



## Episode 15: Family Reunification in the Event of an Emergency

**#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded):** [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

**Janelle Hughes:** Hello and welcome back. We are so excited to host another #REMSontheAir Podcast episode. My name is Janelle Hughes, and for those of you who are new friends to the REMS TA Center, I serve as the Project Director for our team. Today, I'm joined by my colleague, Alison Curtis, REMS TA Center Director of [00:01:00] Information and Product Management.

**Alison Curtis:** Thanks, Janelle. In today's episode of #REMSontheAir, we'll be discussing family reunification in the context of emergency management planning. We'll go over how schools and school districts can plan for reunification in their emergency operations plans or EOPs and what types of activities are involved before, during, and after family reunification.

**Janelle Hughes:** This is such an important topic, Alison, and to help us get a better understanding, do you mind walking us a bit through family reunification and what it is in the context of emergency operations planning?

**Alison Curtis:** Absolutely. In the context of school safety and preparedness, family reunification refers to the process of reuniting children with authorized family members after an emergency event, particularly in an event that disrupts the school day or results in early [00:02:00] dismissals.

Reunification is one of many critical functions of an EOP that requires advance planning and preparation to be able to carry out reunification activities before, during, and after an emergency event. Schools and school districts can prepare for reunification by creating a Family Reunification Annex as part of their comprehensive EOP.

**Janelle Hughes:** Thanks, Alison, for that overview. So, you mentioned that Family Reunification Annexes should contain planned courses of action for before, during, and after an emergency event. Can you help us dig a little deeper into why this is important?

**Alison Curtis:** That's definitely right, Janelle, and I'm happy to provide us with a closer look. Family reunification planning is important due to the nature of emergency events being unplanned, unpredictable, and often highly stressful. [00:03:00] There are many threats and hazards that result in a need for family reunification, which is not always a quick and easy

## Episode 15: Family Reunification in the Event of an Emergency

process. It's really quite critical that schools and school districts prepare for family reunification activities before they ever need to implement these protocols.

**Janelle Hughes:** That's a very good point. So, let's go back to the before, during, and after aspects of family reunification. What kinds of considerations should be made when designing that annex that prepares school safety teams for *before* an emergency event?

**Alison Curtis:** When developing a Family Reunification Annex, the "before" activities that schools should engage in include first designing locations where reunification will occur and delegating staff member roles and responsibilities for carrying out reunification activities.

Next, schools should consider how [00:04:00] reunification will occur. How will students be transported to the reunification site? How will families be contacted? How will children be cared for until their caregivers arrive? These are all components that schools need to prepare for in advance of an emergency event. Another critical "before" activity is collecting up-to-date student emergency information, so there is no confusion about who a student should be released to.

We also recommend schools prepare an actionable checklist of both procedural information, as well as emergency supplies and equipment that may be needed at the reunification site. Lastly, administrators and school safety officials should ensure that all staff are well trained for family reunification in advance of any emergency. Creating a detailed plan for family reunification that addresses each of these aspects can reduce confusion [00:05:00] during an emergency event and ensure family reunification happens seamlessly when it becomes necessary.

**Janelle Hughes:** Wow, I can already imagine how helpful a Family Reunification Annex can be. So, Alison, how do you think schools can prepare for those necessary activities that happen *during* reunification?

**Alison Curtis:** Well, the process of family reunification may vary in length and complexity, depending on the emergency event, its scale, and its impact on the community. In general, schools can plan for the arrival of students' caregivers; setting up and staffing the reunification site; they can plan for ensuring a process where documentation is checked before students are released; how to provide support and information to students, families, and staff; and really, depending on the emergency, providing onsite mental health supports to those involved. [00:06:00]

Janelle, I'll hand it over to you right now to share with us some family reunification activities that schools need to plan for in order to carry out those activities after an emergency event.

## Episode 15: Family Reunification in the Event of an Emergency

**Janelle Hughes:** Thanks, Alison. So, a well-designed Family Reunification Annex should address the recovery phase of an emergency event by detailing those actions school safety teams will take *after* the family reunification process. This might include restoring the reunification site, coordinating care for students who are not yet reunified, providing transportation for those in need, as well as providing ongoing mental health supports and public information updates to the school community.

Finally, the entire school safety team should convene no later than 2 weeks following the emergency event to, of course, debrief and, if needed, amend the Family Reunification Annex based on those [00:07:00] lessons learned.

**Alison Curtis:** There really is so much to consider when planning for family reunification. Another aspect of this discussion that I want to bring light to is that each state or local education agency may use different approaches and techniques in collaboration with their state partners to manage family reunification.

And we're excited to share more on this topic from an interview with a subject-matter expert. Let's now hear from Jim Lee, former Principal and Director of Student Services from the Paradise Valley Unified School District in Arizona and, later on, Emergency Response Advisor at the Arizona Department of Education. He'll share some information about the role of community partners in the family reunification process.

