Family Preparedness Plan: Build Your Household Emergency Protocol

A written emergency plan runs on autopilot when panic shuts down your ability to think clearly — and panic will come, so the plan must exist first.

Introduction

Most households have a vague sense of what they would do in an emergency. A few have actually written it down. Fewer still have practiced it with their children, communicated it to elderly relatives, or considered what happens when a crisis occurs while the family is split across school, work, and home.

The research is unambiguous: households with written, practiced plans respond faster, make fewer dangerous errors, and experience significantly lower psychological trauma than those improvising in the moment. The plan doesn't have to be complex — it has to exist, be known to everyone, and cover the four or five scenarios most relevant to your geography.

This guide takes you through building that plan in five structured steps. Block out one hour this week and complete it.

Step 1: Define Your Emergency Scenarios

Your plan should be built around the emergencies most likely to affect your specific location. A coastal family faces different risks from a family in an inland city.

Identify three to five scenarios from this list that apply to your area:

- **Extended power outage** (relevant virtually everywhere)
- **Severe winter storm** (relevant in northern and central Europe, Canada, northern USA)
- **Flash flooding** (relevant in river valleys, urban areas with poor drainage, coastal zones)
- **Earthquake** (relevant in seismically active regions)
- **Civil unrest or lockdown** (relevant in any major urban area)
- **Industrial accident or gas leak** (relevant in any area near industrial sites, ports, or rail lines)
- **Wildfire smoke** (increasingly relevant across southern Europe, western USA, and Australia)

For each scenario you select, write two lines: the most likely trigger event, and your household's default first action (shelter in place vs. evacuate). This becomes the foundation of your plan.

Step 2: Assign Roles

An emergency response with unclear roles leads to duplication, omission, and conflict. Assign clear responsibilities to each capable household member before any crisis occurs.

Primary adult responsibilities:

- **Kit and supplies:** One person is responsible for grabbing the PREPORA bag and any additional supplies if evacuation is ordered.
- **Communications:** One person monitors the radio, contacts the out-of-area family contact, and manages phone communication.
- **Mobility:** One person manages transport — vehicle preparation, route selection, or on-foot navigation if driving is not possible.
- **Medical:** One person leads any immediate first aid response and manages medication needs.

Children's roles (age-appropriate):

- Age 4–7: Can carry their own small bag with their comfort items, and know to stay close to an adult and not open the front door.
- Age 8–12: Can pack their own essentials bag, turn off their bedroom lights, and follow the household meeting point plan independently.
- Age 13+: Can be assigned genuine supporting roles — carrying gear, helping younger siblings, operating a torch, reading a map.

Elderly or mobility-limited household members: Assign a dedicated helper within the household. Identify equipment they depend on (walking frames, medication, medical devices) and include retrieval of these in the kit-grabbing role.

Pets: Assign one person responsibility for each animal. Keep a simple pet emergency kit (food, water, crate, medications, vaccination records) alongside your PREPORA bag. Confirm in advance which emergency shelters in your area accept pets — most do not.

Step 3: Set Your Meeting Points

When an emergency strikes and family members are not all in the same location, you need pre-agreed points to converge.

Primary meeting point: Outside your home — typically the end of your driveway or a neighbour's house directly opposite. Use this when you need to evacuate the building quickly and everyone can reach it within minutes.

Secondary meeting point: Within walking distance but away from your immediate neighbourhood — a school, a place of worship, a community centre, a recognisable street corner. Use this if your primary point is inaccessible (the street is blocked, the area is evacuated).

Out-of-area meeting point: A location in a different town or district that all family members can name and navigate to independently. This is the fallback if your city or borough becomes inaccessible. Choose somewhere with personal meaning — a relative's home, a named hotel, a recognisable building in a nearby town.

Write down all three meeting points. Make sure every household member from age 8 upwards can name them from memory.

Step 4: Communication Protocol

When cell networks are overloaded, call attempts fail before text messages do. When cell networks are down entirely, texts also fail. Your communication plan must account for all levels of degradation.

1. **Designate an out-of-area contact.** Choose a friend or relative who lives in a different city or region. In a local emergency, it is often easier to communicate with someone outside the affected area than with someone inside it — networks become less congested at distance. Every household member should have this person's number memorised or written on a card in their school bag or wallet.
2. **Prefer text over voice calls.** Text messages require far less network bandwidth than voice calls and will often reach their destination even when voice calls fail. The out-of-area contact becomes the information relay point: everyone checks in with them, and they relay information between family members.
3. **Store ICE contacts.** ICE stands for "In Case of Emergency." Set an ICE contact in every household member's mobile phone — emergency services will look for these. Include your out-of-area contact and one local contact.
4. **Have a physical contact list.** If a phone is lost, dead, or unavailable, every household member should carry a small paper card with key phone numbers: the out-of-area contact, each family member's mobile number, and the household's emergency services local number.
5. **Establish a check-in schedule.** If separated during a prolonged emergency, agree on a check-in time (e.g., every 6 hours at the top of the hour) and a channel (text, specific app, radio). This prevents the anxiety spiral of unanswered messages.

Step 5: Practice Drills

A plan that exists only on paper is a plan that will not be followed under stress. Practice converts the plan into muscle memory.

1. **Run an annual full household drill.** Choose a Saturday morning. Announce that you are running an emergency drill. Execute the full sequence: everyone grabs their roles, locates the kit, meets at the primary meeting point, and reviews the communication protocol. This takes 20–30 minutes and reveals gaps you would never notice on paper.
2. **Do a partial drill for each scenario.** In addition to the general drill, run a brief scenario-specific walkthrough once per year: "It's 2 am and there's a fire smell — what does everyone do?" or "The water is off and the radio says there's a flood warning — walk me through the first 10 minutes." Short, specific, and without warning to simulate real conditions.
3. **Debrief with children at their level.** After any drill, sit down for 10 minutes and ask: What was confusing? What would have slowed us down? What should we add to the plan? Children often identify gaps that adults miss. A 9-year-old asking "but what if the front door is blocked?" is giving you a genuine planning contribution.
4. **Update the plan after each drill.** If the drill reveals that your secondary meeting point is now inaccessible (a new building went up, the route is changed), update the plan immediately. A stale plan is worse than no plan — it creates false confidence.

Key Takeaways

- A written, practiced plan reduces panic-driven errors; households with plans consistently outperform those improvising in real emergencies.
- Assign explicit roles before any emergency — kit, communications, transport, medical, and child/pet management should each have a named owner.
- Set three meeting points: immediate (home exterior), local (walkable), and out-of-area (independent navigation required).
- Designate an out-of-area contact as the information relay hub — they often reach family members faster than direct local communication during network overload.

> ***A family that has practiced its emergency plan is a family that can stay calm — and calm is the most important survival resource you have.***

Part of the PREPORA Survival Guide series. Download the full guide at prepora-gear.com/guides.