

# After Disaster Strikes: Helping Your Community Recover

## Part 3 of a 3-Part Series on Child Care Emergency Preparedness and Response

by Paul Myers and Mark Mendel

Child care is at the heart of every community. This is never more apparent than after disaster strikes and the recovery of caregivers and child care facilities are critical to helping get a community back on its feet. When child care programs are closed, not only does the business lose money, but parents have to miss work and children lack the routine that is so critical to their getting



Dr. Paul Myers is Director of Emergency Preparedness for Save the Children's programming in the United States, including the organization's signature Resilient and Ready Communities initiatives.

Previously, he served at various levels within the American Red Cross, including being the educational lead for the Preparedness department at the National HQ and a Director of Emergency Services. Paul graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a PhD in Communication, where his research focused on mass-media persuasion in the context of disaster relief, health threats, and counter-terrorism. His publication history includes a book chapter, academic articles, and professional publications.



Mark Mendel is President of Bright Horizons Foundation for Children. Mark serves as the visionary leader for the Foundation and is responsible for the overall operations, fiscal integrity, and programmatic success of the organization.

Prior to joining the Foundation, Mark served as Division Vice President of Bright Horizons Family Solutions for 14 years, where he provided leadership and oversight to the company's center and school operations in the Southeastern United States. In addition to his 'regular' work with their centers, he took an active role in developing center-based solutions for disaster and emergency preparedness and recovery, especially for hurricanes and related natural disasters. Mark holds a Masters in Social Work from Yeshiva University in New York and a Bachelor's degree with a concentration in Community Services Administration from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

back to 'normal.' Child care provides children, families, and staff with a stable, familiar environment around which to organize life. When that service is altered by disaster, the whole community suffers and recovery is delayed.

A disaster can have a profound impact on children and adults and can leave us feeling powerless and uncertain about the future. Some children and families may have been exposed to extreme danger, may be coping with significant losses, or may have been uprooted and displaced from their homes and usual supports. As a caregiver, you play an important role in comforting children, and in helping them sort out their thoughts and feelings surrounding the disaster and its impact on their families and community. In the early phases, a program may be focused on locating and registering students, rebuilding homes or classrooms that may have been damaged, or finding ways to incorporate students displaced from other affected areas. New challenges will arise as your program and community move through the phases of rebuilding and recovery.

Having dealt with many different types of tragedies — from a death in a center to a national tragedy — Bright Horizons Family Solutions has attempted to develop materials to support staff and families

during their time of grieving. Following a disaster, there are things you can do to facilitate the recovery of your program, the children you care for, and the community you love.

### Take Care of Yourself and Your Co-Workers

A disaster can cause huge disruptions in work and life. In the chaos of a post-disaster environment, as a caregiver, it may be easy to put the needs of others ahead of your own and your co-workers. However, it is critical that everyone takes care of himself and takes the time to process feelings and losses. In the face of so many changes, it is unrealistic to expect the center community to go on as if it were 'business as usual.' The child care center may have lost learning materials or be adjusting to a new physical environment, new staff and new enrollees, or dealing with staff members who are rebuilding their own homes. Everyone impacted may find it harder to concentrate, or might be experiencing difficult emotions in response to what has happened.

It is important to take care of one's self, but as a supervisor, manager, or owner you need to be thinking about how you might help care for your employees and, if you are unable to take it on yourself, how you might be able to get assistance. Someone should be

checking on each staff member to make sure that she is okay, that housing is accessible safe, and that family members are also doing well. A center director should consider accessing an employee assistance program through their health insurance carrier or through a local nonprofit. There are many resources available and during a time of grief or loss, asking for help is important. It is also important to keep the lines of communication open with families at the center. Talk to them about your needs and the staff's needs and explain why certain staff members may be absent or may be working modified schedules. And if you're dealing with a tragedy or disaster that has impacted the entire community, allow for time to talk with parents who may be struggling as well.

After seeing centers struggle to cope after losing a beloved staff member or in times of a broader tragedy, Bright Horizons created a 'grief kit,' which can be used by centers during the grieving process. The kit includes: a list of helpful books for a variety of age groups that address difficult issues like death, illness, and tragedy; handouts that the center can provide for families; and other resources that the center can draw from as the community works through the situation. Having the materials in a central place makes it easy to distribute quickly. It's an unfortunate reality that many centers may experience tragedy more than once. If you have found helpful resources, keep them on hand for the future when you, a co-worker, or a family may need them.

When parents and caregivers are stressed, anxious, or upset, children feel this. Children do better when the adults around them are confident, calm, and reassuring. Take extra care of yourself — your own health and emotions — so that you will be better able to support children in your care.

## Commit Long Term

It can take months or years to recover from a major disaster, and the emotional scars of the tragedy may linger long after the initial storm has passed. Although you should not dwell on the disaster and its destruction, provide children with a safe space where they are able to express how they are feeling. Some children may want to talk about it, while others may draw or act out scenarios. If children continue to want to talk about the event, embracing the emergent curriculum may be therapeutic. For example, a dramatic play area that is most often a kitchen or castle can become a hospital or a police station.

In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings, Bright Horizons on the Charles was in the center of the area where police were looking for the bombing suspect. Most of the children who attend the center were forced to be in lock-down at home, inside with their parents while the area was searched. As helicopters hovered over the area for hours, families were not allowed to leave their homes and many parents and caregivers struggled with how to explain the circumstances to the children. However, it was not difficult to explain that the police were making sure that families were safe. In the following days, the children at the center drew pictures and thank-you cards for the local Watertown police department thanking them. They did not need to know the details of what happened, but sending the cards helped to bring some closure to a difficult situation.

