

From the Children in Disasters Caucus

Meeting the Unique Needs of Children in Shelters

By Samantha Miller, American Red Cross

The events leading up to a stay in a shelter can be chaotic and unpredictable.

As families in our communities evacuate, they are filled with fear and doubt – and it isn't only parents who experience this.

"Are my toys going to be safe?" "Why are we sleeping at the school?" "Why does mommy look so worried?" These are just some of the questions children ask or think about when they come to our shelters.

In their normal day, children rely completely on their caretakers to meet their needs, while in a disaster, their caretakers rely upon us to meet their needs. As we discuss meeting the needs of our clients, we must remember that our clients are all ages. Because children are so dependent upon others, we can consider them a special population in our shelters.

The Right Food

While people of all ages need food, clothing and shelter, children have a few additional needs that must be met. When addressing the need for food, we must remember that babies may be able to consume only mashed or semi-solid foods. Infants may be on a diet of formula. Mothers who are breastfeeding would benefit greatly from a separate, quiet area to breastfeed.

Changing Areas

Until about age three, children are in diapers and need to be changed about every two hours. One child uses approximately 10 diapers per day. The sizes of diapers vary, generally 0-6 (0 for small infants and 6 for larger toddlers). Additionally, some older children

may still use pull-ups to prevent bed-wetting. As parents may not evacuate with enough diapers or pull-ups, shelters should consider keeping a variety of sizes in stock. A changing area also will be needed, and it will need cleaning after each use.

When deciding on the location of a changing area, keep in mind the need for close proximity to a sink for hand washing. The changing area should be near the family area and the children's play area, as adults might be supervising more than one child at a time.

A sturdy surface with cleaning solution and a step-by-step guide for proper diaper changing can help ensure a safe, clean area. Waste receptacles with lids will help reduce odors and keep accidental spills from curious small hands.

Materials such as diapers, cream, wipes, disposable gloves, disposable paper mats, and cleaning solution at the changing area will help to provide caregivers everything they need to clean their child and reduce the spread of disease and diaper rash. Remember, sanitizing wipes are *not* the same as baby wipes.

A Safe Place to Play

Children process their experiences through play, so it's very important that even during a disaster they have a safe place to play. Not only will this alleviate the stress of parents and children, but also it will help shelter workers if they don't have to be on the lookout for little faces popping up in areas where they should not be. Play areas should be in a relatively separate area, preferably near the section of

the shelter for families. If possible, place the play area in a separate room to ensure safety, both from children running off and from adults with possible ulterior motives.

To a child, everything is a toy – so be aware of things like extension cords, open electrical sockets, and other hazards. Toys should be age appropriate and cleaned at least once a day to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.

Help with Emotional Trauma

Children process their stress differently than do adults, so while a child may look fine physically, emotionally they may need professional help. Trained mental health workers should be close by to assist children and families with the emotional trauma they are experiencing.

Due to the disaster, parents may not have a safe place to take their child during the day, turning the shelter play area into an unexpected temporary day care. A possible resource when this arises is Children's Disaster Services, a nonprofit organization able to set up child care centers in shelters and disaster assistance centers, using volunteers trained to respond to traumatized children throughout the nation. FEMA also offers possible reimbursement for costs of childcare services accrued in the shelter through the public assistance program.

Conclusion

As we move forward, we must keep in mind the unique needs children bring when staying in

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Exercises in Futility

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approaches and alternatives, in a safe, risk managed, controlled environment.

In my experience, too many participants talk their problems away during discussion-based exercises, without really understanding the value of critical thinking and analysis of shortcomings – they don't understand the value of failure.

The Value of Failure

Failure is a powerful teacher and motivator. A risk-free exercise, in which failure is not an option, ends up being just another exercise in futility. We need to move from risk-free, discussion-based exercises to risk-managed, decision-based exercises that give participants the freedom to try out new ideas and fail.

No exercise would be complete until the participants fail, correct, and achieve their goal(s) and

objective(s). This would give organizations opportunities to find their failure points, find successful ways to cope with failure, and strengthen their plans, policies and operations.

Why Should We Reset our Approach to Exercises?

Our nation has made huge investments in exercises in terms of money, time and resources – but has little measurable improvement to show for it. In the current budget climate, organizations are more likely than ever to cut exercises because of the failure to link with real, demonstrable improvement.

Ironically, exercises are more important than ever. We need to devise innovative ways to deliver services cheaper, faster and more efficiently. Exercises provide us with risk-managed environments to create the shared understanding necessary to fuel the innovation we need. It's time to stop participating in these exercises in futility and start building a culture of risk-managed planning. ▲

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shelters. These can include feeding adjustments, diaper changes, extended day care, and mental health needs. Our children are an integral part of our community. Without care and focus on the needs of the children, our community will never fully recover.

Learn More

■ For more information regarding Children's Disaster Services, visit <http://www.brethren.org/cds>.

■ Also, see "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, published in the July 2014 IAEM Bulletin, page 26.

■ For more information regarding FEMA Public Assistance for child care services, download the [FEMA Disaster Assistance Fact Sheet: Public Assistance for Child Care Services](#). ▲

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