

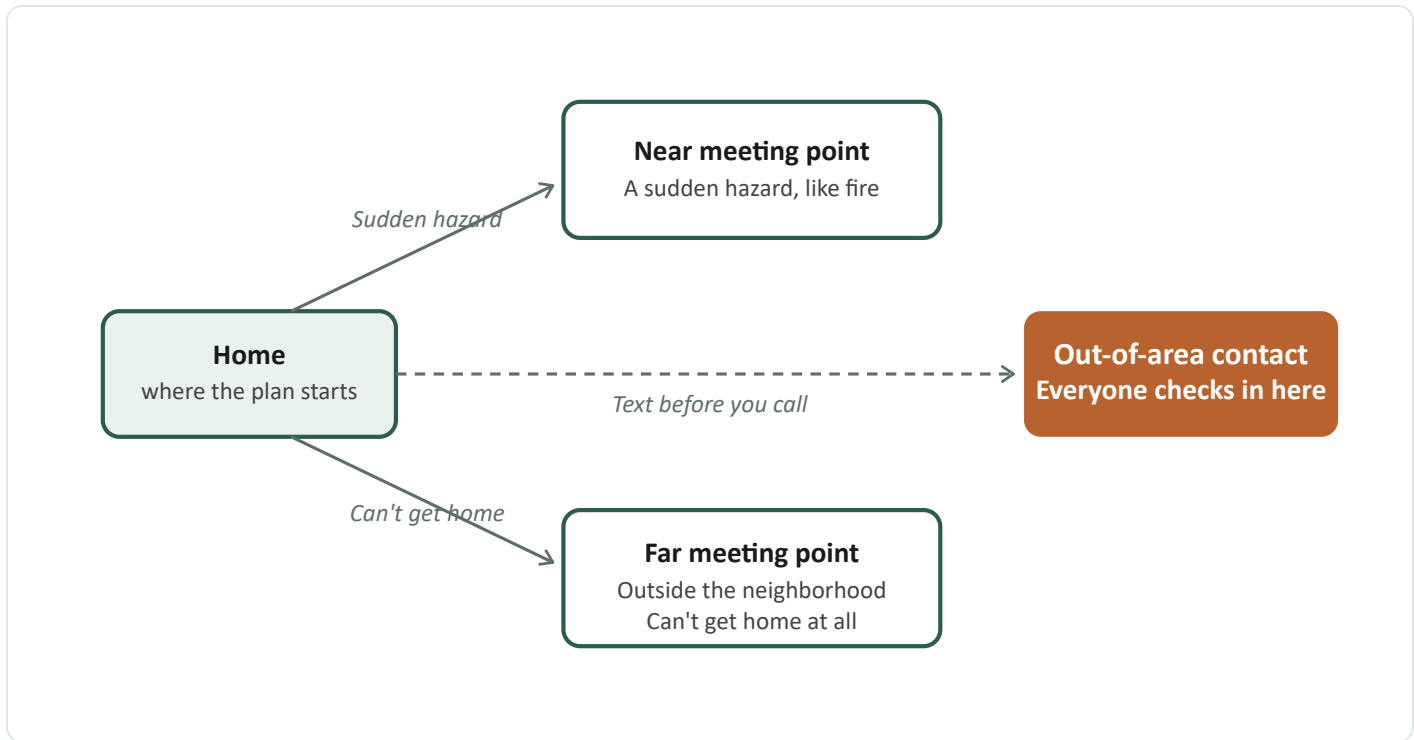
Family Communication Plan & Emergency Radio

A plan for reaching your family when the phone network is jammed, and the radios that keep working when it's down entirely. This is the hands-on side of the Communication chapter and its addendum.

Build the plan before you need it

The single biggest mistake is assuming a phone call to a family member two miles away will just work. In a real local disaster, it's often the opposite: local cell circuits jam with everyone calling at once, while a call or text to someone out of the area goes through fine.

