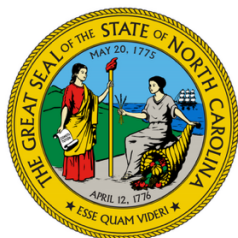


# Guidance for Children's Health and Safety in Emergency Shelters

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services  
Division of Public Health  
Environmental Health Section



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**  
Division of Public Health

The objective of this guidance is to provide an overview of the best practices for child care and children's sanitation in an emergency shelter. This document provides information that can be shared with local health departments, charitable organizations and other community groups, and shelter management as a guide for what protocols and procedures can be put in place to best protect children during an emergency. This guidance is meant to be shared among partners to help answer questions as they arise regarding children's health and sanitation needs.

## Introduction

Natural disasters and public health emergencies often disrupt routines for families, leaving families with few options for ensuring the well-being of their children. The comprehensive guidance outlined in this document reflects a collaborative effort between local and state health departments, charitable organizations, and child care providers to develop standardized protocols for caring for children within emergency shelters. Emergency shelters play a critical role in supporting the emotional and psychological needs of children during times of disruption. By providing a safe and nurturing environment for children, these shelters allow parents and caregivers the opportunity to focus on addressing immediate challenges. By following these instructions, stakeholders can ensure consistency, efficiency, and effectiveness in their response to crisis events.

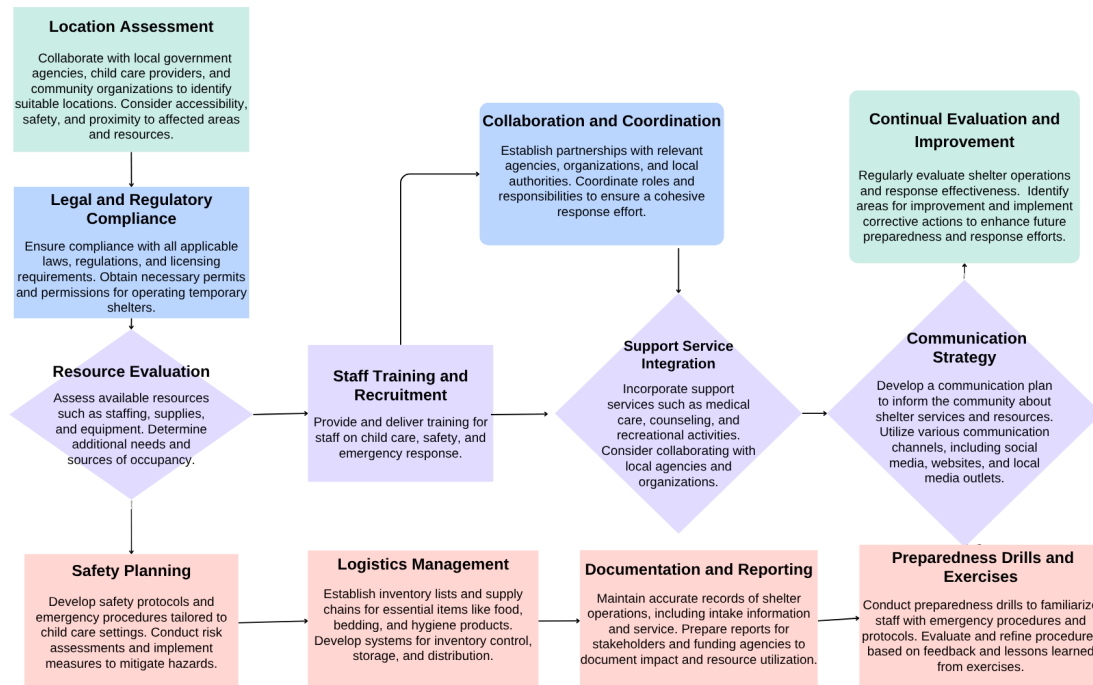
## Preparation Prior to the Disaster

Preparation for an emergency shelter is crucial prior to any disaster to ensure a swift and effective response. Key steps include identifying suitable locations, assessing resources, establishing partnerships with relevant agencies explained in **Figure 1**, and developing comprehensive plans for safety, staffing, and support services. Additionally, implementing protocols for logistics management, communication, and ongoing evaluation is essential for maintaining operational efficiency and effectiveness. By prioritizing preparedness activities including staff training, facility readiness, and community outreach, the shelter can enhance its ability to provide safe and supportive care for children and families during times of crisis. Ultimately, proactive preparation prepares the shelter to meet the needs of vulnerable populations in emergency situations.

