RIVALSHOT ACADEMY · COURSE BOOK

Your Personal Safety Plan

Home, Vehicle and Routine — the companion book to the RivalShot Academy course

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Foreword: How to use this book

This book goes with the six-lesson RivalShot Academy course Your Personal Safety Plan: Home, Vehicle and Routine. The lessons give you the core ideas in a few minutes each. The book gives you room to slow down: more examples, more detail, a checklist for each chapter and questions to talk over with the people you live with.

The whole course rests on one belief. Safety at home and on the move is mostly made of small, ordinary decisions made in advance, by calm people, on ordinary days. It is not made of fear, gadgets or worst-case thinking. A good personal safety plan is short enough to fit on one page, specific enough that everyone in your household knows their part, and gentle enough that nobody dreads talking about it.

Each chapter follows the same shape. First come the ideas, developed a little further than the lesson could. Then **In practice** offers two short fictional stories. The people in them are invented, and so are the places; they are there to show how the ideas feel in real life, not to predict what will happen to anyone. After that you will find a **Checklist**, a few **Key terms**, three **Talk it through** questions for a household, class or study group, and a **Journal prompt** that matches the course's learner journal.

A few ground rules hold throughout:

- **You can pause.** Some people have lived through frightening events, and reading about safety can bring memories up. Put the book down whenever you need to. Do one chapter a week, or one section a day.

- **Leaving, asking staff and calling for help are always valid.** Nothing in this book asks you to confront anyone, investigate anything or stay somewhere you feel unsafe.
- **Keep secrets out of your notes.** Your plan and your journal never need your address, door or alarm codes, where keys are hidden, passwords or private details about other people.
- **This is education, not certification.** It is an educational reading course with no saved completion, certification or qualification, and it is not an inspection of your home or a legal opinion. Laws and local services vary; check official sources for your area.
- **Sources are named and dated.** Where a statement comes from public guidance, such as Ready.gov, CISA, the FTC or the National Crime Prevention Council, the chapter says so, and the Sources section at the end lists the exact pages and the date they were checked.

You do not need to do everything in this book. If you finish with three home fixes, a car routine you no longer think about, one alternative route, two agreed contacts, a one-page plan on the fridge and two dates in your calendar, you will have made a real start, and you may well feel calmer, not more worried.

Chapter 1. Layers at home: light, locks and clear sightlines

Why layers beat a single fix

When people decide to “do something” about home safety, they often reach for one big purchase: a camera system, a smart lock, an alarm subscription. Any of those can be useful. But a single measure carries all the weight, and when it fails, is switched off or is simply not used, nothing is left behind it.

A layered approach works differently. You put several small, ordinary measures in a row so that each one does a modest job and the others back it up. A light that comes on, a hedge cut low enough that a window can see the street, a door that is actually locked, a spare key that is not where everyone looks, a household that checks who is at the door before opening it. None is impressive on its own. Together they make a home harder to approach without being seen, harder to enter quietly and easier to leave in a hurry.

The simplest way to think about this is three rings around your home.

The outer ring: the approach

The outer ring is everything someone passes through before they touch your door: the path, the steps, the entrance, the driveway or the place you park, the side gate, the alley behind a ground-floor apartment.

Two questions do most of the work here. **Can it be seen?** And **can it be seen from inside?** The National Crime Prevention Council's home-safety advice is to light up or remove the places near entrances where someone could hide, such as the space between shrubs, a dark stairwell or a recessed doorway. CISA's personal security guide adds a useful second test for plants: shrubs and hedges should neither give anyone cover near the home nor block your own view out of the windows. A window that can see the path is a quiet layer of its own.

Lighting does not need to be bright or expensive. A motion-sensor bulb over the back steps, a porch light on a timer and a light by the place you park cover many homes. The NCPC also suggests putting indoor lights on timers so the home looks lived-in while you are away. The goal is not floodlights. It is that the places where a person would stand to open your door are not the darkest places on the street.

The middle ring: the shell

The middle ring is the shell of the home: doors, windows, locks and keys. Most of the work here is not buying better hardware. It is using the hardware you already have, every time.

Make locking the door part of the same movement as stepping inside, the way you take off your coat. Before bed or before a trip, check the windows that can be reached from the ground, a porch roof, a balcony or a fire escape. If a window will not lock or a door will not close properly, that goes on your fix list.

Keys deserve their own thought. The doormat, the planter, the ledge over the door and the mailbox are the first places anyone looks. The NCPC suggests giving a spare to a trusted neighbor instead. Think also about who already has keys or codes: a former

roommate, a contractor, a dog walker from three years ago. If keys go missing or a code has been shared more widely than you meant, CISA's guide suggests considering a change of locks or codes rather than hoping for the best. Put away ladders and tools that could help someone reach an upper window; CISA's guide mentions this too, and it costs nothing.

The inner ring: habits

The inner ring is made of habits, and it is the one people forget.

Who opens the door. Know who is there before you open it. A window, a peephole, a door camera or a simple question through the closed door all work. Nobody is owed entry because they knocked confidently or because they are wearing something that looks official. You can ask for identification, call the company they say they are from using a number you already have, or ask them to come back at another time. You do not have to explain yourself.

Where the phone sleeps. Decide where phones charge overnight so one is always within reach of the people who might need it.

How everyone gets out. A personal safety plan is not only about crime. Ready.gov's home-fire guidance asks every household to find two ways out of each room and to practice the escape plan twice a year. A bedroom window painted shut, a door blocked by a wardrobe or a back exit piled with boxes is a gap in the inner ring, however good the front lock is.

If your household keeps anything that must be locked away, that is a separate planning topic. This chapter stays with the home itself.

Renters, budgets and bodies

Layering is not only for homeowners with money to spend. Renters can do almost all of this: many changes simply need a polite request to a landlord or building manager, and the request is easier when it is specific ("the light over the back steps is out, and the hedge is now covering the front window"). Keep a copy of what you asked for and when.

Layering also has to fit the bodies and lives in the home. A second way out has to work for someone who uses a wheelchair, walker or cane. A door camera that relies on hearing a chime may need a visual alert. A visitor rule has to make sense to a child, a grandparent and a teenager alike. The best layer is the one your household will actually use.

What this does not mean

Layering does not mean turning your home into a fortress, buying every gadget or treating every evening noise as a threat. CISA's guide makes this point plainly: measures should fit the real concerns you have, because excessive security brings its own stress and inconvenience.

