

Guest Article: 12 Steps to Fire Proof Your Family, by

The Survival Mama

By [James Wesley, Rawles](#) on October 29, 2010 2:46 PM

Disasters can show up anytime, and leave little time in the moment of crisis to prepare with any sense of organization. The worst time to prepare is when you receive a reverse 911 call, or a knock at the door from a police officer ordering an evacuation of your home.

This list is meant for residents of a suburban area located near an undeveloped forested area. This list was put to the test during a wildfire that consumed over 4,600 acres within a five-hour period, fed by winds sustained at 55 m.p.h. and gusting to 70 m.p.h. No matter where you live, what circumstances are prompting an evacuation, or the natural disasters common for your area, preparing beforehand is key.

1. Plan Ahead. Receiving an order to evacuate your home, without knowing when you will be able to return is stressful. Having to make critical decisions about “what to take” and “what to leave” is unneeded stress. Taking the time before the emergency is setting up for success. If you live in an area with severe weather, plan a winter and summer evacuation list to ensure the safety and comfort of your family.

2. 5 Minute List. Sometimes there are mere minutes to get out. If you only had 5 minutes to get out, what items are critical?

Suggestions:

Children and Pets.

Documents in the safe (emergency binder, life insurance policies, passports).

Essential clothes. (Winter wear, one change of clothes)

Essential medication.

All the items of a 5-minute list are best contained in a “bug-out” bag. Prepare a backpack for each member of the family with the essentials. Rotate each season to ensure safety and comfort.

3. 20 Minute List. Some disasters give a bit of warning. Depending on location, wildfires can generate a few hours of warning before the fire is too close for comfort. 20 minutes should be plenty of time for a full-on evacuation of all the critical (**NON**-replaceable) items.

How do you decide what goes on the list without packing the entire house? This is where early planning is critical to alleviate a bit of the stress.

Suggestions:

All documents in the safe.

Current household documents.

Emergency Binder – copies of credit cards, passports, contact information and account numbers for all bills.

Essential clothes. (Winter wear, one change of clothes)

Essential medication.

Mementos/Photos – **only** the ones that aren't scanned.

Hard drive, jump [aka "thumb"] drives.

Remember: Non-replaceable!

Prepare the emergency binder beforehand. Make photocopies of all passports, social security cards and drivers licenses for the first section. The second section contains all critical accounts for banking and bill paying. Include the company name, account number, mailing address, phone number, web site and login information. With this information, you will be able to pay your bills, cancel utilities, or any other critical items while you're unable to get back to your home.

In this technological age, if all your contacts are saved on your computer or iphone in lieu of your brain, print the critical contacts and add a section to the binder.

4. Involve the whole family. If you weren't home, would your spouse or kids know what to do, what to take, and where it's located? Is there a list posted somewhere in the house? Does everyone know where the list lives?

Is everyone's list the same? Does your spouse have a non-negotiable item you didn't think to add to the list? Does anyone have a new medication that's not on the list? Would your youngest manage this kind of stressful event without a lovie or woobie or pacifier?

5. Write it down. Excel's user-friendly columns are an easy place to create the 5-minute and 20-minute lists. Bottom line, it

doesn't matter if the list is fancy, or spaced evenly, or even printed. What counts is writing it down, posting it in a central location, and telling everyone where it is. Use crayon if necessary, but **write it down**.

A central location possibility is the inside of the pantry door. Pick a date to review it every year. A not chaotic choice is on your birthday. If there are young children in the house, their needs change rapidly as they grow, and the list may need to be updated more often than once a year. If anyone has health problems, the list will need to be updated often to reflect any medication changes.

6. Post it. Once the list is written down, it won't do a bit of good if it's sitting on the computer's hard drive. Hit print, grab some tape, and stick it up.

The Pantry Door list is a master list. For each room containing 5-minute and 20-minute evacuation items, post that room's items again on the back of the room's door (i.e. in the office: household documents, hard drive). Add the item's location to the list. Be specific enough to ensure all members of the family will be able to find the item based on the location description. Add an item description if there's room on the list to eliminate confusion.

The more detailed the list, the less likely precious minutes will be wasted running up and down the stairs grabbing forgotten items.

7. Share it outside your family. What if you were out of town and your home was included in an evacuation order? Share your list with a nearby family member or friend willing to come evacuate your essentials if a disaster showed up while you were on vacation. Remind both of you before you leave.

8. Consolidate. Most lists contain "photos/memorabilia" with a vague sense of where everything is located. Specificity is key. Oftentimes, photos and important family items end up on a shelf to be cataloged later. Evacuation is not the time to find out boxes are half-full, overflowing, or photos are still in frames, waiting to be put away. Catalog all items falling into the "Photo/memorabilia" category. Eliminate duplicates, Eliminate items safe on the hard drive and backed-up online. Group items by date and label the boxes with large lettering, including the date. Use medium sized boxes easily carried by one person (ideally, by the weakest member of the family participating in the evacuation).

9. Organize. Where is everything on the 20-minute list stored? Are the items in separate rooms? In the event of a flood or other natural disaster, would they be safe? If you had to leave them, would they be safe? Can *everyone* find them? When storage is tight, creativity is king. Some of the items on the evacuation list may not be in use every day, or on a regular basis. It may be tempting to store items such as photos and memorabilia on a bottom shelf, out of the way, out of sight, out of place. If possible, find an ongoing location that keeps all the items out of harm's way for most disasters.

10. Practice. Once the list is complete (both the 5 and 20 minute), items are organized, and labeled, it's time for a Dry Run. Set the timer, grab the family and see what happens. This seems silly, but it's a critical test. Practice eliminates panic. Practicing more often (a monthly drill) will hone the skills of every member of the family, instill confidence in even the youngest member, and cut the time it takes to complete an entire evacuation. Be prepared to take notes during or after the practice. While you practice, notice things to change, eliminate, or add.

11. Change it. During the Dry Run, what issues or obstacles surfaced? While you practiced, what did you notice? Are there things to add to the list? Was everything on the list where it was supposed to be? Did you complete the Dry Run as a family? What would happen if you practiced as individuals – can everyone find all the items? Did you practice with the Person you assigned in Step #7?

12. Reorganize and Put Away. As you're putting things away from the Dry Run, be aware of the changes you've made to the list in the last step. Do things get to move around? Are they logically together? Are they easy to get to? Don't just plan for one emergency – plan for all of them.

13. Keep It Up. As the family grows, and new items get added to the list of items, organize them as you go, catalogue them, and remember to tell all the family members where the new items are located.

At the close of each year, rotate household documents to ensure the most up-to-date items are in the evacuation location.

Consider an online backup solution for all your computer files. External hard drives can fail, and an online solution is one less item to pack in the event of an evacuation.

The best evacuation preparedness is an ongoing task. It might be easy to get complacent once the list is done and one Dry Run is completed. Practice is crucial, and ongoing practice is priceless.

With a little planning, and a lot of practice, you'll be ready for anything nature throws you! - [The Survival Mama](#)