American Red Cross	Law Enforcement	Emergency Management	Local Health Department	North Carolina Department of Public Health
Often provides essential services such as shelter management, first aid, mental health support, and logistics coordination. They may assist in setting up and managing the physical space of the shelter, providing basic necessities like bedding, hygiene kits, and meals.	Ensures the safety and security of the shelter and its occupants. They may provide security personnel to maintain order, enforce rules, and address any safety concerns or incidents	Coordinates response efforts, including setting up and managing emergency shelters. They provide guidance, support, and resources for shelter operations.	Provide the local coordination and support for sanitation in the shelter. Responsible for the shelter assessment, and any communicable disease outbreak investigations.	Plays a critical role in ensuring the health and well-being of shelter occupants. They provide guidance on sanitation, hygiene practices, disease prevention, and may offer medical services or support for individuals with specific health needs.
	Board of Education	Department of Social Services	Housing Authority	
	May assist with child care services, providing educational resources, and coordinating activities. They ensure children's educational needs are met while displaced from their homes.	Provides staffing for shelters, and assists with support services for shelter residents during and after emergency.	May assist displaced families with finding temporary or permanent housing. They provide support and resources for families who need assistance to secure housing.	
Foster Parent Association		Faith Community Service Groups/ Community Action Agencies		
May assist with caring for children who are separated from their families during the emergency. They provide temporary foster care services, support, and resources for children who cannot stay with their families.		These groups often provide support services such as counseling, spiritual care, volunteer coordination, and community outreach. They offer emotional support, and resources and may assist with coordinating donations or volunteers.		

**Figure 1.** Community Partners

# Preparing for Emergency Shelter Setup



**Figure 2.** Planning and Coordination

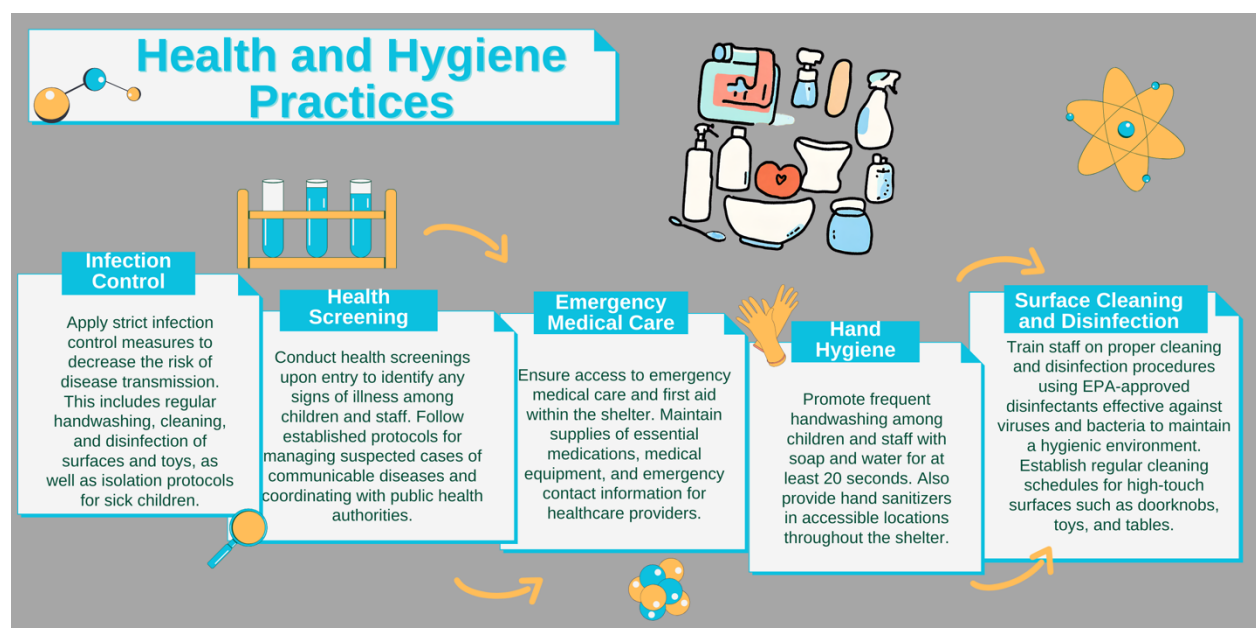
In anticipation of unforeseen crises, preparation for establishing emergency shelters is crucial. Setting up emergency shelters and areas for caring for children requires careful planning and coordination to ensure the safety and well-being of children during crisis situations. This comprehensive process involves strategic planning, resource assessment, and collaboration with pertinent stakeholders to ensure the swift and effective provision of safe and supportive care for children and families during emergencies. From identifying suitable locations to implementing robust safety protocols and logistical arrangements, every aspect of preparation plays a crucial role in safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable populations in times of crisis. **Figure 2** outlines essential considerations for preparing and operating emergency shelters, emphasizing the importance of careful planning, safety measures, staff training, support services, logistics management, communication, and ongoing evaluation.