It also does not mean that anyone whose home has been broken into did something wrong. Layers reduce opportunity; they do not guarantee an outcome. Responsibility for a crime belongs to the person who commits it. If it has happened to you, this chapter is not a verdict on your choices. It is a set of options for whatever comes next, when you are ready.

In practice

The ground-floor apartment. Two friends share a ground-floor apartment. One works early shifts at a bakery and leaves in the dark; the other uses a wheelchair and works from home. One Sunday evening they walk the outside together with a notepad. The stretch of path between the streetlight and their door is dark. The hedge under the front window has grown so tall that, from inside, they cannot see the street at all. And the spare key is, they admit with a laugh, under the mat. Their list is short. They email the landlord about a motion light and the hedge, give the spare key to the neighbor upstairs, and check together that the back door and the path beyond it work for the wheelchair as a second way out. The path does not: a recycling bin sits across it. They move the bin. Total cost: one email, one bulb the landlord agreed to fit, and a friendly knock upstairs.

The man who hated gadgets. A retired mechanic who lives alone in a small house had been sent advertisements for camera systems after a break-in two streets away. He did not want a phone full of alerts. Instead, he did a dusk walk-around with his granddaughter. They found that his side gate did not latch, that his ladder lived against the back wall under the bathroom window, and that his spare key had been in the same planter for eleven years. He fixed the latch, moved the ladder into the shed, gave the key to his neighbor and swapped the porch bulb for a motion-sensor one. “That’s four layers,” his granddaughter said. “And no app.” He sleeps fine.

Checklist

- Walk the outside of your home just after dark, or the route from your car or stop to your door.

- Light the places where a person would stand to open your door, and light the place you park.
- Trim or remove plants that hide an entrance or block the view from your windows.
- Lock the door every time, and check ground-level and easy-to-reach windows before bed or travel.
- Move any spare key out of the obvious places and consider who else holds keys or codes.
- Store ladders and tools that could help someone reach an upper window.
- Confirm two ways out of every room, and that they work for everyone in the household.
- Write down three fixes, cheapest first, and do the first one this week.

Key terms

- **Layered approach:** several modest measures that back each other up, instead of one big fix.
- **Outer ring (approach):** paths, entrances and parking areas leading to the home.
- **Middle ring (shell):** doors, windows, locks and keys.
- **Inner ring (habits):** what the household does, from answering the door to getting out in a fire.
- **Dusk walk-around:** a short walk around the home just after dark to spot dark areas, hiding places and key problems.

Talk it through

1. Which of the three rings is strongest in our home, and which is weakest?

2. Who has keys or codes to our home today, and is anyone on that list who no longer needs to be?
3. If our usual way out were blocked, how would each of us get out, including anyone who moves differently?

Journal prompt

After your dusk walk-around, or after picturing your entrance carefully, which ring felt weakest? List three fixes, cheapest first, with who will do each and by when. Leave out your address, any codes and where keys are kept.

Chapter 2. Vehicle habits that run on autopilot

Why habits, not heroics

Most of what keeps you safe around a car is boring, and boring is the goal. Cars carry us through the in-between places of life: parking garages, school pick-up lines, gas stations, quiet streets after an evening class, the far corner of a supermarket lot. Those places are usually perfectly fine. A few automatic habits make them a little more predictable for you and a little less convenient for anyone looking for an easy opportunity.

The trick is to make the habits automatic. A habit you have to remember is a habit you will skip when you are tired, late or carrying a toddler. A habit that runs on autopilot costs you nothing.

Where you park

CISA's personal security guide suggests parking in a well-lit area, in public view, within sight of a camera or in a staffed lot when you can, and using a garage or locked area if you have one.

One small shift can make a real difference: **choose the spot for the time you will return, not the time you arrive.** At six in the evening, every space in a garage feels the same. At nine, the space by the stairwell door under a light feels very different from the far corner of the top level. A slightly longer walk in is worth a much better walk out.

As you walk away from the car, notice the building: where the exits, stairs, elevators, attendant booth or help points are. You are not memorizing an escape route. You are simply giving your future self a head start.

Locking and hiding

Close the windows, lock the doors and take the key every time. CISA's guide says to lock up even if you are only stepping away for a few minutes, which covers the quick stop at a gas station or the dash into a pharmacy.

Keep bags, phones, laptops and shopping out of sight. The best moment to stow them is before you arrive, not in the parking lot, where someone could watch you move valuables to the trunk. Learn what your own car's alarm, locking and locator features do. Reading the manual at a calm moment means you will not be guessing at a stressful one. While driving, keep the doors locked and open the windows only as far as you need.

Readiness: kit, fuel and phone

Readiness is a vehicle habit too. Ready.gov's car-safety page recommends keeping a small emergency supply kit in the car, with items such as jumper cables, flares or a reflective triangle, a phone charger, a blanket and a map, and having a mechanic check the main systems. It also recommends keeping the gas tank full in case of an evacuation or a power outage.

A full tank at all times is not realistic for everyone. A workable alternative is a personal floor: you never let the tank fall below a quarter, or the charge below a level that would get you home and back. The floor turns a surprise detour, a long traffic jam or a closed road into an inconvenience rather than a crisis.

Your phone is part of the kit. Keep a charger in the car, save a roadside-assistance number in your contacts, and know how to use hands-free calling. If you break down, CISA's guide suggests taking stock of your surroundings and contacting emergency services or a tow service. Ready.gov's car page adds practical cautions for bad weather, such as not driving through floodwater.

When something feels off on the road

Occasionally, something will feel wrong. A common example is the sense that a car has been behind you for a long time. Usually it is nothing: many people are going the same way. But it helps to have one calm default ready.

CISA's guide describes it: stay calm, keep the vehicle moving, keep the doors locked and windows closed, contact law enforcement, and if you can, head toward a police station rather than home. A staffed, well-lit public place, such as a police station, a fire station or a busy, open business, puts you among people whose job is to help. Driving home would show someone where you live; stopping to confront them adds risk for no benefit. You do not need to prove anything. If the car turns off, good. You have lost five minutes.

Rideshares and getting picked up

Not everyone drives, and the same principles apply to rideshares, taxis and lifts from friends. CISA's guide suggests checking that the driver and vehicle details match the app before you get in, and telling a friend or colleague where you are going. Many rideshare apps let you share a trip in a couple of taps. Wait for the car somewhere lit and staffed if you can, rather than at the curb in the dark.

