

# **Caring for Children in the Aftermath of Disaster: The Church of the Brethren Children's Disaster Services Program**

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## **Abstract**

*This article extends the discussion of social support for child disaster survivors by providing a case study overview of the primary organization in the United States responsible for caring for young children in the aftermath of natural and human-made disasters: Children's Disaster Services (CDS), which is part of the Brethren Disaster Ministries of the Church of the Brethren General Board. We offer an overview of the history and purpose of the CDS program, describe the training and mobilization process for volunteers, and explain the services that are provided at CDS child care centers. Throughout, we focus on the things that CDS does to help children cope and begin the process of recovery following traumatic events, including designing and maintaining a suitable space for child care activities, participating in play-oriented activities that facilitate a sense of safety and trust, and listening to the stories of children as they process their emotional responses. By offering child-centered care, emotional support, and a sense of normalcy, the CDS program helps meet the immediate needs of children, assists family members who may be overwhelmed as they attempt to deal with the effects of disaster, and plays an important role in fostering resiliency among children.*

**Keywords:** *children, disasters, emergency response, social support*

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, significant progress has been made in identifying the factors that increase children's vulnerability in disasters (see La Greca et al. 2002). However, less research has examined the ways that adults may provide support for children following traumatic events. Of the research that is available, parents are often recognized as the single most important source of social support for children in the aftermath of disaster (Prinstein et al. 1996). Parents provide material and emotional support, give comfort and nurturance, and offer a sense of physical safety. In addition to parents, research has identified other individuals such as teachers, peers, school counselors, psychologists, pediatricians, disaster relief volunteers, and shelter workers as playing key roles in reestablishing normalcy, allowing children to express their emotions, and assisting in coping efforts (Alat 2002; Hagan 2005; Johnston and Redlener 2006; Peek and Fothergill 2006; Shen and Sink 2002). Indeed, Fothergill and Peek (2006, 122) argue that these various "support agents" play different, but vitally important, roles in the in the short- and long-term post-disaster recovery of children.

In this article, we extend the discussion of social support for child disaster survivors by providing a case study overview of the primary organization in the United States responsible for caring for young children in the aftermath of natural and human-made disasters: The Church of the Brethren Children's Disaster Services (CDS) program.<sup>1</sup> We also discuss the Critical Response Child Care (CRC) team, which responds to highly traumatic or mass casualty disasters, and is composed of CDS volunteers who have received advanced, specialized training that prepares them to work with grieving and traumatized children. We begin with an overview of the history and purpose of CDS and CRC, then describe the training and mobilization process for volunteers, and explain the services that are provided by these programs. We also discuss the structure of CDS child care centers and the various activities and play opportunities that they offer to children. Throughout, we focus on the things that CDS does to help children and families cope and recover following disasters.

## **History and Overview of the Church of the Brethren Children's Disaster Services Program**

Children's Disaster Services is a network of trained volunteers who specialize in the provision of care and emotional support to children following a disaster. Founded by the Church of the Brethren in 1980, its mission is to serve young children and their families who are affected by disasters of all types including floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, landslides, airplane crashes, terrorist attacks, and other traumatic events. The inception of CDS came about based on the suggestion of a Church of the Brethren disaster responder who had seen children waiting in long lines with their parents and other family members in busy and overcrowded family

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the program has changed several times over the years—from Brethren Disaster Child Care to Cooperative Disaster Child Care to Disaster Child Care to its current moniker, Children's Disaster Services. The new name was selected in order to more fully encompass the expanding services provided by trained caregivers and to emphasize that the program offers more than "babysitting."

assistance centers, where the patience of both the children and the adults were tested time and again. Recognizing the special physical and emotional needs that children have following a traumatic experience, the Church of the Brethren collaborated with child development experts and created the Children's Disaster Services program. Over the past three decades, the program has incorporated new knowledge gained from experiences in the field and from the ever-evolving child development literature. While the program has grown and adapted to changing needs and organizational structures, the core mission of the program—to care for and support children and their families in the aftermath of traumatic events—has remained the same.

Children's Disaster Services is a program of the Brethren Disaster Ministries of the Church of the Brethren General Board and works in cooperation with the American Red Cross, the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and volunteers from many local and faith communities. CDS is supported by the Church of the Brethren Emergency Disaster Fund, which benefits from fund-raising events and receives contributions from individuals, churches, and private organizations.