1. **Pick one out-of-area contact** for the whole family to check in with. A relative or friend in another state works well, since they're unlikely to be affected by the same local event, and long-distance routing often isn't as congested as the local network you're standing in.
2. **Text before you call**, unless it's a genuine emergency. A text uses a fraction of the network capacity a voice call does, so it's far more likely to get through when circuits are jammed, and it leaves the limited voice capacity open for actual 911 calls. Don't compose it from scratch under stress, use the same short check-in text every time: *"[Name] here. I'm safe, at [location]. Will update when I can."* Short, factual, and it answers the two questions anyone reading it actually has: are you okay, and where are you.
3. **Set two meeting points**: one right outside your home for a sudden hazard like a fire, and one outside your neighborhood in case you can't get home at all.
4. **Write it all down on paper**, not just saved in a phone that could be dead, lost, or destroyed. Include everyone's out-of-area contact, both meeting points, and each family member's school or workplace emergency plan.



Where to find it: Ready.gov publishes a free, fillable family communication plan card built around exactly this structure; print one for each family member's wallet or backpack.

This whole plan assumes home is the safe place and everyone in the household benefits from the same shared information. For a household living with domestic violence, that's not true, a shared plan can be turned against you; see [Safety Planning When Home Isn't Safe](#) instead.

Make it a real plan, not just a good idea

A plan that only lives in your head competes with panic for your attention at the exact moment you need it most. Finish this sentence, out loud, with your own household:

"If we can't reach each other, I will text Aunt Carol and we'll meet at
the library on Main Street."

A NOAA weather radio is the baseline

A battery- or crank-powered NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards receiver keeps working when the power, internet, and cell network don't, and it's built to wake you up for exactly the alerts that matter.

The feature that makes this useful instead of annoying is **SAME** (Specific Area Message Encoding): every county in the U.S. has a 6-digit SAME code, and a radio programmed with your county's code only sounds its

alarm for alerts actually issued for your area, not every warning issued anywhere in the broadcast range.

1. Look up your county's SAME code on the National Weather Service's own listing.
2. On the radio, navigate to its SAME or county-setting menu (typically Menu → SAME → Set County → Add) and enter the code.
3. Consider adding neighboring counties too if you work, commute through, or have family in one.

Where to find it: electronics, hardware, sporting goods, and marine-supply stores all carry NOAA weather radios, as do general retailers and online. Look for "Public Alert" certification on the box, which confirms it meets NOAA's own performance standard; the Midland WR400 is one widely available example with SAME programming for up to 25 locations.

For anyone in the household who is Deaf or hard of hearing, a weather radio's audible alarm isn't enough on its own. Many models have an output jack for external alerting devices, bed shakers, pillow vibrators, and strobe lights, that trigger on the same alert instead of (or alongside) the speaker. NOAA maintains dedicated guidance and sign-language resources for exactly this.

Watch it: ABC 33/40, "Programming a NOAA Weather Radio".

When you need to talk back: GMRS and ham radio

A weather radio only receives. For two-way communication when cell service is down entirely, family separated across a property or a neighborhood, or coordinating with neighbors, you need a radio that transmits too.

	GMRS	Ham radio (Technician license)
Licensing	\$35 fee, no exam, covers your whole immediate family under one license	Pass a 35-question FCC exam (26 correct to pass); most people study 1–2 weeks
Range and capability	22 fixed UHF channels, roughly a few miles handheld, more with a repeater	Access to VHF/UHF repeaters (50–100+ miles), HF bands, digital modes, and emergency nets (ARES/RACES)
Best for	Most households: simple, fast, family-wide coverage	Anyone who wants real depth and range, and is willing to study for it

Where to find it: GMRS radios are sold at any outdoor or electronics retailer; the license itself is a \$35 online application through the FCC directly, no test required. For ham radio, the ARRL's licensing guide lists exam sessions near you; sessions typically run about \$15.