The three-point routine

Put all of this into a routine short enough to write on a sticky note.

1. **Before you walk out:** know where you parked and have your key or phone ready, so you are not searching a bag at the car door.
2. **At the car:** a quick look around and inside, get in, lock, and go. Check messages later.
3. **On the road:** fuel or charge above your floor, a charger and kit in the car, and someone who knows your arrival time when a trip is outside your usual pattern.

Practice it on purpose until it starts to run by itself; there is no fixed timetable.

Teaching the routine to new drivers and passengers

The best time to build these habits is at the start. If someone in your household is learning to drive, add the three-point routine to the practice sessions alongside everything else: choose the parking spot together and talk about why, practice the look-around and lock-and-go, and decide together what the fuel floor is. New drivers often feel self-conscious about looking around before getting into a car; it helps to hear that experienced drivers do it too, briefly and without fuss.

Passengers can share the routine as well. A child who learns that “we lock the doors when we get in” and “we don’t leave bags on the seat” will carry those habits into their own driving years later. Older relatives who no longer drive can apply the same thinking to being picked up: wait inside until the car arrives, check that it is the right car, and let someone know when you are home.

What this does not mean

These habits do not mean avoiding parking garages, night classes or late shifts, and they do not mean treating every car behind you as a threat. Often the headlights are just someone else going home. They never mean you must confront anyone: going back inside, asking staff or security to walk with you and calling for help are always valid choices. And this chapter is not a substitute for your vehicle's manual, a mechanic's inspection or driver training.

In practice

The night class. A parent of two takes an accounting class at a community college on Tuesday nights. They arrive at six, when the garage is busy, and choose the second level by the stairwell door, under a light. At nine they walk out with their key already in hand, glance around and into the car as they approach, get in, lock the doors and drive off before checking messages. On the way home they notice the same headlights behind them through four turns. They do not head home and they do not pull over. They stay calm, keep moving, call for help using hands-free calling and head for the police station a few streets away. Two streets later, the headlights turn into a driveway. It was almost certainly a neighbor. The parent laughs, tells the dispatcher they are fine, and drives home. The plan cost them five minutes and a little embarrassment, which is a very good trade.

The hospital garage. A respiratory therapist finishes a late shift and learns in the lobby that the lights on the top level of the staff garage are out, where she parked that morning. The attendant booth by the elevators is staffed. She asks the attendant whether someone can walk up with her. A security officer does, chatting

about the hospital's football team the whole way. The next morning she adds a line to her routine: on late-shift days, park on level two near the booth, even if it means arriving five minutes earlier.

Checklist

- Park for the time you will return: lit, visible and near staff when possible.
- Notice exits, stairs, elevators and help points as you walk away from the car.
- Lock up and close windows every time, even for a short stop; take the key.
- Stow valuables out of sight before you arrive.
- Keep a small car kit, a charger and a roadside-assistance number.
- Keep fuel or charge above a personal floor you have chosen.
- Know your calm default if something feels off: keep moving, call for help, head for a staffed public place.
- For rideshares, check that the driver and car match the app, and share your trip.

Key terms

- **Three-point car routine:** before you walk out, at the car, on the road.
- **Personal fuel floor:** the lowest fuel or charge level you will let the car reach.
- **Staffed public place:** a lit location with people whose job is to help, such as a police or fire station.
- **Car kit:** a small set of emergency supplies kept in the vehicle.

Talk it through

1. Which of our regular parking places would we choose differently if we were coming back after dark?
2. What is in each of our cars today, and what is missing from the kit?
3. Does everyone in the household know the calm default if they feel they are being followed, including teenagers who have just started driving?

Journal prompt

Write your three-point car routine in your own words. Which step are you most likely to skip when tired, and what cue could make it automatic? If you do not drive, describe your routine for rideshares, taxis or being picked up.

Chapter 3. Routines: less predictable, not more fearful

Routines are worth keeping

Routines are good for you. They save attention for the things that matter, they build community, and they make life feel steady. The barista who knows your order, the bus driver who waves, the neighbor you pass on your walk with the dog: these are part of what makes a place feel safe in the first place.

So this chapter does not ask you to give anything up. It asks a narrower question. **Are there a few places where your routine is so fixed and so visible that it makes you easy to predict, and would a little variation cost you almost nothing?**

How much variation do you need?

The honest answer depends on your situation, and it is worth deciding on purpose rather than by mood. CISA's personal security guide suggests weighing a few questions: does your work or role draw unwanted attention, is there credible evidence of a specific threat, and have you been targeted before? It also warns, in so many words, that excessive security measures cause unnecessary stress and inconvenience, while too little effort can leave you exposed.

For many people, that adds up to a light touch: one or two alternative routes and a habit of telling someone when a plan is out of the ordinary. For someone who has been threatened, harassed or

stalked, or who is leaving an abusive relationship, the answer is very different and needs more than a book; the last section of this chapter says where to start.

Think of variation as a dial, not a switch. Many people only need to turn it slightly.

Routes and timing

The most useful variation is in the trips you make most often: to work, school, a class, a parent's home, a place of worship, a regular activity.

CISA's guide suggests planning a safe route ahead of time, varying routes and departure times to regular places, and avoiding quiet, poorly lit shortcuts, deserted parking garages and remote lots. Ready.gov's commuter emergency plan asks you to write down your daily route and some alternatives, for a different reason: if a road, bridge or transit line is closed in an emergency, you already know another way home.

The overlap is the point. One small piece of preparation serves both purposes. You will not be lost on a detour, and nobody watching can count on your exact path and time. In practice, variation can be as simple as taking the alternative route once a week, leaving ten minutes earlier now and then, or swapping one dark shortcut for the lit main road permanently.

What your routine broadcasts

Predictability also leaks through what we share. A photo tagged at the same gym at the same time every morning, a public post announcing that the whole household is away for two weeks, a fitness app that publishes every run starting at your front door: each can say more than you meant.

You do not need to stop sharing your life. A few easy changes go a long way:

- Post holiday photos after you are home rather than while you are away.
- Check what your fitness and photo apps make public by default, including maps and location tags.
- Keep live location sharing for the people who actually need it, and review that list now and then.

