

Plenary Session Report

EM in an Age of Extremes: How to Help Children, Families and Professionals Affected by Multiple Disasters

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“We are living in an age of extremes,” Lori Peek, Ph.D., said during her plenary session presentation at the 2020 IAEM Reimagined Virtual Conference. “Behind every disaster are millions of people’s lives upended by those extreme events. This is the reality we now face.”

Yet while we are living in an age of extremes and disasters, there is another reality unfolding – one filled with hope. There is a nascent and unprecedented interest and participation in environmental causes by our youth, and while the pandemic might have slowed that movement, it hasn’t disappeared.

Dr. Peek is a professor in the Department of Sociology and director of the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado – Boulder. She studies and writes about vulnerable populations. She co-authored *Children of Katrina*, which received several awards and helped write school safety guidance for the nation, which resulted in the publication of FEMA P-1000, *Safer, Stronger, Smarter: A Guide to Improving School Natural Hazard Safety*. In addition to recognition for her scholarship, Peek has received nearly a dozen awards for her teaching and mentoring.

Yet, when her niece asked her what she really did, she told her: “I listen to kids.”

Prior to 1980, children were written about but rarely consulted about their own lives. When Dr. Peek first began researching vulnerable populations, including youth and children, she had two questions:

- How are they vulnerable?
- What do they need?

“As time passed, I started to ask a different question – what can kids do?” she said. “I wanted to listen and learn from them. I wanted to look more at children’s capacities, and what they can do in disaster-affected communities.”

She began to research children’s capacities during disasters. She kept coming back to how they helped themselves and others, and started to distinguish them into three categories:

■ **Youth/children helping adults.** They help prepare for impending disaster by influencing parental decision making. For example, youth and children in the household were a major factor in evacuation decisions. They remind us that in preparing warnings to households specifically to/for youth and children, we should understand that children and youth need routines. Adults who provide those routines help to promote their own recovery.

■ **Youth/children helping other children.** Children and youth are often cast as victims, but it is worth celebrating and acknowledging how kids can contribute to each other and their individual recovery. Children help support others by helping their other siblings, taking charge and forming groups in shelters, and acting as a calming force with adults and children alike.

■ **Youth/children helping themselves.** Youth and children understand how upsetting a disaster is to the adults in their lives, and are reluctant to share their fears and



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concerns. But they will and do talk to each other.

Research shows that if you don’t talk to youth and children about disasters, fear can fill in the gap. Talking helps them be more prepared themselves and more able to help create the normalcy and routine that they – and the adults in their lives – need in order to recover from a disaster.

Children play games, expressing themselves through creative activities like art, drama and music. This research showed that children were more likely to take on new leadership roles by raising funds and founding new organizations.

In conclusion, Dr. Peek expressed a hope that her presentation would spark our imaginations as emergency managers about how to engage children in what we do every day and in all phases of emergency management. “There is enormous potential if we try to reimagine an emergency management that is child/youth centered,” she said. ▲