Children's Disaster Services trains, certifies, and maintains a network of child care volunteers who are prepared to serve at disaster sites across the United States within a few days notice at any given time. In order to maintain a sufficient volunteer base, each year CDS schedules eight to ten training workshops in various regions of the country. Churches, community interfaith organizations, and disaster response organizations sponsor and provide logistical support for these 27-hour workshops, which are designed to simulate the experience of living and working in an American Red Cross shelter. CDS provides assistance to the sponsoring organization, a team of trainers, and training materials to all participants. At the workshops, participants receive a detailed notebook that includes information regarding establishing and maintaining a disaster child care center, understanding the value of play, developing empathetic listening skills, dealing with grief and pain due to loss, human growth and development as related to child stress reactions, and the role of the volunteer in relation to the administrative structure in disaster response. After completing the workshop, potential CDS volunteers must submit three letters of reference and undergo a criminal background and sex offender check. These requirements are in place so that during times of crisis, parents and family members know that their children are being cared for by trained and certified volunteers.

Nationally, ten CDS Regional Coordinators (all highly experienced volunteers who are appointed by the CDS Coordinator) support the volunteers in their geographic region. In 2006, there were over 600 active CDS volunteers in the United States. These volunteers are predominantly middle-aged or older white adults who are affiliated in some way with the Church of the Brethren. The demographic make-up of the volunteers is not by design, but rather because these are often the individuals who know about the program through personal or faith connections and have the time available to go to disaster sites. CDS recognizes there is a need for childcare providers of all different ages, cultures, and ethnicities who share a

common concern for the well-being of children, and thus welcomes volunteers from diverse backgrounds.

Unlike teachers who have preplanned lessons and curricula, or mental health workers who engage in therapeutic dialogue for the purposes of diagnosis and intervention, CDS caregivers' purpose is to provide a safe space, loving care, and an opportunity for play for young children after a disaster. CDS volunteers are recognized by the blue smocks that they wear while working in CDS' temporary child care centers.

**Figure 1. A volunteer sits with a young boy as he paints a picture at a CDS child care center established in Florida after Hurricane Ivan**

(Photo: Judy Bezon)



In the event of a disaster and when a need for child care has been identified, CDS volunteer caregivers from across the country are mobilized and the team becomes responsible for child care service provision at the disaster site. In local disasters, CDS volunteers work with local government and community-based organizations as needed. In the event of a Presidentially-declared disaster, CDS volunteers are mobilized at the request of the American Red Cross or FEMA and provide child care services based upon a memorandum of understanding between the organizations. CDS does not respond to every disaster in which the American Red Cross and FEMA are involved, but rather works collaboratively to assess the need for child care services in each major disaster. Although it is a challenge to mobilize resources and volunteers in the immediate aftermath of disaster, CDS has always been able to respond to events when called upon by the American Red Cross or FEMA.

While CDS centers are usually open as long as disaster relief shelters and family assistance centers are operating, child care volunteers normally serve at the disaster site for a two-week period, which has been determined as the maximum time during which volunteers can assist effectively (Bowman 2007). CDS caregivers also work to educate parents, teachers, community workers, and the general public about the effects of disasters on children. CDS volunteers have met with groups of parents and teachers to help them understand the needs of young children who have experienced a disaster, have presented workshops about young children and trauma to child care professionals, and have met with local government and non-profit emergency personnel to help with planning for disaster response.