Online privacy is a much larger topic of its own. Here, the point is only to notice where your routine is visible.

The check-in habit

The second half of a balanced routine is the check-in. Set one simple rule for **out-of-pattern** trips: when you go somewhere new, travel at an unusual hour, or meet someone for the first time, a trusted person knows where you are going and roughly when you expect to be back. When you arrive, a two-word text closes the loop.

A good check-in rule is reciprocal and judgment-free. It is not a way for one person to monitor another, and it is not an admission that something is wrong. It is fairest when everyone in a household uses it, including the adults.

Building variation into ordinary life

Variation is easiest when it comes with a reason that has nothing to do with safety. Take the alternative route on the day you need to stop at the pharmacy that sits on it. Leave early on Fridays to get the good seat at the café. Walk the dog the long way when the weather is nice. Variation that is attached to something pleasant or useful may be easier to keep up, while variation done purely out of worry can feel like a chore.

It also helps to notice which parts of a routine already vary on their own. You may find you are less predictable than you feared: schedules shift with seasons, school terms, overtime and family visits. The goal is not to engineer randomness. It is to make sure the parts that never change, the same dark shortcut, the same unlit corner of the same garage at the same time, are not the weak points.

Talking about routines with family

Routines are often shared, and conversations about them can be delicate. A teenager may hear "let's vary your route" as "we don't trust you." An older parent may hear it as "you can't look after yourself anymore." Frame it as something everyone does, adults included, and ask rather than tell: "Which way do you usually walk home? Is there another way you like?" Let each person choose their own alternative and their own check-in person where possible. People keep habits they helped design.

The proportion test

Every precaution has a cost: time, money, attention, sometimes joy. A useful test is this. **If a precaution is costing you sleep, joy or time with people out of proportion to the real concern,**

scale it back. Constant scanning, refusing invitations or rehearsing worst cases in your head are signs the dial has been turned too far. A calmer, slightly less predictable routine is the goal, not a smaller life.

When a checklist is not enough

If someone has threatened you, is following you, or knows your routine in a way that frightens you, that is more than a checklist can carry. Contact local law enforcement, and consider reaching out to a trained advocate or support service who can help you build a plan for your specific situation. Many communities have confidential services for exactly this. You deserve that kind of individual help, and it is not an overreaction to ask for it.

What this does not mean

Varying your routine does not mean randomizing your whole life, giving up a favorite café, scanning every face or treating strangers with suspicion. It does not mean judging people by how they look; awareness is about behavior and context, never appearance, age, ethnicity, disability or dress. Calm, behavior-based attention to your surroundings is a related topic of its own.

In practice

The morning loop. A retired couple walk the same loop every morning at seven and then take the window seat of the same café, where they do the crossword. They love it, and they keep it. Their changes are small. Some mornings they walk the loop in reverse or take the river path instead. They tell their adult son when they travel out of town. And they no longer post “at our usual ta-

ble!" in real time; they share the photo in the afternoon. Nothing about their week feels more anxious. The longer river walk has become a favorite, and they have met two new neighbors on it.

The 7:40 bus. A graduate student catches the same 7:40 bus every weekday and then cuts behind a closed warehouse to reach campus, because it saves four minutes. After a friend has a frightening evening, she finds herself thinking about quitting her evening study group and checking over her shoulder all day. Talking it through with her roommate, she lands somewhere better. She keeps the bus and the study group. She drops the warehouse shortcut for the lit main road, takes the 7:25 bus on Mondays and Thursdays, and texts her roommate when she leaves the study group late. Before long she has stopped thinking about it, which is exactly how a good routine should feel.

Checklist

- Decide how much variation you need, based on your real situation rather than general worry.
- Write a main and an alternative route for your two most frequent trips.
- Use the alternative now and then, sometimes at a slightly different time.
- Replace any dark, deserted shortcut with a lit, populated route.
- Set one check-in rule for out-of-pattern trips, and close the loop when you arrive.
- Review what your apps and posts reveal about your regular times and places.
- Apply the proportion test to every precaution, and scale back what costs too much.

- If there is a specific threat, contact local law enforcement and consider a trained advocate.

Key terms

- **Out-of-pattern trip:** somewhere new, at an unusual hour, or meeting someone for the first time.
- **Check-in rule:** an agreement that a trusted person knows your plans for out-of-pattern trips.
- **Variation dial:** the idea that unpredictability is adjusted a little, not switched fully on or off.
- **Proportion test:** checking whether a precaution costs more than the concern it addresses.

Talk it through

1. Which of our household's trips is the most predictable, and which is the easiest to vary?
2. What would a fair, two-way check-in rule look like for everyone in our home?
3. Is any precaution we already take costing us more than it gives?

Journal prompt

Choose one trip you make often. Describe its main and alternative routes in general terms, with no addresses. What is your check-in rule, and what is the role of your check-in person? Name one precaution you might scale back.

Chapter 4. Who to call: emergency contacts and a household communication plan

Start from the real question

When something goes wrong, whether it is a citywide power cut, a storm, a fender-bender or simply a phone that dies on the way home, the first question in many households is the same: **where is everyone, and are they OK?**

Ready.gov's planning guidance starts from that reality. Your household may not be together when something happens, so you need to know ahead of time how you will reach each other and where you will reconnect. Ready.gov's family communication planning guide frames it as a simple "what if": what if something happens and I am not with my family? A communication plan answers those questions on a calm day, so nobody has to invent the answers on a frightening one.

Paper first

Begin by collecting information on paper. The Ready.gov guide recommends a written copy of phone numbers and email addresses for everyone in the household, plus important contacts such as schools, childcare, workplaces, doctors and other service providers.

Paper matters because phones die, get lost, break and lock you out at the worst moment. The guide suggests a small experiment you can try tonight: ask everyone to recite the household's im-

portant phone numbers from memory, then imagine doing it while frightened, in the dark, on a borrowed phone. Many people know only one or two numbers. That is not a failing; it is just how modern phones work. A card in a wallet or backpack fixes it.

The two contacts that matter most

Two contacts do most of the work.

The ICE contact. ICE stands for In Case of Emergency. The Ready.gov guide recommends storing at least one emergency contact under the name "ICE" in every household phone, so that someone helping you can identify who to call. It also suggests telling that person about any medical issues or other requirements you have, so they can pass the information on if needed. Many phones also let you show emergency contacts on the lock screen; it is worth finding that setting.