Watch it: Ham Radio 2.0, "Ham Radio vs GMRS: A Reality Check".

TIP**Height beats power for range on any handheld radio**

Get the antenna up higher and you'll out-perform a stronger radio held low almost every time; height matters more for range than transmit power does. Standing up instead of crouching, climbing to a porch or a second story, or moving to high ground before you transmit can turn a call that doesn't get through into one that does, with the exact same radio in your hand.

Verify an alert is real before you act on it, or share it

A genuine Wireless Emergency Alert or NOAA broadcast is real most of the time, but not always: security researchers have demonstrated that WEA messages can be spoofed over cellular networks, and unverified rumors and screenshots spread on social media faster than any official channel can correct them. Two habits close most of that gap:

- **A real emergency alert never asks you to click a link, log in, or provide personal information.** That's a scam pattern riding on a real alert's format, not a WEA or NOAA behavior. Treat any alert that does as fake regardless of how official it looks.
- **Cross-check against your local emergency management office's own channels,** their official website or verified social media account, before you evacuate, share, or act on something you saw forwarded or screenshotted rather than received directly. If you can't reach them, your county's non-emergency dispatch line can usually confirm whether an alert is genuine.

This matters as much for what you forward as what you act on: sharing an unverified rumor "just in case" is exactly how false information outruns the correction, treat forwarding as the same decision as acting on it yourself.

Give kids their own version of the plan, not just a role in yours

A plan that only lives in an adult's head doesn't help a child who gets separated from every adult who knows it. What a child actually needs depends on age, not on repeating the same instructions at every age and hoping they stick:

- **Ages 5-7:** too young to reliably memorize a phone number under stress. Give them a card instead, worn on a lanyard or clipped inside a backpack: their full name, a parent's phone number, home address, and who's allowed to pick them up. Practice the meeting point with them like a game, not a lecture.

- **Ages 8-12:** old enough to memorize a home address and one parent's phone number, and to call 911 independently. Teach them to do exactly that with an old, disconnected phone so it's a real rehearsal, not just a conversation, and give them a real, small role, like helping a younger sibling find the meeting point, so the plan includes them instead of just describing them.
- **Ages 13 and up:** capable of being a genuine part of executing the plan, not just following it. Make sure they know the out-of-area contact's number themselves, understand the check-in text above well enough to send it on their own, and know they may need to be the calm one for a younger sibling if no adult is reachable yet.

A card young enough to need one

Print or copy this by hand for a child who can't yet reliably recall this under stress:

My name is

Call my parent at

My address is

If we're separated, go to

Press Ctrl/Cmd+P to print just this page, or copy it onto an index card by hand.

Neither radio replaces the plan

A radio is only useful if the people on the other end know how and when to use it. Agree on a channel, a check-in schedule, and a backup meeting point as part of the same conversation where you write down the family communication plan above, not as a separate afterthought.

Know someone this guide would actually help? Being the person who's ready includes being the person who says something.

[Send them this page ›](#)

Sources

- Ready.gov, "Family Communication Plan," and FCC/FEMA emergency communication tips: Ready.gov; FCC/FEMA
- Why text messages outperform voice calls on a congested network during a disaster: KQED

- NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards and SAME county-code technology: National Weather Service
 - Accessible weather radio alerting for Deaf and hard-of-hearing users: National Weather Service
 - GMRS licensing and FCC requirements: FCC
 - Amateur radio Technician license requirements and capabilities: ARRL
 - Antenna height as the dominant factor in two-way radio range, for both fixed and handheld radios: Rugged Radios; Herda Radio
 - WEA/IPAWS message authentication and demonstrated spoofing vulnerabilities: FEMA, IPAWS Myths vs. Facts; researcher-demonstrated WEA spoofing
 - Age-appropriate emergency information for children, by age tier: NYC Emergency Management; Twiniversity
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Working through this from Ready, Set, Ready? Head back to pick your next topic once this one's real.