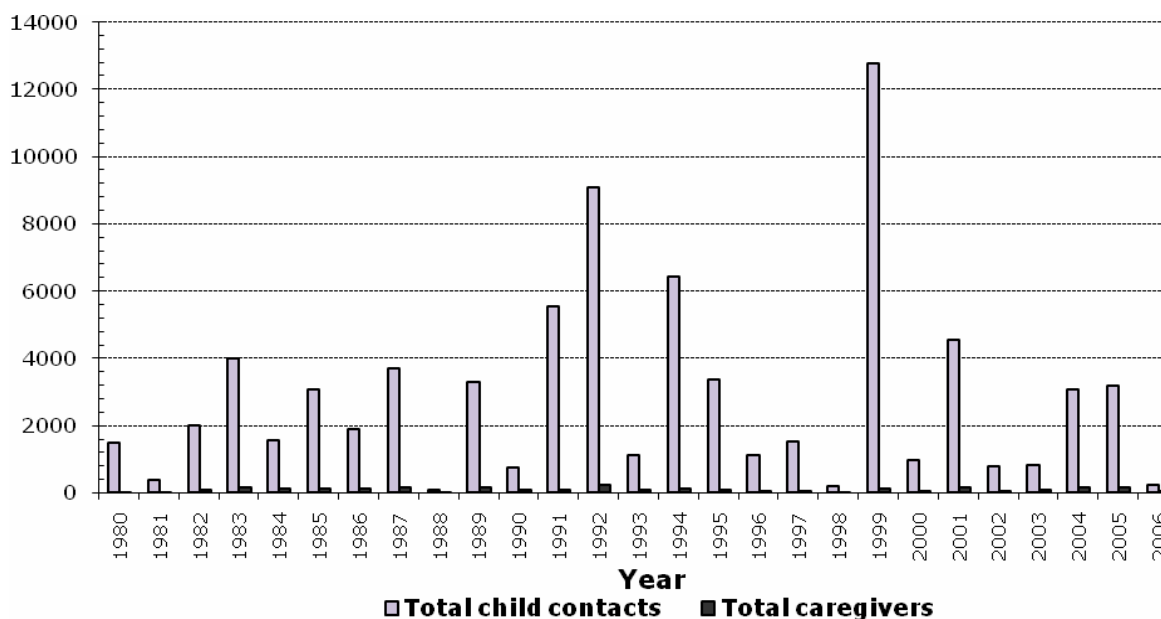
The Church of the Brethren also maintains a team of Critical Response Child Care (CRC) specialists as part of CDS. This group has served in highly traumatic disaster responses such as the Alaska Airlines Flight 261 crash in 2000, the World Trade Center disaster in 2001, and the US Airways Express Flight 5481 crash in 2002, as well as at a number of memorial services for transportation disasters. In addition to the training that all CDS volunteers receive, CRC specialists are highly experienced volunteers who have undertaken additional training on the traumatic effects of mass-casualty incidents and have learned to work with the various response organizations charged with family service provision following these types of catastrophic events. As of 2006, over 70 persons had been trained for the CRC team.

Because CDS and CRC caregivers and centers offer much more than casual babysitting, centers are staffed by certified volunteers instead of local walk-in volunteers. However, CDS works with local agencies and individuals when appropriate to provide the post-disaster support children often require. Specifically, CDS volunteers build relationships with children and families and seek out additional help when children's behavior indicates greater need. For example, licensed mental health professionals have joined CDS/CRC staff in several different responses, interacting with young children who showed significant trauma. Art therapists worked with CDS/CRC volunteers and led expressive art opportunities for children in a family assistance center following 9/11, and a music therapist joined the CDS/CRC team and led children in singing, dancing, and playing instruments in the Hurricane Katrina response to Gulf Coast evacuees who were displaced to Denver, Colorado. In certain post-disaster situations where the need is great, CDS has held mini-training workshops to help local volunteers meet the immediate needs of young children.

Since the program's inception in 1980, approximately 76,000 children have benefited from the assistance of CDS volunteers. These children have been cared for by over 2,500 volunteers in more than 183 disaster responses. In 2005 alone, 148 CDS volunteers served a combined total of 1,372 days (10,976 hours), making 3,152 child care contacts in 16 different locations in the aftermath of four natural and human-caused disasters (Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and two apartment fires

in the Los Angeles area). The value of this donated care is estimated at \$192,628.80 (<http://www.brethren.org/genbd/BDM/CDSstatistics.html>).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 2. Total number of child care contacts and total number of CDS caregivers, 1980-2006**



### Summary of Disaster Child Care Services

In the aftermath of disaster, young children are dependent on adults for restoring physical and psychological safety, routine, and order (Jagodic and Kontak 2002); offering a safe space for the expression of emotions (Fothergill and Peek 2006); and providing opportunities for play (Raynor 2002). Parents and other family members are the ones who most often meet these needs for children during non-disaster times, as well as post-disaster. However, providing consistent care and comfort for children may be particularly difficult for parents and caregivers who are overwhelmed and attempting to deal with the devastating effects of a major disaster. Thus, CDS strives to fill this gap by offering free child care in centers staffed by trained and supportive volunteers who recognize that children need a comfortable and safe environment where their feelings and needs will be understood and respected. One of the primary goals of CDS is to foster the healing and recovery of children through creating an atmosphere where children can freely express themselves and feel comforted and encouraged.

<sup>2</sup> The value of \$16.54/hour for volunteer time is based on the average hourly wage for non-agricultural workers, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, plus 12 percent for estimated benefits. This is the rate used to calculate in-kind donations by the Church of the Brethren, Children's Disaster Services.