The out-of-town contact. This is someone outside your community, perhaps in another state, who agrees to be the central point everyone checks in with. The reason is practical. Ready.gov explains that in a local disaster it may be easier to make a long-distance call than to call across town, because local lines can be jammed. If everyone tells the same distant person where they are, the household can piece the picture together even when local calls fail.

Ask each person before you write them down. Explain what the role involves: answering or reading messages, passing information along, and knowing a little about the household's needs. An out-of-town contact is a message hub, not a rescuer.

Text first, short and specific

Agree how you will send messages. Ready.gov's guide notes that a text message may get through when a phone call will not, because a text needs far less network capacity, and texts can save and send automatically once capacity returns.

Keep messages short and useful: where you are and whether you are OK. The guide's own example is "I'm OK. At library." Set up a group thread for the household and include the out-of-town contact. The guide also suggests deciding who the lead person will be for sending out information about where to meet, which prevents three people sending three different plans at once.

Make sure everyone knows how to text, or has another way to communicate if they cannot. For someone who prefers calls, agree which single number they will call.

Meeting places

Then choose meeting places. The Ready.gov guide describes several:

- **Indoor:** if you live where tornadoes, hurricanes or other high winds happen, a place inside where everyone goes for shelter.
- **In your neighborhood:** a spot close to home where everyone gathers if you have to leave the house, for example during a fire. A particular tree, a mailbox at the end of the driveway or a neighbor's house are the kinds of examples the guide gives.
- **Outside your neighborhood:** a place to meet if you cannot get home, such as a library, community center, house of worship or a family friend's home.

- **Out of town:** a place to reunite if you cannot get home or to your out-of-neighborhood spot, or if your area is told to evacuate.

Ready.gov asks that meeting places be familiar, easy to find and accessible to everyone in the household, including people with disabilities and people with pets or service animals. Write them on the card as landmarks your household recognizes, not as long directions.

Fit the plan to the people

Ready.gov's Make a Plan page lists what to consider when tailoring a plan: the ages of household members, responsibilities for helping others, places you go often, dietary and medical needs, disability and access needs, languages spoken, cultural and religious considerations, pets or service animals, and school-age children.

In practice, that might mean:

- Writing down how a household member who is Deaf or hard of hearing connects through a relay or video relay service, which the Ready.gov guide specifically mentions.
- Learning your children's school or childcare emergency plan and who is allowed to pick them up.
- Making sure everyone, including children, knows how and when to call 911. The guide is clear that 911 is for life-threatening emergencies.
- Making sure children without phones know to follow a responsible adult, such as a teacher.
- Printing the card in the languages your household reads.

Keeping the card safe

The Ready.gov guide suggests that everyone carry a copy of the plan in a wallet, purse or backpack, and that a copy be posted somewhere central at home. That is exactly why the card must stay free of anything you would not want a stranger to read. Leave off door codes, alarm codes, spare-key locations and passwords. Describe meeting places as landmarks. Names, numbers, meeting places and how each person prefers to be reached are enough.

A two-minute test

Once the cards are printed, a two-minute test tells you whether the plan works. Ask each person to show you, without help, where their card is, how to find the ICE contact in their phone and how they would message the household group. Then send one test message to the group and the out-of-town contact and see who replies, and how quickly. If someone cannot find their card or does not know how to reach the group, you have found the gap before it mattered. Fix it kindly and test again next time.

What this does not mean

A communication plan does not replace calling emergency services when a life is at risk, and it does not make the out-of-town contact responsible for anyone's safety. It also does not require everyone to own a phone. It simply means that on a bad day, each person already knows the first two or three things to do.

In practice

Three generations and a dog. A household includes a mother who works across town, a fourteen-year-old with a phone and a bus pass, a grandfather who prefers calls to texts and walks with a cane, and a large, anxious dog. At the kitchen table they call an aunt two states away and ask her to be the out-of-town contact; she says yes on speakerphone and asks what she would need to know. The meeting place outside the neighborhood becomes the public library, because it has a step-free entrance and the grandfather knows the staff. The teenager sets up the group text and shows the grandfather how to read it. The mother prints wallet cards. The grandfather adds his own line: if he cannot get through, he will call the aunt's landline, the one number he knows by heart. The dog goes on the plan too: whoever is home takes the leash.

The new apartment. Two coworkers who recently moved in together realize they do not know each other's family at all. Rather than a big conversation, they each write down one ICE contact and agree on a shared out-of-town contact: one coworker's older brother, who lives four hours away and is happy to help. They pick the coffee shop at the end of the block as their neighborhood meeting place and the community center across town as the outside spot. Then they send the brother a test: "Test. I'm OK. At home." He replies with a thumbs-up and a photo of his cat, which is, they agree, the correct response.

Checklist

- Write down every household member's numbers and email on paper, plus schools, workplaces and doctors.

- Save an ICE contact in every phone and tell that person about any needs they should know.
- Ask someone outside your area to be the out-of-town contact, and confirm they agree.
- Set up a household group text that includes the out-of-town contact.
- Choose neighborhood and out-of-neighborhood meeting places that work for everyone.
- Decide who sends the "where we are meeting" message.
- Make sure everyone knows how and when to call 911.
- Keep codes, key locations and passwords off every card.

Key terms

- **ICE contact:** an emergency contact saved under "ICE" (In Case of Emergency) in a phone.
- **Out-of-town contact:** a person outside your area who acts as a central check-in point.
- **Meeting place:** an agreed, familiar location where the household reunites.
- **Lead person:** the household member who sends out information about where to meet.
- **Relay service:** a service that helps people who are Deaf, hard of hearing or speech-disabled make phone calls.

Talk it through

1. Without looking, how many of each other's phone numbers can we recite? What does that tell us?
2. Who outside our area would we trust to be our message hub, and what would they need to know?

3. Do our meeting places work for everyone, including anyone with mobility needs, small children or pets?

Journal prompt

Who will be your household's out-of-town contact, and why that person? Describe your two meeting places as general landmarks, and name one household need the plan must account for.

Chapter 5. Write it down and walk it through

From head to page

A plan that lives only in one person's head is a hope. It helps that person, sometimes, but nobody else can use it, check it or improve it. Writing it down turns it into something the household shares.