## Health and Hygiene Practices

Health and hygiene practices are paramount in an emergency shelter due to their direct impact on the well-being and safety of children, staff, and caregivers. These practices play a crucial role in preventing the spread of infectious diseases, maintaining a clean and sanitary environment, and promoting overall health. By implementing proper hand hygiene, surface cleaning, and disinfecting standards depicted within **Figure 3**, the shelter can minimize the risk of illness transmission and ensure a healthy environment for all occupants. Additionally, monitoring illness symptoms, providing health education, and integrating emergency

preparedness into hygiene protocols further enhance the shelter's ability to respond effectively to health-related challenges during emergencies. Overall, prioritizing health and hygiene practices is essential for safeguarding the health and safety of vulnerable populations in emergency settings.

Effective health and hygiene practices also demonstrate a commitment to duty of care and ethical responsibility toward vulnerable populations. By upholding these standards, the shelter fulfills its obligation to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children who may be experiencing trauma or displacement due to emergencies. Moreover, by integrating health education and promoting healthy habits, the shelter empowers children and caregivers to take proactive steps toward their own well-being, fostering a culture of resilience and self-care.

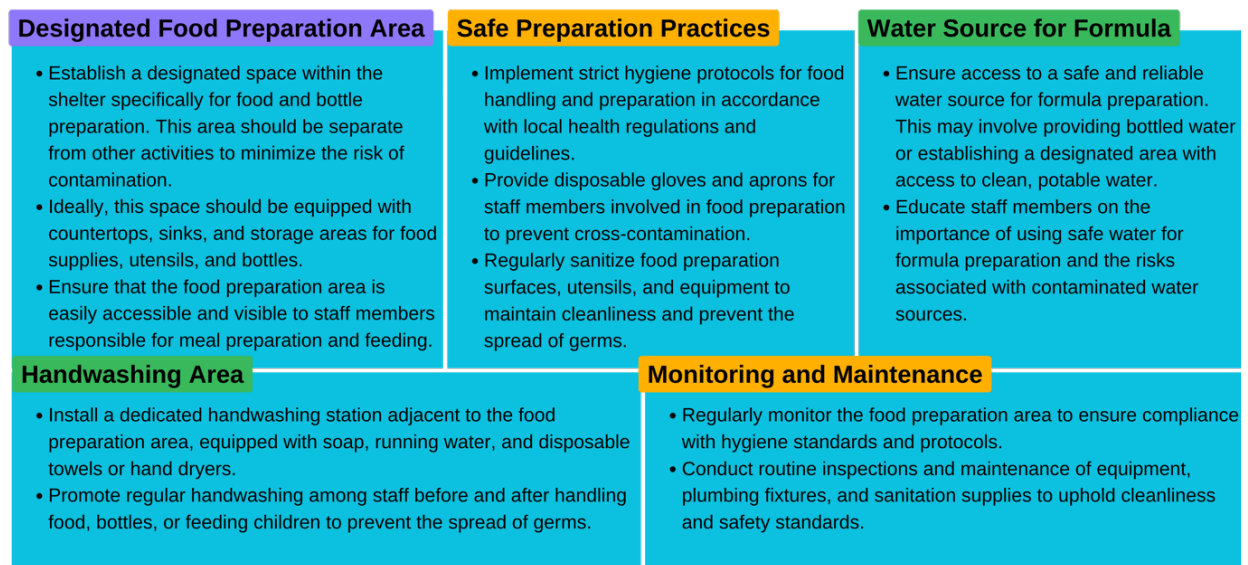


**Figure 3.** Health and Hygiene Practices

In the broader context of emergency response and disaster management, a well-prepared and hygienic child care area in a shelter serves as a vital component of community resilience. By reducing the risk of illness transmission and supporting the physical and emotional health of occupants, the shelter contributes to the overall stability and recovery of the affected community. By integrating health education and promoting healthy habits, the shelter empowers children and caregivers to take proactive steps toward their own well-being, fostering a culture of resilience and self-care. Investing in health and hygiene practices not only ensures the immediate safety of shelter occupants but also contributes to long-term community well-being and recovery efforts.