The main focus of Children's Disaster Services is on caring for young children between the ages of two and six while their parents or family members are accessing resources and obtaining what they need to start their recovery and get their lives back in order. Although the focus is on young children, caregivers are flexible and sometimes care for infants and older children depending on the number of caregivers available, the number of children in the child care center, and the space and materials available. In some particularly traumatic situations, caregivers have cared for older children to ensure that siblings would not be separated from one another.

### **Child Care Centers**

CDS centers are structured to help establish a sense of safety and security for the children and their families. As Rosenfeld and colleagues (2005) argue, until safety is addressed post-disaster, all other issues and concerns will remain tangential. To foster a sense of safety and security, the CDS team sets up an orderly and clean space, staffs the center with trained and certified caregivers, maintains a controlled environment, limits access to authorized persons only, follows a protocol for an adult signing a child in and out of the center, offers individualized attention to children with varying needs, and generally attempts to ensure children's physical and emotional comfort at all times.

Different types of disasters result in varying degrees of loss, disruption, and destruction. Thus, the size and location of a CDS center is always affected by the scale of a given disaster event and the resultant availability of physical space. Over the years, CDS centers have been set up in corners of large mass shelters, in enclosed rooms within family assistance centers, in vacant stores of shopping centers being used as assistance centers, in hotel meeting rooms, and in tents outdoors when no safe buildings were available. Some child care centers are large with their own bathrooms, and some are small and necessitate a walk to the bathrooms. Some centers receive an abundance of materials including child-size furniture from generous donors; other centers are put together creatively by CDS volunteers using boxes, folding chairs, blankets, adult-size tables, and other available materials. Yet no matter the size or space, the goal of the CDS program is to create a sense of safety for children and their guardians when they enter. Child care volunteers work to ensure that children are respected and listened to, can play and be played with, can laugh, cry, or just be quiet, and get the individual attention and comfort they need.

Sometimes CDS volunteers provide care even before there is a center established. Patty, a caregiver, wrote the following in one of her journals:

*It took a while to get staffed in at the Red Cross. This is a big event and there is some confusion. As Judy and I wait for the paperwork, a mental health worker there comes into the room and points to us. "We need you!" and she takes us into a room where families are waiting for some support services. There is a mountain of strewn toys in huge disarray and five to six children running amuck under the observation of one worker. As Judy and I sit on the floor with the children and begin to sort the piles into some sort of*

*workable order, the other worker quickly disappears. The children calm down with some adult playmates (us). We aren't staffed in yet. This is not our "center" but obviously the need is here today and we're glad to be in the right place at the right time for these children (Henry 2005).*

Upon entering a CDS center, each family is greeted by a caregiver who records information such as children's names, ages, special needs, allergies, and so forth. A picture is taken of the family and, for security purposes, the child is released only to someone in that picture. The children and parents are invited to play, read books, or just watch if they wish. CDS caregivers introduce themselves and build relationships with the children so that when parents leave to attend to other needs, the children feel safe within the center and with the caregivers. Parents are invited to stay as long as they need in order to feel reassured that their children are being cared for in a loving way and are encouraged to visit throughout the day as they wish.

Typically, CDS centers are staffed by four to eight certified caregivers (or more, depending on the number of children needing care) at any given time. Although most of the care is provided in child care centers in family assistance centers or shelters, sometimes this care continues away from the center when the need arises. One caregiver accompanied a child to visit a parent who was hospitalized as a result of a disaster. Caregivers have also accompanied children and their families to memorial services after an airline crash so that the children would have someone there just for them.

### **Activity Areas**

In the aftermath of a disaster, children do not always have the words to express how they are feeling, but they often can express those feelings through play or art (Raynor 2002). In order to promote healing and provide emotional comfort, each CDS center is organized around different creative activity areas. In order to establish these areas, CDS caregivers who are arriving at the disaster site bring with them a Kit of Comfort, which contains a suitcase full of therapeutic activities. An official Kit of Comfort is developed by a group of CDS volunteers and stored in a home or church, complete and ready to be used at any time. The Kit of Comfort contains information and materials for organizing the center, for managing registration of children, and for setting up a variety of creative play areas. Materials in the Kit of Comfort include but are not limited to puzzles, small "matchbox" size emergency vehicles and masking tape with which to make roads, puppets, bubbles, art supplies, bean bags, balls, and cuddly toys. The Kit of Comfort also includes books and dolls that represent people of many different ethnic backgrounds, which reflect the diversity of the children who may receive care in the child care center.