Ready.gov's Make a Plan page lays out four simple steps: meet with your household, assess your household's needs, document the plan, and practice it. The first four chapters of this book gave you the pieces. This chapter puts them onto one page and shows you how to rehearse without turning the kitchen into a stage for fear.

The one-page layout

Keep the written plan to one page if you can. Long plans do not get read. A useful layout has six short sections:

1. **Home layers:** the three fixes you chose, who does each, and anything about getting out of the home in an emergency, such as the two ways out of each room.
2. **Vehicle routine:** your three-point routine and what is in the car kit.
3. **Routine and check-ins:** alternative routes for the most frequent trips, described generally, and the check-in rule.
4. **Contacts:** the ICE contact and out-of-town contact, by name or role, and how each person prefers to be reached.

5. **Meeting places:** described as landmarks.
6. **Roles:** who does what.

Post a copy somewhere central, such as on the fridge, and give everyone a wallet-sized card with the contacts and meeting places. Leave important documents themselves off the page; the plan only needs to say where the household keeps them. Organizing those records is a separate topic.

Roles

Roles matter more than people expect. When something unexpected happens, the trouble may not be that nobody acts; it may be that everyone acts at once, or everyone assumes someone else will. Ready.gov's communication guide suggests deciding who will be the lead person to send out information about the meeting place. Add a few more:

- Who checks on a neighbor or relative who relies on the household?
- Who looks after the pets?
- Who keeps the printed copies current?
- Who picks up children if the usual person cannot?

Give roles to people who can realistically carry them, and give everyone a backup.

A sample page

Here is what a finished page might look like for a fictional household of two adults and a ten-year-old. Notice what is missing: no address, no codes, no key locations.

Our household plan — last reviewed in April

Home: Back-step motion light fitted. Hedge under the front window trimmed each spring. Spare key with the upstairs neighbor. Two ways out of every room; the ground-floor bedroom windows open easily, and everyone has practiced opening them. Smoke-alarm batteries changed in April and October.

Vehicle: Three-point routine on a sticky note on the dashboard. Kit in the trunk: jumper cables, triangle, blanket, charger, map. Never below a quarter tank.

Routine: Work trip, main road or river road. School walk, main street, never the alley. Check-in rule: anyone going somewhere new or coming home after eleven texts the family group when they leave and when they arrive.

Contacts: ICE is Grandma (agreed). Out-of-town contact is Uncle in the next state (agreed). Group text includes him.

Meeting places: Near home, the big oak at the corner. Outside the neighborhood, the public library on the square.

Roles: Parent A sends the “where we meet” message; Parent B is backup. Ten-year-old carries the wallet card and knows how and when to call 911. Parent B checks on the neighbor downstairs.

Your page will look different, and it should. The point is that everything fits on one side of one sheet, and anyone in the household can read it in two minutes.

Ordinary what-ifs

Then add a few ordinary what-ifs, one or two lines each. The key word is ordinary. You are not writing a disaster film.

- **The power goes out at night:** where the flashlights are, who checks on whom, how you get updates.
- **A smoke alarm sounds:** two ways out of each room, and the meeting spot outside.
- **Someone is not home when expected and is not answering:** how long to wait, whom to call first, and when it becomes a call for help.
- **A wallet, phone or keys are lost:** cancel cards, consider changing locks or codes, and watch for signs of identity theft. The FTC lists warning signs such as charges you did not make and bills that stop arriving, and advises reporting suspected identity theft at IdentityTheft.gov, which provides a personal recovery plan. The FTC also suggests storing documents with personal information securely, shredding papers before throwing them away and collecting mail promptly.

Short and specific beats long and dramatic. If a what-if needs more than two lines, it is probably two what-ifs.

Rehearsal, step by step

Rehearsal is where a plan becomes real. It is also where you discover the painted-shut window, the meeting place nobody could find and the out-of-town contact whose number was wrong.

Step one: the tabletop. Sit down together for ten to fifteen minutes. Someone reads a what-if card aloud, and each person says what they would do. Do not correct people harshly; the point is to find the gaps.

Step two: walk it. Go to the neighborhood meeting spot together. Check that the second way out of each bedroom actually opens. Send a test text to the group and to the out-of-town contact. Ready.gov's communication guide suggests practicing exactly this: texting, calling the out-of-town contact and gathering at the meeting places.

Step three: talk about it. The same guide suggests talking afterward about what worked, what did not and what needs updating. Then fix one thing within a week.

Ready.gov's home-fire guidance recommends practicing your fire escape plan twice a year. That rhythm becomes the backbone of the review in the next chapter.

Keeping it calm

Keep rehearsals calm and kind. Nobody needs to act out a break-in, play a villain or be woken by banging on doors. There is no prize for imagining the worst, and a frightened person may take in less, not more.

Explain to children in simple words what the practice is for: "We are practicing so that if the smoke alarm ever goes off, everyone knows where to meet. It is like a fire drill at school." Let them ask questions. Let anyone step out if they need to. Some people have lived through frightening events, and a planning conversation can bring those memories up. It is fine to pause, to take one piece at a time, or to rehearse only the communication part this month.

What rehearsal is not

Rehearsal is not drilling for a confrontation or practicing physical responses, and no plan can predict what will actually happen. This course does not teach any of that, and you do not need it to have a good plan. A rehearsed plan simply means that when something unexpected does happen, the first few steps already feel familiar, and everyone knows how to find each other and get help. If you want to go further, the Where to go next section points to qualified, hands-on community options.

In practice

Four housemates and three cards. Four housemates in their twenties rent a house near a university. One Sunday they spend twenty minutes at the kitchen table with tea and three index cards: a power cut, a smoke alarm at night, and someone not home by two in the morning. The power-cut card reveals that nobody knows where the flashlight is, and that two people assume the other will check on the elderly neighbor. The smoke-alarm card reveals that one bedroom window has been painted shut, which becomes a request to the landlord the next morning. The late-night card produces a rule everyone likes: a one-word text when leaving somewhere late, no questions asked. They stick the one-page plan on the fridge and put a reminder in the shared calendar for six months later.

The worried six-year-old. A family finishes its one-page plan. One parent suggests a surprise drill at two in the morning to "make it realistic." The other notices that their youngest has gone quiet. They decide instead on a short, announced daytime walk to the meeting spot, the mailbox at the end of the street, followed by hot chocolate. The six-year-old gets to be the one who

leads everyone to the mailbox. A month later they do it again at dusk, still announced. By the third time, the child is explaining the plan to a visiting cousin.

