

OVERVIEW

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey of 2006, children under 18 years of age make up nearly one quarter (24.6%) of the U.S. population. Children will need special assistance during a disaster.

Local disaster planners, childcare facility operators, and school officials should consider the needs of this special group as they formulate their disaster plans.

For example, young children are particularly vulnerable to chemical agents because they breathe more air per pound of bodyweight than adults and they have less blood to dilute and filter toxins.

Children will need assistance to locate exits and escape from danger. Some children may require special medical equipment; others have special dietary needs in [sheltering](#) situations.

Young children may be unable to identify their home address, phone number, or the name(s) of their parent or guardian if they become separated from their family during the disaster event, or if the disaster strikes while they are away from home.

The importance of planning for children cannot be overstated. In 2006, a tornado struck Montgomery, Alabama. Staff at a local daycare facility had little time to react and quickly escorted the children to the only safe place in the building. The building collapsed around them, but the staff's preparation and practice drills saved the lives of all 31 children.¹

Incorporating pediatricians, childcare facility operators, and child caregivers is a necessary component in disaster planning.

RELATED TOPICS

[Sheltering](#)

[Special Needs](#)

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REDUCING VULNERABILITY TO DISASTERS

As noted, many children have special needs during a disaster. Many of these needs can be addressed prior to the disaster by including pediatricians, childcare facility operators, children's hospitals, and other children's groups in the preparation of an emergency plan. These professionals understand the needs of children and can advocate on their behalf.



Students at Virginia Elementary School practice a tornado drill

Source: Virginia Dept. of Emergency Management

PREPAREDNESS

Children should be taught to memorize their home address and phone number. This information will be vital in the event that they become separated from their caretakers.

Planners must ensure that there are adequate medical supplies for children.

A reunification system should be developed. This may be the most important function for childcare agencies to implement during an emergency. Each child's emergency contact information is included in the system. Municipalities should support record identification systems across organizations—schools, childcare facilities, and shelters—to help reunite children who become separated from their parents or caretakers.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offers a Disaster Action Kid certificate program to help children learn to prepare for emergencies. This teaching tool will be most useful if it complements hazard-specific preparation relevant to the child's geographic area. The program is free and Web-based and can be found at www.fema.gov/kids/dizkid1.htm



A child earns FEMA Action Kid Certificate in 2004 in Mobile, Alabama.

Source: Amanda Bicknell for FEMA

Practice emergency drills. Schools and childcare facilities can piggyback on existing fire safety drills to account for other disasters such as tornadoes or chemical spills. Drills will help children know what to expect if a disaster strikes.

RESPONSE

Disaster may strike while children are in the care of others, such as at school, or while they are with their family. If there is advanced notice, or if the disaster destroys many homes, sheltering may be necessary. In either case, children present many special challenges. Dr. Lou Romig, an expert in children's health at the Miami Children's Hospital, recommends the shelters should be 1) family friendly, 2) family safe, and 3) family functional, as summarized below.²



The shelter should be family friendly

Allow families to remain together and care for each other. Consider the special needs of children. This may include providing a separate area for children to play, attending to the dietary requirements of children, and providing psychological support.



The shelter should be family safe

Prohibit alcohol, tobacco, and drugs in shelters. Childproof the facility. Isolate children from disturbing situations. Provide child supervision services such as babysitters and play areas. Organize shelter occupants to assist with babysitting. Utilize community childcare workers to increase to adult-to-children ratio.

Call on community mental health or child-life resources for therapeutic play and psychological guidance for children. Monitor the entrance and exit of individuals.

Provide each family with a unique identifier such as a number or a barcode wristband. These identifiers will help in the event that a child becomes separated from their family.



The shelter should be family functional

Have an information center in each shelter that provides access to community and recovery resources.

Parents should carry their children's identification at all times. This information will be vital for an emergency medical situation, in the event of separation, or to enroll in a new school.

Necessary documents include a birth certificate, a recent picture, a social security card, and immunization records.

Schools and other agencies caring for children must also be prepared to shelter in the event of an emergency. All staff should know where to take children in the event of an emergency. Facilities should have food on hand to feed occupants for at least 72 hours.

Initiate a reunification system to notify parents that their children are safe.



Patricia Blackwell of Children's Disaster Services plays with kids in a New Orleans Shelter, 2005.

RECOVERY

Children are more psychologically vulnerable than adults. Disasters can disrupt their daily routines, destroy their home and school, or separate them from their pets. After a disaster, parents should monitor their children for any unusual behavior, talk to them about the disaster, and seek counseling if necessary.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES – PROMISING PRACTICES



A child helps in the recovery efforts after Katrina in Gulfport, Mississippi in 2005.

Source: Mark Wolfe for FEMA

Children of different ages may react differently to disaster. For example, children around age six may express a desire to stay home from school. Meanwhile, teenagers may internalize their concerns, but fight more with parents.

There are several measures that can be taken after an emergency to quell fears and minimize disruptions. Encourage children to talk and express their fears. Reunite children with their parents as soon as possible. Allow children to help with the recovery. This may include volunteering or working on their home.