**Jim Lee (Recorded):** During the development of your reunification plan, part of that is going to be reaching out to community partners who may be involved [00:08:00] in that reunification process. First that comes to mind to me is local law enforcement, who may be assisting with traffic control, parent issues during the reunification process if necessary, helping to provide direction and guidance. Also local fire [departments], who may be assisting with ingress, egress, also who may assist during the reunification process if there are injuries to students or staff members, in that their EMTs would be providing assistance. And then, of course, you're always going to want to coordinate your plans, not only with local law enforcement and local fire, but local emergency management, public health, as well, because you never know, depending on the situation, where you will need their assistance or participation in your reunification process.

**Janelle Hughes:** From each of those scenarios Jim shared, you can really tell how fundamental collaboration is to emergency operations plans. [00:09:00]

**Alison Curtis:** Truly. Community partners like those Jim mentioned are such valuable resources, and they should be engaged and involved in every step of a school or school district's EOP planning and development process.

## Episode 15: Family Reunification in the Event of an Emergency

**Janelle Hughes:** That's right. Family reunification is such a nuanced process, and there are many things to consider when planning for this function. Let's hear again from Jim about some of those considerations and how to maintain best practices when coordinating so many details.

**Jim Lee (Recorded):** You know, a big challenge for schools and school districts and reunification is the process itself. And that is: what is the process that you identify as a school for the reunification process? The notification of parents, which we just talked about, as to whether you're going to be doing an onsite or an offsite reunification. What [00:10:00] procedures you have in place for notifying parents. What procedures you have in place for transporting students. If you're going to an offsite relocation center, what supplies you might need or supplies that you need for the reunification process.

And so that when you go through, you know, those questions, asking yourself, working with your team, you know, there's a lot of detail involved in that. It's just not a matter of saying, "Hey, we have to have a reunification; the reunification is going to be here at school" or "we're going to have to do an offsite relocation reunification, and we're going to line the parents up and check the students out to them." It doesn't work that way.

It has to be a very detailed process, keeping in mind that the safety of students and staff is first and foremost in this, and then also equally important is the accountability of students. How do you keep track of students during the reunification process, again, whether that process be [00:11:00] onsite or offsite.

So, great planning for the process, great planning for the people involved, great planning for the supplies that you're going to need, OK, and great planning for the procedures themselves. Great attention to detail.

**Alison Curtis:** Jim is spot on here, Janelle. I couldn't have said it better myself. Great planning and attention to detail during the EOP development process, involving key community partners, is really the best way to ensure that when a Family Reunification Annex does need to be activated, everything goes smoothly.

**Janelle Hughes:** Exactly.

**Alison Curtis:** This conversation has been so informative! I want to point out that the REMS TA Center has a wealth of resources on the topic of family reunification. First, our fact sheet, *Integrating Family Reunification Planning Before, During, and After an Emergency Into the School Emergency Operations Plan*, provides a [00:12:00] more in-depth look at all aspects of planning for family reunification.

## Episode 15: Family Reunification in the Event of an Emergency

We also have two great webinars on this topic, where we break down how to prepare for family reunification after a communitywide disaster and how to conduct family reunification during an emergency event. These webinars are also accompanied by comprehensive resource guides, and we also have a specialized training package module on developing a Family Reunification Annex.

And finally, we have a sample Family Reunification Annex as well to look at. There are many more resources on the REMS TA Center Website that can help guide schools and school districts in planning for family reunification in their emergency operations plans.

**Janelle Hughes:** Well, Alison, I always enjoy our conversations, and thanks so much to our listeners for tuning in today.

Remember to follow us on social media and bookmark the *#REMSontheAir* [00:13:00] hashtag to get more information on Twitter chats we might host on topics such as family reunification and others. You can also tweet us using the *#REMSontheAir* hashtag if you're addressing similar topics. And if you have any questions related to this discussion today or just want to learn more, send us your questions via email at [info@remstacenter.org](mailto:info@remstacenter.org) or give us a call at 1-855-781-7367. You can pose questions that perhaps might be featured on future podcast episodes.

**Alison Curtis:** Don't forget that you can also email us at any time at [info@remstacenter.org](mailto:info@remstacenter.org) to join our mailing list, where you'll get up-to-date information on webinars, Web chats, and other virtual opportunities to learn and share.

**Janelle Hughes:** And you can also access additional *#REMSontheAir* Podcast [00:14:00] episodes and share this one with your colleagues by visiting the REMS TA Center's podcast page and clicking the share tabs that appear along the left-hand side of your screen. Our podcast page also provides access to so much more, including those topics mentioned during today's episodes, as well as resources on other key school and campus safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness topics. Thank you for joining us.