "hide anywhere." Allow children to participate in safe preparations, such as checking a flashlight or drawing a map to the shelter. Participation can increase confidence while keeping responsibility with adults.

If emotional or physical concerns continue, interfere with school, sleep, eating, or play, or seem disproportionate to the event, consult the child's pediatrician or another qualified healthcare professional. Professional support is appropriate and does not mean a child has done anything wrong. Reassurance, predictable care, and repeated practice can help children regain a sense of safety.