PROFILE: CHILDREN'S DISASTER SERVICES

Program:	Children's Disaster Services
Organization:	Church of the Brethren
Keywords:	kids, children, sheltering, organization partnerships
Source:	www.brethren.org/genbd/BDM/CDSindex.html
Contact:	Brethren Disaster Ministries Children's Disaster Services 601 Main Street P.O. Box 188 New Windsor, MD 21776-0188 Phone: 1-800-451-4407 Fax: 410-635-8739 cgs_gb@brethren.org
Brief Summary:	This organization partners with Red Cross shelters to provide a welcoming place for kids. Volunteers go through a training provided by the Church. They provide therapeutic play and structured activities to help children cope with the aftermath of a disaster.

Since 1980, Church of the Brethren has cared for over 74,000 children affected by disasters. The program uses puzzles, crafts, and games to help children express their feelings. If a drawing or action reflects angst in the child, Disaster Services refers a Red Cross mental health official to help the child.

A mandatory training is required for volunteers to work in the shelters.

No more than 25 volunteers at a time engage in a 27-hour training course in a simulated Red Cross shelter where they sleep on a cot or mat. Volunteers are split into teams to learn about specific childcare skills and to build their own childcare center. The emphasis is on understanding, comfort, and encouragement. The cost is \$45.



Erica Fitzpatrick of Children's Disaster Services plays with kids in a New Orleans Shelter, 2007.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES – PROMISING PRACTICES

To be qualified for training, individuals must be 18 years of age or older, care about children, provide two references, be in good physical and mental health, be a team player, work well under pressure, and obtain a clean criminal background check.



PROFILE: CHILD CARE

Program:	Self Assessment Guide for Child Care Center and Family Child Care Homes
Organization:	California Division of Social Services, Child Care Advocate Program
Keywords:	disaster plan, child care facilities
Source:	http://www.cclid.ca.gov/Res%5Cpdf%5CDisasterGuideforHomesCenters.pdf
Brief Summary:	This document is meant to be used as a reference for facilities that have an emergency plan in place.

This self-assessment guide serves as a reference or supplement for childcare facilities that have an emergency plan in place. It outlines the best practices for water and food preparedness, emergency supplies, transportation, disaster drill procedures, and tips for reducing the threat of disasters. The specific guidelines can be found in the document at the following website:
www.cclid.ca.gov/Res%5Cpdf%5CDisasterGuideforHomesCenters.pdf.

Key preparations include:

Water Preparedness

There should be enough drinking water to supply children and staff for 72 hours (½ gallon per child and 1 gallon per adult each day). The water supply should be dated and changed annually for freshness.

Food Preparedness

A 72-hour supply of non-perishable food should be stored in a safe, easily accessible area. The food should be dated and replaced on a regular basis. Children’s special dietary needs such as diabetes or allergies should be considered, and a supply of children’s medicine should be kept on site.

Emergency Supplies

A three-day supply of emergency provisions should be maintained. Basic emergency supplies include clothing, bedding, tools (including flashlights and batteries), and first aid. Special items such as diapers, baby formula, and sanitation supplies should be available as well. Maintain portable first-aid kits in case of an immediate evacuation. Additional items include portable radios, personal hygiene items, portable toilets, tarps and canopies, and sandbags to prevent flood damage.

Transportation

Keep additional first-aid kits in the facility’s vehicle(s). Obtain and update the emergency phone numbers and information for children, including consent to transport them in the event of an emergency.

Disaster Drills and Procedures

Drills should be conducted at least once every six months with provisions for fire, earthquake, sheltering-in-place and other risks the facility may face. It is best to conduct multiple drills at different times of the year. Plans to relocate to another site should also be developed.

Reducing the Potential Threat of Disasters and Emergencies

Maintain an accessible written evacuation plan on site, removing hazards such as matches and chemicals from the reach of children, securing or removing heavy objects from counters, installing safety latches on cabinets, and clearing any obstructions that prevent a safe exit from the facility.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A disaster planning guide for childcare resource and referral agencies can be found at:
http://www.naccrra.org/disaster/docs/Disaster_Guide_MECH.pdf

A disaster preparation training program for childcare facilities can be accessed at:
http://www.naccrra.org/disaster/docs/disaster_prep_ccc.pdf

Information and links related to disaster planning for kids can be found at *FEMA for Kids*:
www.fema.gov/kids

InFocus – brief news pieces and stories geared toward children. This online resource at PBS features topics such as pet rescues, flood fighters and flood science. See:
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/infocus/floods/html>

Children and Disasters – This website provides a list of resources to help children and their families prepare for disasters.
American Academy of Pediatrics
<http://www.aap.org/disasters/resources.cfm>

National Resource Center on Advancing Emergency Preparedness for Culturally Diverse Communities
Includes a wealth of resources on helping vulnerable populations, including children, prepare for disasters.
http://www.diversitypreparedness.org/Target-Audience/Target-Audience/28/audienceId_15885/

Always Ready Kids
A website that describes a youth-run volunteer youth organization that helps young people and their families prepare for disasters.
http://www.genv.net/en-us/team/always_ready_kids

REFERENCES

¹ Sietzen, Frank. (2006, November 20). Protecting children when disaster strikes. *The Examiner*. Retrieved January 16, 2009, from www.examiner.com/a-409846~Protecting_children_when_disaster_strikes.html.

² Romig, Lou, MD. Powerpoint lecture presented at the Homeland Defense Journal Conference.