## Monitor Children's Recovery

As children return to your care, you may notice some changes in their behavior, emotional expressions, and activities. Remind children that it's normal and okay to feel sad, angry, or fearful when thinking about the disaster. In some instances, children may overhear adult conversations or news about families taking care of themselves or needing to be

self-reliant. Older children, in particular, may misunderstand messages on the news or adult conversations they overhear. Children need a sense of security, especially when in the midst of natural or other disaster. It is important to talk with children and assure them that their teachers, parents, and adult family members will keep them safe and that they shouldn't worry. Children may be more fearful of returning to class and have more difficulty separating from their parents or guardians. They may be more aggressive or withdrawn or may tend to cry or become more easily upset. Common reactions of children to a disaster are:

### Preschool Children

- Sleeping and eating problems
- Temper tantrums and irritability
- Being defiant; frequently saying "No!"
- Getting upset over small injuries
- Being afraid the disaster will happen again
- Separation anxiety
- Increased fearfulness
- Being less active or playful than usual
- Acting quiet or withdrawn
- A return to bed wetting, thumb sucking, or earlier behaviors
- Asking questions over and over again, sometimes about small details of what happened

### School-Age Children

- Clinging to parent/guardian
- Fearful of going to school
- Fatigue from sleep difficulties or nightmares
- Change in eating habits
- Poor school performance
- Aggressive behavior, fighting
- Withdrawal from peers
- Anxiety, crying spells, sadness, and grief
- Feeling guilty or to blame for bad things that happened
- Losing interest in usual activities
- Difficulty concentrating and staying on task

While these are some of the common reactions, they are by no means exhaustive. As we all know, any child may have a temper tantrum or a day or two with fussy eating. When monitoring children's behavior as an indicator of stress, professionals, teachers, and parents should be cognizant of degree, duration, and difference. You should be more concerned when behaviors are different (distinctly out of the ordinary for the child), more intense than usual (degree), and/or when the duration of the behavior lasts longer than usual.

As children get back into the routine and structure of school, most will feel better in time. Children who may have suffered great losses or been exposed to danger and threats to their lives or safety may require extra support. If you notice a child is struggling with one or more of these behaviors for an extended period of time, encourage parents or guardians to seek additional professional help.

## Prepare to Recover

In May 2013, devastating tornadoes swept through Moore, Oklahoma, destroying buildings and homes and stealing the normalcy from children's lives. Among those impacted was Agapeland Learning Center, whose staff heroically covered children and grasped their legs to keep them from blowing out of the roof that was ripped away.

One year later, clouds and loud noises still make these children nervous. But as the anniversary of the tornadoes approached, Agapeland staff teamed up with Save the Children to teach kids and families about emergency preparedness with a Get Ready, Get Safe Prep Rally. Through the program, children participated in storytime with books that taught kids that it was okay to be scared, how to use comfort items to help them feel safe, and how to prepare for different types of emergen-

cies. Older children also participated in a Disaster Supplies Relay Race, after which teachers described why each item might be needed during an emergency. Instead of feeling anxious, kids were active, happy, and laughing and excited to tell their families about what they had learned.

Emergency preparedness can help as a next logical step in disaster recovery. There are simple things that caregivers and families can do to be ready for new disasters in the region. Teaching children how to participate in making an emergency plan or supplies kit can help them feel more in control of the situation. By talking through the plan, children can feel confident that they know what to do and that you, as a caregiver, are there to help protect them. And, ongoing emergency drill practice helps provide added reassurance.

## Build Resilience Beforehand

A disaster can flip a community upside down within minutes, leaving families immobilized and unsure of how to start over and get back to normal. Child care providers play a critical role in catalyzing recovery and ensuring that children can cope in healthy ways with tragedy. However, the best thing you can do to facilitate recovery is to prepare your program now (see our September/October 2013 *Exchange* article, "When Disaster Strikes, Will Children in Your Care Be Safe?"). By writing an emergency plan, training staff, communicating the plan to parents and guardians, and practicing the plan, you can save children's lives and have the protocols in place to save critical information, business files, and bounce back more quickly following the disaster. We cannot prevent disasters from happening, but we can be ready for them. Be safe, don't wait. Make a disaster plan now!

## Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics. Children & Disasters: [www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/default.aspx)

Child Care Aware. Protecting Children in Child Care During Emergencies: [www.naccrra.org/sites/default/files/publications/naccrra\\_publications/2012/protectingchildreninchildcareemergencies.pdf](http://www.naccrra.org/sites/default/files/publications/naccrra_publications/2012/protectingchildreninchildcareemergencies.pdf)

National Association for the Education of Young Children — Tips to Help Children Cope with Disasters: [www.naeyc.org/tyc/article/helping-children-cope-with-disasters](http://www.naeyc.org/tyc/article/helping-children-cope-with-disasters)

Save the Children. Get Ready, Get Safe: [www.savethechildren.org/GetReady](http://www.savethechildren.org/GetReady)

Save the Children Prep Rally Program: [www.savethechildren.org/PrepRally](http://www.savethechildren.org/PrepRally)

What happened to my World? Helping Children Cope with Natural Disaster and Catastrophe: [www.brighthorizons.com/talking-to-children](http://www.brighthorizons.com/talking-to-children)



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