## Food and Bottle Preparation

Ensuring the safe preparation of bottles and baby food is paramount to meet the nutritional needs of infants and young children within a shelter. One essential aspect of this preparation is providing a separate, dedicated area for food and bottle preparation within the shelter. The key essentials in **Figure 4** demonstrate that by providing a separate, safe area for food and bottle preparation, along with access to a reliable water source for formula and a designated handwashing area, a shelter can ensure the nutritional needs of infants and young children are met in a hygienic and safe manner, even in emergency situations.



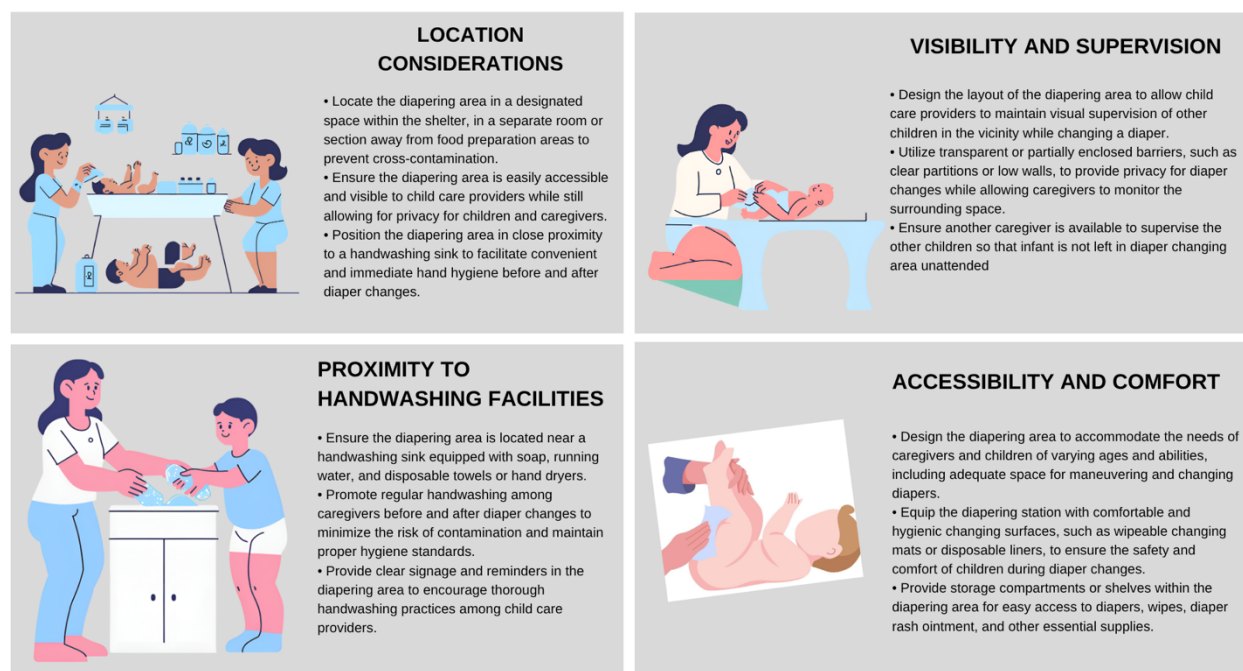
**Figure 4.** Key essentials for food and bottle preparation

## Lactation Station

The lactation station should be set up in a separate, dedicated location for nursing and pumping uses, offering both privacy and comfort for nursing mothers. Furnished with the necessary essentials, the lactation station should feature comfortable nursing chairs, breastfeeding pillows, and side tables for mothers to place their belongings. There should be a refrigerator provided to assist keeping breast milk cold. In addition to physical comfort, the lactation station should also offer emotional support for mothers. Resource materials on breastfeeding and lactation consultants should be readily available, providing valuable information and assistance to those in need. Handwashing stations or hand sanitizers should be available in lactation areas.

## Identify Diapering Facilities

Diapering is a regular, everyday occurrence within the infant and toddler section of a child care facility. In setting up a shelter, establishing adequate diapering facilities is essential for maintaining cleanliness and promoting the health and comfort of infants and toddlers. When identifying diapering facilities within a shelter, it is important to consider the design and layout described in **Figure 5** of diapering facilities so that caregivers can ensure a safe, hygienic, and efficient environment for diaper changes while prioritizing the well-being and comfort of children while reducing the risk of spreading germs.