In a child care center, the CDS team sets up a variety of activities that are developmentally appropriate for young children and enables them to express their emotions. These include free-form, sensory-based play activities with play dough, rice, shaving cream, and water, each of which evoke soothing and calming effects. There are also art areas with a variety of art mediums such as crayons, markers, and paints. Children can utilize the art supplies to process and express their



experience of disaster. For example, during a CDS mobilization following a wildfire, one child asked a caregiver for black paint. The child proceeded to paint thick black vertical lines all over a large piece of paper. After doing the same on several more pieces of paper, he told a caregiver, "There were a lot of burnt palm trees" (Walker, Forney, and Meyers 1988). Sheryl, another CDS caregiver, shared the following story after caring for children affected by Hurricane Katrina:

*One little girl was just starting to paint when her parents returned. They allowed her to finish as the father expressed his hurt seeing his child go through this disaster. The family was from New Orleans and had slept in many unfamiliar places over the past weeks. The girl painted pink up and down lines all over the paper, when she finished she said, 'I'm making a wall to keep all the water out' (Faus 2005).*

**Figure 3. A caregiver watches as children work with play dough in a CDS center established after Hurricane Ivan** (Photo: Judy Bezon)



The centers also include toys and dolls for interactive and imaginative play that offer children the opportunity to reenact their disaster experiences. Children often play with the emergency vehicles such as fire trucks, ambulances, and helicopters, helping them to gain some understanding of what they saw and heard during the disaster. Some children are able to play imaginatively with one another, reenacting their common experiences. For instance, following a flood disaster, a young girl and her friend played a game they called "flood." The children ran into a playhouse, threw out all of the items, yelled "flood!," and then ran out and jumped into the lap of one of the CDS caregivers and pretended to cry. As they played this game over and over and reenacted their experience in the disaster, the girls started with pretend tears, worked their way through real tears, and then back to pretend tears. A few weeks after this incident, the caregiver spoke with the mother of one of the girls. The mother said that her daughter had finally slept through the night after this play, the first time since the disaster.

Another play area in CDS centers includes a variety of puzzles for children of all ages. Puzzles offer the opportunity for both collaborative and independent play, and also result in a sense of accomplishment when a picture is ordered and complete even if the world around is disrupted and chaotic.

CDS volunteers understand the need for active, motor play among young people. Thus, if there is enough space in the child care center, caregivers will set up a play area that includes bean bags, inflatable balls, and space for jumping, dancing, throwing, and catching.

CDS centers also include at least one comfortable area arranged with soft blankets, dolls, stuffed animals, and pillows. There is almost always a child in this area, snuggled up in a caregiver's lap, listening to or reading books together. Patty, a CDS volunteer, recorded the following story in her journal after a day of caring for young Hurricane Katrina evacuees in a shelter in Colorado:

*I rock a 4-year-old and sing to her. She listens to '5 green and speckled frogs.' Then I sing '5 little ducks.' She interrupts, 'How did the ducks get out of the water?' I explain that the ducks can swim out or use their wings to fly out of the water. I begin again to sing '5 little ducks...' Again she asks, 'How did the ducks get out of the water?' Then it dawns on me. I ask her, 'Were you in the water?' She tells me her story: 'I fell off the roof in the water! Mommy caught me.' I asked her how her baby brother got off the roof. 'Mommy caught him too. Then we got in a boat and they took us to a basketball game.' I wonder if she means the Superdome? But we only wonder, we don't ask. We're not here to interrogate these people (Henry 2005).*

**Figure 4. A CDS caregiver hugs a child who was evacuated to Colorado in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina** (Photo: Patty Henry)



In each child care center, caregivers are available to talk with, listen to, hold, and play with the children—they focus their full attention on the well-being of these young disaster survivors. The caregivers continually work to provide a safe environment and a comforting presence for children impacted by traumatic events.

### **Caregiver Support**

Working with young children and their families during times of disaster and trauma is both physically and emotionally taxing for volunteers. CDS recognizes these challenges and supports their volunteers in several ways. Beginning with the initial CDS training workshop, participants talk about the stress of working in a post-disaster environment, discuss the importance of personal and family support systems, and learn how to start building their own systems of support. While deployed to a disaster site, caregivers are encouraged to keep journals of their experiences. The volunteers gather each evening to debrief and discuss any issues or concerns that may have arisen during the day. The on-site CDS Project Manager (an experienced caregiver who helps coordinate response efforts) regularly checks in with the volunteers to make sure their needs are being met. The volunteers are encouraged to take breaks during the work day and to schedule days away from the child care center when appropriate. After their return home, caregivers are expected to report their experiences to the national CDS Coordinator, which gives them the opportunity to talk one-on-one. Often, local groups of trained caregivers will meet a few weeks after the return home to hear stories from those who served and to learn from their experiences in the field.

