

Expect the Unexpected and Facing Fear: Emergency preparedness in schools

Background

Floods in Quebec and the Atlantic provinces; a tornado in Alberta; an ice storm in Quebec and Ontario; firestorms in Alberta and British Columbia; attacks on New York and armed conflicts in Iraq and other parts of the world. In Canada, as elsewhere, natural disasters have increased in frequency and intensity in recent years and terrorism has become part of people's day-to-day preoccupations.

The far-reaching impact of natural disasters and wars on populations in Canada and elsewhere is causing concern in school yards and classrooms. The Canadian Red Cross Society has developed two teaching tools – *Expect the Unexpected*[™] and *Facing Fear*[™] – to help educators deal with issues such as these that can cause anxiety in young people. Since 1997, more than 650,000 students across Canada have benefited from these resources, thanks to support from the Royal & SunAlliance insurance company.

The project

- The Canadian Red Cross Society developed its first educational preparedness programme to help young people deal with emergencies and tragic events after a major flood in Quebec in 1996. The National Society conducted a needs analysis in the communities affected by the disaster, which indicated that children seemed the most disturbed by the event. The study also noted that teachers felt they did not have the knowledge or the appropriate tools to address such issues at school.
- Studies show that the impact of disasters on children are long term and that those who were involved in a hazards education programme had a clear advantage over the others when confronted with disasters. The Canadian Red Cross Society designed *Expect the Unexpected* hoping that, through the children, it would help raise awareness and change behaviours in Canadian households. It is the only curriculum-based disaster education programme for school-aged children in Canada designed to inform public attitudes and modify behaviours.
- *Expect the Unexpected* is directed at educators and parents. It has been designed to teach young people aged 7 to 13 about the main types of natural disasters that could strike their area; how to better prepare for

emergency situations; attitudes and behaviours to adopt during and after emergency situations; and evacuation procedures for school and home. *Expect the Unexpected* is consistent with the objectives of certain educational programmes of provincial and territorial departments of education.

- *Facing Fear* was developed as a complement to *Expect the Unexpected* curriculum to meet a demand from teachers and educators in Canadian schools following the events of 11 September 2001. *Facing Fear* provides lesson plans and activities to help young people aged from 5 to 16 be prepared for disasters and deal with the aftermath of terrorist attacks and tragic events. It addresses the following topics: managing feelings; the role and impact of the media; and international humanitarian law.
- *Expect the Unexpected* and *Facing Fear* have adapted concepts and activities from the American Red Cross's Masters of disaster and Facing Fear programmes. Both programmes have benefited from the support of all federal, provincial and territorial emergency preparedness offices in Canada and have received Curriculum Services Canada's seal of recommendation, as well as recognition from the Canadian Psychological Association.



Launch of "Expect the Unexpected" in a school in Laval, Quebec, in 2002.

Lessons learned

- In 2002–03, the Canadian Red Cross Society assessed the effectiveness of the *Expect the Unexpected* programme. The evaluation showed that:
 - Teachers have found the material useful and have given the programme an A or B score.
 - 89 per cent of the children who participated in the programme enjoyed it.
 - A significant 16 per cent of the children who participated shared the information with their parents.
 - Of those households, 51 per cent indicated that the information related by their children prompted them to take emergency preparedness measures.
 - 73 per cent of the households that participated in the study indicated they would like to be more active in disaster prevention/preparedness.
- Stimulated by those results, the Canadian Red Cross Society adopted a new dissemination strategy for *Expect the Unexpected* and *Facing Fear* and both programmes can now be downloaded free of charge from the Canadian Red Cross Society's web site (<http://www.redcross.ca/educatorsresources>). This has facilitated the implementation of the programmes throughout the country and induced a significant increase in the number of users. The number of young people benefiting from these resources has grown from 272,000 in 2002 to 548,000 in 2003.



Red Cross facilitator introducing "Expect the Unexpected" in a school in Ontario in September 2003.

- The educators are now aware of the existence of the programmes and use them whenever they need to, for example, following the floods in the Atlantic provinces or the bomb attacks in Madrid.



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The "Expect the Unexpected" and "Facing Fear" programmes provide a variety of teaching aids for educators, including facilitator's guides, transparencies, activity booklets, briefing notes for parents, videos, posters and participation certificates for students.

Conclusion

The Canadian Red Cross Society's experience in implementing its educational preparedness programmes has shown that teachers, parents, emergency measures officials, scouts and girl guides, childcare centres and other community health groups have found the *Expect the Unexpected* and *Facing Fear* programmes valuable tools for use in addressing issues related to children being prepared to deal with natural disasters and conflicts.

The results of the impact analysis indicate that the general lack of household preparedness across Canada highlights the need for more disaster education.

A combination of student satisfaction, teachers' repeated use of the material and households' new emergency preparedness behaviour shows that *Expect the Unexpected* had a positive impact on both the students and their families. It is reasonable to assume that *Facing Fear* would get similar results.

The Canadian Red Cross Society now knows that emergency preparedness behaviours were adopted in the 25,000 homes that participated in the programme and that those families now have a three-day supply of food and water and an evacuation plan.

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