**Figure 5.** Efficient Diapering Facilities Environment

## Equipment and Toys

Maintaining a safe and hygienic environment in a shelter involves careful consideration of the equipment and toys provided for children. From selecting age-appropriate and easily cleanable toys to establishing detailed cleaning procedures, every aspect of toy management plays a crucial role in safeguarding the well-being of the children in care. In addition to ensuring age-appropriate and easily cleanable toys, it's imperative to emphasize certain restrictions within the pop-up child care center to maintain a safe environment for all children. Toys that launch projectiles, such as dart guns, pop guns, slingshots, and similar items, are strictly prohibited within the facility. These toys pose significant safety hazards, including the risk of eye injuries or choking incidents, and their use can lead to potential accidents or conflicts among children. Balloons present a choking hazard, especially for preschool-aged children who may not fully grasp the risks associated with playing with them.



Therefore, balloons should not be accessible to preschool children within the child care center to prevent any potential choking incidents.

When selecting toys for children under three years of age, it's crucial to ensure that they are not only age-appropriate but also developmentally suitable. Toys for this age group should promote sensory exploration, fine and gross motor skill development, and cognitive growth in safe and engaging ways. By prioritizing safety, cleanliness, and developmental appropriateness detailed in **Figure 6**, child care facilities can create a safe and stimulating environment where children can play, learn, and thrive with confidence, while avoiding unnecessary risks or hazards.

Equipment and Toy Selection	Common Toys	Cleaning Procedures	Toy Hygiene and Safety
<p><b>Age Appropriateness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Select toys and equipment that are developmentally appropriate for the range of ages served in the shelter, considering factors like cognitive abilities, motor skills, and safety concerns.</li> </ul> <p><b>Cleanability</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prioritize toys and equipment that are easily cleanable, preferably made of materials that can withstand frequent cleaning and disinfection without damage.</li> </ul> <p><b>Safety Standards</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure all toys and equipment meet safety standards, with no lead hazards or choking hazards present.</li> </ul> <p><b>Good Repair</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regularly inspect toys and equipment to ensure they are in good repair, with no sharp edges, loose parts, or other potential safety hazards.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Soft Toys</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide plush animals or fabric blocks, that can be easily washed and sanitized.</li> </ul> <p><b>Plastic Toys</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Including building blocks, shape sorters, and toy vehicles, which are durable and easily cleanable.</li> </ul> <p><b>Manipulative Toys</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fine motor skills and cognitive toys such as puzzles, stacking toys, and sensory bins.</li> </ul> <p><b>Art Supplies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crayons, washable markers, and non-toxic paints for creative expression.</li> </ul> <p><b>Outdoor Toys</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Balls, jump ropes, and playground equipment for physical activity and gross motor development.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Regular Cleaning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish a routine schedule for cleaning and disinfecting toys and equipment, at least once daily or more frequently as needed.</li> </ul> <p><b>Washing and Rinsing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wash toys with soap and water, ensuring coverage of all surfaces. Rinse toys under running water to remove any soap residue.</li> </ul> <p><b>Sanitizing Solution</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mix sanitizing solution according to manufacturer instructions. A mixture of bleach and water can be used (1 tablespoon of bleach per gallon of water).</li> </ul> <p><b>Sanitize and Air Dry</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spray toys with the sanitizing solution. Allow toys to air dry naturally in a clean and well-ventilated area.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Hand Washing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage children and staff to wash their hands before and after playing with toys to prevent the spread of germs.</li> </ul> <p><b>Rotating Toys</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rotate toys regularly to prevent overuse and facilitate thorough cleaning of all items in rotation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Storage</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Store clean toys in designated bins or shelves, keeping them off the floor and away from potential contamination sources.</li> </ul> <p><b>Monitoring</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continuously monitor toys for signs of wear and tear, replacing or repairing damaged items promptly to maintain safety standards.</li> </ul>

**Figure 6.** Equipment and Toys Considerations

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the establishment of safe and healthy protocols for caring for children in emergency shelters stands as a critical pillar in safeguarding the health and well-being of communities, especially during times of crisis. By providing a safe and nurturing environment for children, these shelters alleviate immense burdens on families, enabling essential workers to fulfill their duties while ensuring children receive proper care and supervision. Moreover, these shelters serve as vital hubs for disseminating crucial health information and resources, contributing significantly to community strength and preparedness. This proactive approach also fosters trust in the emergency response system as a whole to ensure the successful establishment and operation of such shelters to meet the needs of their communities. As such, their incorporation into state health department guidelines is not just advisable but imperative toward strengthening public health infrastructure and fostering a more robust society in the face of unforeseen challenges.