

## Small Steps in Emergency Management Can Mean Big Gains for Children

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Children aren't just little adults. They have unique needs that make them vulnerable in emergencies, as they are reliant on their caregivers, may be unable to walk or identify themselves, require special foods, supplies and medication, or haven't fully developed coping mechanisms to handle trauma. At the most basic level, a disaster and its ramifications threaten to steal the very essence of what it means to be a child – innocence, feeling safe, structure and routine, and access to education. The loss of these things can lead to long-term adverse consequences, for children themselves and for the future of the community.

But when it comes to emergency planning, children often are lumped into the general population, leaving them vulnerable to harm. At its most extreme, this translates into 5,000 reports of missing children following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. At its most likely, it means not knowing where child care centers are located in your jurisdiction or if these centers, caring for children with parents working towns away, have an emergency plan at all.

Since Hurricane Katrina, the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency have taken a more proactive approach in protecting children in emergencies, working closely with governmental and non-governmental partners in disaster preparedness, response and recov-

ery. However, the reality remains that there are big gaps in protecting children in emergencies. Child-serving and emergency management sectors speak different languages and may rarely cross paths, a barrier to creating a coordinated and informed approach to planning for children's needs throughout the disaster cycle. That is perhaps why, even though children comprise 25% of the population, less than one cent of every \$10 invested in the Homeland Security Grant Program is dedicated to children's needs.

### Misconception that Someone Else Is Taking Care of Children's Needs

In general, there is a diffused sense of responsibility between agencies and community stakeholders, which has led to the common misconception that someone else is thinking about, making plans for, and assuming responsibility for children's needs in emergencies. But really, we're all behind. Families are behind. According to a recent survey<sup>1</sup> by the National Center for



Hailey (9), Lisa (8) and Jazmin (11), take refuge in a Gonzales, Louisiana, shelter following the 2016 Baton Rouge floods. The girls participated in temporary respite care for children in the shelter, where they had access to structured activities and play materials, that helped provide routine and normalcy for them and their families following the disaster. Photo by Stuart Sia, Save the Children.

Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute, 65% of households in the United States don't have adequate emergency plans. Many child-serving institutions are behind as well.

It wasn't until the 2014 reauthorization of the Child Care Development Block Grant that states required regulated child care facilities to have emergency plans that met basic standards in place. And emergency management is behind as there is lack of representation of children's needs on planning committees and professionals are rarely trained on child protection.

Following Hurricane Katrina, the presidentially-appointed National Commission on Children and Disasters was formed. It released its final report in 2010,<sup>2</sup> documenting 81 recommendations to improve

<sup>1</sup> National Center for Disaster Preparedness, Columbia University Earth Institute. Children in Disasters: Do Americans Feel Prepared? New York, NY. (2016).

<sup>2</sup> National Commission on Children and Disasters. 2010 Report to the President and Congress. AHRQ Publication No. 10-M037. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2010).

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outcomes for children across 11 emergency planning functions (including mass care, disaster case management, health, schools, child care, housing, evacuation and reunification, and recovery).

From 2008-2015, Save the Children, an international nonprofit with more than 100 years of experience responding to disasters and humanitarian crises in the U.S. and around the world, issued a *National Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters*,<sup>3</sup> measuring the nation's progress against the National Commission's recommendations. The 2015 report found that 79% of these recommendations remained unfilled more than a decade after Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, large gaps remain in preparation for family reunification, protection in mass care settings, coordinating with child-serving institutions, and providing immediate and long-term psychosocial/mental health and pediatric supports. Notably, there are a lack of child protections and safeguarding measures throughout the disaster cycle, horrifying considering that children are more likely to suffer abuse, violence and neglect following a traumatic event.

### Barriers Identified by Save the Children's Report Card

Save the Children's Report Card called out key barriers to progress:

- **Progress is tenuous.** Over the last decade, state and national policy changes have helped promote



*Cousins 5-year-old Colton and 10 year-old Codey stand in front of what was once their home in Bethel Acres, Oklahoma. It was demolished during the EF-5 tornado on May 20, 2013. Research shows that, as a nation, the United States is underprepared to protect children in emergencies. Photo by Susan Warner, Save the Children.*

best practices for children in emergencies, but state and local municipalities lack clarity on how to implement the requirements.

- **Progress is not trickling down.** Many state and local entities do not follow non-binding federal guidance and rarely prioritize children's needs when seeking federally-funded preparedness grants.