Checklist

- Put the plan on one page with six short sections.
- Assign roles, each with a backup.
- Write three to five ordinary what-ifs, one or two lines each.
- Hold a ten- to fifteen-minute tabletop talk-through.
- Walk to the meeting spot, test the second way out and send a test text.
- Talk about what worked and fix one thing within a week.
- Keep it calm: announced, short, kind, with room to pause.
- Post the plan centrally and give everyone a wallet card without codes or key locations.

Key terms

- **One-page plan:** the household's written plan, short enough to be read and used.
- **What-if card:** a single ordinary situation written on a card for a tabletop talk-through.
- **Tabletop talk-through:** a short conversation in which the household talks through what-ifs.
- **Walk-through:** physically going to meeting spots and testing exits and messages.
- **IdentityTheft.gov:** the FTC's site for reporting identity theft and getting a recovery plan.

Talk it through

1. Who in our household would naturally take the lead person role, and who would be their backup?
2. Which ordinary what-if worries us most, and what are the first two steps we would take?
3. How can we make practice feel calm for the most anxious person in our home?

Journal prompt

Describe how your first tabletop rehearsal went, or how you plan to run it: which three what-ifs, who took part and one thing you changed. What will you do to keep practice calm for anyone who finds the topic stressful?

Chapter 6. Keep it current: a twice-a-year review

Why plans drift

Plans age quietly. A phone number changes. A hedge grows back over the window. A teenager starts driving. A grandparent moves in. A new job brings night shifts. The car kit's charger ends up in someone else's car. The library you chose as a meeting place changes its hours.

None of this is dramatic, which is exactly why plans drift out of date without anyone noticing. The plan on the fridge looks the same as the day you wrote it, so it feels current. A short, regular review is the simple fix.

The twice-a-year rhythm

Ready.gov's communication guide asks households to review, update and practice the plan at least once a year, or whenever information changes. Ready.gov's home-fire guidance recommends practicing your fire escape plan twice each year and replacing smoke-alarm batteries twice a year unless you use ten-year lithium batteries.

This course suggests pairing your personal safety review with that twice-a-year rhythm. It is easy to remember and frequent enough to catch many changes: one session in spring, one in fall, each about an hour. Many households anchor the dates to something already on the calendar, such as a season change, the start of a school term or a birthday. Put both dates in your calendar as recurring reminders today.

A review in course order

Review the plan in the same order as the course, so nothing is missed.

- **Home.** Repeat the dusk walk-around. Check bulbs, timers and motion lights. Look at plants that may have grown back. Confirm who holds a spare key, and whether anyone who no longer needs a key or code still has one. Check that the two ways out of every room still work.
- **Vehicle.** Check the kit, the charger and seasonal items such as a blanket or ice scraper. Book any service the car needs. Ask whether the household's routine still fits, especially for anyone who has started driving.
- **Routine.** Has a new job, class, school or activity changed your most frequent trips? Do the alternative routes still make sense? Is the check-in rule still being used?
- **Contacts.** Call the out-of-town contact to confirm they are still willing and their details are right. Update every number on the card. Check the ICE entry in every phone.
- **Meeting places.** Are they still open, accessible and familiar to everyone?
- **Reprint.** Ready.gov reminds households to print new copies for everyone after any update, and to check that household members are actually carrying the plan.

A useful structure for each section is a one-line **keep, change, start** note: what is working, what needs updating and one new thing to try.

Triggers for an early update

Some changes should not wait for the next review date. Treat these as triggers for an early, focused update:

- Moving to a new home.
- Someone moving in or out.
- A new job, shift pattern, school or regular activity.
- A new car or a new driver in the household.
- Lost keys, or a code shared more widely than intended.
- A new medical, mobility, hearing, vision or communication need.
- A scam attempt or identity-theft scare.
- Any incident that left someone in the household feeling unsafe.

An early update is usually small. A new roommate needs a ten-minute walk-through and a wallet card. A new night shift changes a check-in rule. A changed phone number changes one line.

Reviewing after something hard

If something difficult has happened, review gently and only when people are ready. The question is “what would help now?” rather than “what did we do wrong?” Nobody should be blamed for what someone else chose to do. Sometimes the most useful change after an incident is not a new lock but a new support: someone to talk to, a change of routine that restores a sense of control, or simply time.

A sample one-hour review

If you have never done a review before, a simple agenda helps. Here is one that fits into an hour, with time to spare.

- **Ten minutes, outside.** Walk the outside at dusk, if timing allows, or at least walk the path to the door. Note bulbs, timers, plants, latches and anything new, such as a fence, a delivery box or a construction site next door.
- **Ten minutes, inside.** Check the two ways out of every room, smoke-alarm batteries on Ready.gov's twice-a-year rhythm, flashlights and where phones charge at night.
- **Ten minutes, cars and trips.** Look at the car kit and charger, then talk through the most frequent trips. Has anything changed?
- **Fifteen minutes, contacts and places.** Update numbers, call or message the out-of-town contact, and confirm the meeting places still work.
- **Ten minutes, the page.** Write the keep, change, start notes, update the date and reprint.
- **Five minutes, something pleasant.** End with something that has nothing to do with safety. It helps everyone look forward to the next one.

Different households, different reviews

Reviews look different in different homes, and that is fine.

People who live alone can review with a friend or relative over the phone, the way the widower in the story below does. A second pair of eyes catches things you stopped noticing years ago, and the other person learns your plan at the same time.

Shared houses and roommates benefit from a short review whenever someone moves in or out, as well as the scheduled ones. A new housemate who has never seen the plan is an easy gap to miss in a shared home.

Families with children can give children a real job in the review, such as checking the flashlights or reading out the what-if cards. Children who help keep a plan current may find it easier to remember.

Caregivers may need to review two plans: their own household's and that of the person they help. Linking the two, for example by making sure each plan lists the other household's contacts, helps avoid an easy gap to miss: two plans that each assume the other person is covered.

Keeping the record honest

Write the date of each review on the plan, so everyone can see it is current. If you only have ten minutes, update the contacts and reprint the cards; that single step keeps the most important part alive. And remember that an out-of-date plan is still a useful starting point. When you notice something wrong, fix that one thing. You do not need to start over.

