

Supporting Resilience in Young Children Building a Cadre of Certified Volunteers

By Kathy Fry-Miller, Associate Director, Children's Disaster Services, Church of the Brethren

Although we often hear that children are resilient, we also know that many children have great difficulties with the stress of disaster situations. So how do we foster resilience in children?

Since 1980, Children's Disaster Services (CDS) has been meeting the needs of children following disasters by setting up child care centers in shelters and disaster assistance centers across the United States. Trained to respond to traumatized children, volunteers provide a calm, safe and reassuring presence in the midst of the chaos created by disaster.

Volunteers arrive on location with a "Kit of Comfort," containing carefully selected toys that promote imaginative play. Volunteers give children individualized attention and encourage them to express themselves, thereby starting the healing process. Supported by the kindness of a caregiver and materials that

invite creative expression, children engage in meaningful play. This can include block play with emergency vehicles, creative painting and drawing, cuddling with soft stuffed animals or dolls, fixing each other up with a play doctor kit, fixing tables and chairs with play tools, putting together puzzles as they make order out of mixed up pieces, and much more.

Children feel comforted and encouraged when they are given their own space to just be kids apart from the confusion of the disaster experience. In a community that experienced severe flooding, a parent came to pick up her three-year-old child in one of our children's centers. She became tearful as she shared, "This is the first time I've seen her smile and play since we had to leave our home." She was thrilled to see her daughter experience a bit of normalcy in the midst of a frightening situation.

Mudslides in Darrington

In Darrington, Washington, following the devastating March 2014 mudslide, children of the community made "super powerful robots." (See photo at left.) One mother talked with the CDS team throughout the week, expressing her appreciation for their support. She told these volunteers of the guilt her son felt because he was still alive while his favorite teacher lost her son. She said she did not realize how much he needed this opportunity for healing, and how much she needed it as well.



Children's Disaster Services response in Darrington, Washington, following the devastating mudslide.

Severe Power Outages

Adults who are fostering resilience in children support them in developing a positive outlook, a sense of personal power, and a feeling of some control over their environment. CDS was able to serve children in a local Red Cross shelter in West Chester, Pennsylvania, last winter, at a refuge for families who had left their homes during severe power outages in sub-zero temperatures. One little boy used toy tools to "fix" the furniture and happily exclaimed, "I saved the day! I saved the day!" What a precious example of resilience.

CDS Certified Volunteers

CDS is a national ecumenical organization, administered through the Church of the Brethren. Anyone who is at least 18 years old is welcome to take the 27-hour training to become a certified volunteer. A follow-up to the training includes reference letters and national background checks. CDS currently has more than 600 certified volunteers across the United States, trained and experienced disaster project managers, and a critical response child care team that responds to transportation or mass casualty disasters.

In our basic volunteer workshop, participants engage in a shelter simulation with an overnight stay, and receive information through a variety of adult learning experiences, including:

- An overview of disaster preparedness, response and recovery.
- Child development and changes following disaster.

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Dexterity Is Key to Resilience

By Ryan Williams, FPED, Operations Coordinator, Volusia County (Florida) EM

Maintaining a high level of preparedness in a community is no easy task. In today's world of rapid change, we must have more dexterity in our programs than ever before. So how do we best approach the world at hand? How can we maintain our community's resilience? The "same as last year" approach does not work if there has been an abundance of change. Then again, we must be wary of tearing down a fence before finding out why it has been put there.

There is a delicate balance that must be achieved. Often, the only way to walk that line is to periodically look at our existing programs and see if they are still on target.

We must first recognize that not managing change can lead to unfavorable consequences, namely the loss of our communities' ability to prepare for, respond to, mitigate, and recover from emergencies and

disasters. Imagine a world without any one of these keystones of resiliency, when even the smallest of changes can cause unintended outcomes.

Having worked in emergency management in the State of Florida for more than 13 years, I have been witness to many changes. A few of the most significant are budget reductions, staffing decreases, and the continued acceleration of technological advances. These changes illustrate why our emergency management capabilities are only maintained if we recognize that we will need to move and shake with the best of them in order to promote a high level of preparedness.

- **Use a strategic approach.** A qualitative analysis will let you know how your program is doing, and it can be very tempting to post big numbers that don't really show that your efforts have achieved the impact you're seeking to make in

your community. Ask yourself a few questions. Are you targeting the right audiences with your outreach? Are you giving the right group the right message? Do you ask for feedback from those attending your presentations to see if they are retaining the information you have provided?

- **Take advantage of technology.** The information age is an incredible time to live in, and we all have access to more information than ever before. Identify what you need to know, and make it available in your operations center to build a common operating picture and to maintain situational awareness. While embracing new or improved technology like smart phones and social media, don't forget about some of the tried and true technology of yesteryear. Radio is still alive and well, and if you have a car, you have a radio with a battery source under the hood. If the power is out, and the smart phones have an interruption in service, radio may be the way to go.

- **Take a good look around.** What are other emergency managers doing? It is amazing how many great ideas you can incorporate by learning what has worked in other communities. Most emergency managers are more than willing to share their thoughts, successes and failures.

Network with your peers, including your fellow IAEM members, and listen to what they have to say. Keep in mind that someone else may have a successful approach that might not be exactly the right one for your agency or jurisdiction. You may be able to customize their solution to meet your community's needs, or you may be inspired to find your own solution. ▲

Supporting Children's Resilience

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- The importance of child-directed play, active listening, and support for resilience and healing.
- How to set up a children's center, including safety procedures and "Kit of Comfort" play materials.
- The role of the CDS volunteer, including working with partner agencies, ethics and self care.

How can you support children's resilience efforts?

- By including children's unique needs in your community disaster planning.
- By hosting a Children's Disaster Services workshop.
- By sharing time with children, listening with your heart, and letting

them share their feelings and stories with you through their play.

Conclusion

When I think about fostering resilience in children and bringing a sense of hope to their lives, I remember the quote from Mr. Rogers, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

For more information on Children's Disaster Services, check out our website at www.childrensdisasterservices.org. For information on hosting a workshop or planning for children in your community, e-mail the author at kfry-miller@brethren.org. ▲