### **Conclusion**

Disasters impact the lives of children in countless ways. Indeed, disasters harm the physical spaces in which children live (their homes, neighborhoods, schools, and playgrounds), disrupt their daily routines and may lead to long-term displacement, threaten their sense of safety and security in the world, cause stress within families and communities, and may result in the injury or death of loved ones. Because of their age, levels of development, and lack of life experience, young children possess fewer strategies for coping with the after-effects of disaster, and thus may suffer more severe emotional and psychological problems (see La Greca et al. 2002; Rosenfeld et al. 2005).

Over the past two decades, there has been increasing recognition of the special physical and emotional needs of child disaster survivors, who for many years were among the hidden victims of disaster. However, there is still much to be learned regarding the ways that adults can best help children cope with and recover from the devastating effects of traumatic events.

In this article, we have focused on the efforts of the Church of the Brethren Children's Disaster Services program. In the aftermath of natural and human-made disasters, CDS offers free child care in centers staffed by certified CDS volunteers whose primary concern is meeting the needs of children and their families. CDS centers provide a safe, secure environment where children can begin the process of healing and recovery and parents can feel reassured that their children are being cared for in a loving way.

One of the primary goals of CDS centers is to provide a space where children can simply *be* children. CDS centers and activity areas are designed with the special needs and interests of young children in mind, and offer them the opportunity to play, color, draw, read and be read to, eat, and rest. Caregivers work to allow children to be involved in activities that they enjoy doing, even in the aftermath of widespread community disruption and destruction. By offering child-centered care, emotional support, and a sense of normalcy, the CDS program helps meet the immediate needs of children, assists parents and other family members who may be overwhelmed as they attempt to deal with the effects of disaster, and plays an important role in fostering resiliency among youth.

The Church of the Brethren Children's Disaster Services program has provided services to children and their families for more than 25 years. As a result of the consistent, quality care offered by CDS volunteers, they have come to be heavily relied upon by their organizational partners, nationwide. Consequently, the greatest limitation to providing care to children now is the capacity of the CDS program. Because they have been recognized as a vital resource in disaster response, CDS realizes that there is a growing need to have more trained volunteers in the most disaster-prone regions of the United States and specifically along the Gulf Coast, the southern Atlantic states, and the West Coast. Also, given the increasing ethnic diversity of the U.S. population, CDS is encouraging volunteerism and actively seeking volunteers among underrepresented groups and by those with the ability to speak other languages and communicate across cultures.

As the volunteer base grows, rapid response capabilities can expand, but along with this comes the need to reach outside of the Church of the Brethren for additional funding support and more organizational partnerships. CDS is dedicated to building new and pre-existing relationships with county and state emergency management agencies, non-profit organizations, local American Red Cross chapters, and FEMA. The child care and family support that CDS provides in the immediate aftermath of disaster is but one aspect of a continuum of vital care for children who have survived a traumatic event. With stronger organizational connections and a larger funding base, CDS can expand their work to do more facilitating, informing, and educating concerning the broader issues of supporting children in both the short- and long-term following disaster.

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most recent research projects include an exploration of identity formation processes among second-generation Muslim Americans after the September 11 terrorist attacks, a study of children's experiences in Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina, and an examination of the relocation experiences of parents and children who were displaced to the state of Colorado in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Peek is a certified Children's Disaster Services volunteer.

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**Judy Gump** is a Professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Aims Community College. In addition to teaching Early Childhood Education courses, she developed and teaches courses about working with young children who have experienced disaster and providing disaster management for child care centers. She has been a volunteer with Children's Disaster Services since 1984, serving as a caregiver, project manager, regional coordinator, and trainer of CDS volunteers. She also serves on the Critical Response Child Care team. She has been involved in numerous disaster responses, including floods in Washington, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Wyoming, and Texas; a hurricane in Florida; the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York; and an airplane crash off the coast of California. Gump also assisted survivors of Hurricane Katrina in both Denver, Colorado and New Orleans, Louisiana.

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