What this does not mean

Reviewing twice a year does not mean worrying twice a year. A review can be short and pleasant, and it may even end in a conversation about something else entirely. This is an educational reading course with no saved completion, certification or qualification, and it is not an inspection of your home or a guarantee of safety.

In practice

The fall video call. A widower in his seventies and his adult daughter, who lives forty minutes away, do their fall review over a video call with the plan in front of them both. They find three things. The porch-light timer was never reset after a power cut in the summer. His new hearing aids connect to his phone, so he now prefers texts to calls, the reverse of what the plan says. And the library they chose as a meeting place has shorter winter hours. He resets the timer that evening. They change his contact preference on the plan and add the community center as a second meeting place. The call takes forty minutes, and they spend the last ten talking about the grandchildren's school play.

Eight months in. A household of three wrote their plan in the spring. By winter, a new roommate has moved in, one person has started night shifts, and their out-of-town contact has changed her number and moved to a city twelve hours ahead. Their next review is four months away. They treat the changes as triggers. They walk the new roommate through the plan in ten minutes, adjust the check-in rule so the night-shift worker texts on arrival rather than at a fixed time, and ask a cousin in the same time zone to become the out-of-town contact, keeping the friend abroad as a second contact. Then they reprint the cards. The whole update takes under half an hour.

Checklist

- Put two recurring review dates in the calendar, about six months apart.
- Review in course order: home, vehicle, routine, contacts, meeting places.
- Write a keep, change, start note for each section.

- Confirm the out-of-town contact is still willing and reachable.
- Practice the fire escape plan and check smoke-alarm batteries on the same rhythm.
- Reprint cards and the fridge copy after any change, and write the review date on the plan.
- Update early after a trigger event, without waiting for the next date.
- After a hard event, review gently and without blame.

Key terms

- **Twice-a-year review:** a short, scheduled check of the whole plan, about six months apart.
- **Trigger event:** a life change that calls for an early update.
- **Keep, change, start note:** a quick record of what is working, what needs updating and what to try.
- **Review date:** the date written on the plan to show when it was last checked.

Talk it through

1. Which two dates already on our calendar could anchor our reviews?
2. What changed in our household in the last year that the plan does not yet reflect?
3. Who will own the reminder and the reprinting, and who is their backup?

Journal prompt

Which two dates will you use for your reviews, and what existing event will remind you? List three changes from the past year that would have triggered an early update, and name the single part of your plan that matters most to keep current.

Glossary

- **Approach (outer ring):** the paths, entrances and parking areas leading to a home.
- **Car kit:** a small set of emergency supplies kept in a vehicle, such as jumper cables, a reflective triangle, a charger, a blanket and a map.
- **Check-in rule:** an agreement that a trusted person knows your plans for out-of-pattern trips, closed with a short message on arrival.
- **Dusk walk-around:** a short walk around the outside of the home just after dark to find dark areas, hiding places and key problems.
- **Habits (inner ring):** what the household does, from answering the door to getting out in a fire.
- **ICE contact:** an emergency contact stored under "ICE" (In Case of Emergency) in a phone.
- **IdentityTheft.gov:** the Federal Trade Commission's site for reporting identity theft and getting a recovery plan.
- **Keep, change, start note:** a one-line review of what is working, what needs updating and one new thing to try.
- **Layered approach:** several modest measures that back each other up, rather than relying on one.
- **Lead person:** the household member who sends out information about where to meet.
- **Meeting place:** an agreed, familiar and accessible location where the household reunites.
- **One-page plan:** the household's written plan, kept short enough to be read and used.

- **Out-of-pattern trip:** going somewhere new, at an unusual hour or to meet someone for the first time.
- **Out-of-town contact:** someone outside your area who acts as a central point for the household to check in with.
- **Personal fuel floor:** the lowest fuel or charge level you allow before refilling or recharging.
- **Proportion test:** checking whether a precaution costs more in time, money or peace of mind than the concern it addresses.
- **Relay service:** a service that helps people who are Deaf, hard of hearing or speech-disabled place phone calls.
- **Shell (middle ring):** the doors, windows, locks and keys of a home.
- **Tabletop talk-through:** a short conversation in which the household talks through ordinary what-ifs.
- **Three-point car routine:** before you walk out, at the car, on the road.
- **Trigger event:** a life change that calls for an early update to the plan.
- **Two ways out:** the principle that every room should have a second exit in case the first is blocked.
- **Variation dial:** the idea that unpredictability in a routine is adjusted a little at a time, not switched fully on or off.

Where to go next

Finding qualified, hands-on help

This book and course are self-study. For hands-on learning and individual advice, look for qualified local resources:

- **Your local emergency management office.** Many cities and counties run preparedness information sessions, alert sign-ups and community programs. Signing up for local alerts is part of Ready.gov's planning guidance.
- **Community preparedness and volunteer programs.** Many local governments offer free classes on household preparedness and basic emergency skills, taught in person.
- **Your fire department.** Many departments offer home fire-safety information, and some offer smoke-alarm programs or home visits.
- **First aid.** If you want to be ready to help someone who is hurt, take an in-person, certified first-aid course from a recognized provider. This book does not teach first aid; in any emergency, check that the scene is safe and call for help.
- **For a specific threat.** If someone has threatened, harassed or followed you, contact local law enforcement, and consider a trained advocate or confidential support service who can help with a plan for your situation.
- **For legal questions.** Laws about locks, cameras, tenancy and many other topics vary by place. Check official sources for your jurisdiction or ask a qualified professional.

When you choose any class or service, ask who runs it, what qualifications the instructors hold and what exactly is covered. A good provider will answer plainly.

Official resources

- Ready.gov, Make a Plan, and the Family Emergency Communication Plan materials linked from it.
- Ready.gov, Home Fires, and Ready.gov, Car Safety.
- CISA, Personal Security Considerations Action Guide.
- FTC Consumer Advice on identity theft, and IdentityTheft.gov for reporting.
- National Crime Prevention Council, Home & Neighborhood Safety.

Related topics

- Organizing the important records the plan points to.
- Planning for anything your household keeps that must be locked away.
- Other topics that sit next to this one include everyday awareness, online privacy, travel and the first steps after an emergency.

Sources

All sources below were read on the date shown. They support the specific statements attributed to them in the chapters; the stories, structure and wording of this book are original.

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RivalShot Academy · Original course book, authored 2026-10-15.

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