- **Progress is not being monitored.** There is no formal accountability system to track progress on child-focused emergency preparedness at either the national or state levels.

There are necessary actions and scalable solutions to help emergency management prioritize children's needs. By purposefully incorporating children into the foundations of the state and local emergency management plans, training and systems, communities can utilize the solutions that best fit their needs, thereby providing for long-term sustainability and resilience.

### Ensure Children's Needs Are Represented on State and Local Planning Committees

A primary and low-cost solution is to ensure that children's needs are represented on state and local emergency planning committees. That is, a representative from the education system (schools or child care) who can speak to the needs of children, families and caregivers within the community, should have a permanent voice within emergency management. This solution is not new, although it is under implemented. In 2015, FEMA appointed a National Children's Needs Advisor. In April 2017, the Homeland Security for Children Act (HR 1372) passed the House, which would permanently formalize the position and help coordinate efforts for children in disasters across agencies. In December 2016, Congress passed legislation to address the missing voice of children in the process of

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<sup>3</sup> Save The Children. Still At Risk: U.S. Children 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina 2015 National Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters. Fairfield, CT: Save The Children. (2015).

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applying for and receiving U.S. Department of Homeland Security Grants. Specifically, the State and High-Risk Urban Area Working Group Act (H.R. 4509), amends the Homeland Security Act of 2002 to expand the list of stakeholders to include individuals representing educational institutions.

### Prioritize Funds for Children

Closely related to the representation of children is the need to prioritize funds for children in emergencies. Prioritizing funds could strengthen a community's ability to protect children throughout the disaster cycle, including investing in mitigation for child-serving institutions or capacity building for leadership, shelter managers, and disaster case managers on best practices for child protection and their unique needs in emergencies. These funds also could help to bridge the gap between emergency managers and child-serving institutions, as they will need to work together to implement the funds.

### Add Children's Annex to State or Community EOP

Adding a Children's Annex to a state or community EOP also can help to improve outcomes for children in emergencies. This annex could clarify responsibilities, and outline how child-serving institutions would be incorporated into plans and communications, including child reunification planning and specific guidelines for how to meet their needs in mass care settings. This action would be a huge step in purposefully protecting the youngest, most vulnerable citizens and would create a bedrock for children

to be included and prioritized for years to come.

But protecting children requires the cooperation and coordination of the whole community. Each work day in the United States, 69 million children are in school or child care settings, separated from their family should disaster strike. As such, strengthening the links that serve children really enable families and communities to reduce the lasting impact of disasters. In fact, research shows that children could be considered bellwethers, and a community's ability to protect children and help them rebound from a crisis is usually a good indication of a community's overall resilience.

### Mobilize Community Stakeholders Around Needs of Children

To this end, mobilizing community stakeholders around the needs of children in emergencies to enhance coordination and communication is integral to improving outcomes for children. A good example of this cross-community work is the *Resilient Children, Resilient Communities (RCRC) Initiative*, a project led by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute and Save the Children and supported by a grant from biopharmaceutical and health-care company GSK. The RCRC initiative brings together leaders from different sectors (health, schools, child care, emergency management, foster care etc.) at a county level to assess gaps in emergency planning for children and create action plans to better protect children before, during and after disasters. With pilot communities in Washington County, Arkansas, and Putnam County, New York, the primary mechanism for change is

the Community Resilience Coalition, as this group of key stakeholders are engaging the whole community – agencies, institutions, businesses and families – around protecting children in emergencies, creating a more resilient community. For example, these communities are conducting child-focused emergency tabletop exercises in partnership with local schools and child care programs, and child-focused professionals are seeking out additional emergency training and building relationships with local emergency management professionals. This three-year initiative is developing a replicable model of child-focused community resilience planning.

[Learn more.](#)

### Conclusion

Although gaps remain in protecting children in emergencies, there are low-cost solutions that emergency professionals can take to improve community and state level capacities. We can do better, but we will have to hold one another accountable. Emergency plans should specifically address children's needs. Children should be represented on planning committees and considered in funding opportunities. Emergency management and response personnel should be trained to protect children and to consider how they can build relationships with child-focused entities. Overall, by connecting emergency management and child-focused leadership, communities can create a trusting environment for children, families and caregivers, because they know that when disaster strikes children's needs will be met. ▲

