

UNIQUE NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN EMERGENCIES

When disaster strikes, children are the most vulnerable. When the people, places and routines they depend on for safety and wellbeing are affected by upheaval, children cannot adjust on their own. Yet, parents or guardians may be overwhelmed addressing the needs of their whole family's recovery. Child care centers and schools may be damaged, destroyed or used as shelters. At the same time, children are not just little adults. Infants, toddlers and children require special care and supplies at times of emergency. Children are also most likely to suffer long-term developmental, physical and psychological setbacks following a disaster. Preparing ahead of time to meet children's unique needs at times of disaster is critical to their protection.

The following unique needs of children in emergencies need to be addressed in emergency planning and preparation to help ensure children are safe and protected from harm.

RELiance ON CAREGIVERS

Children are physically and emotionally dependent on their caregivers, and rely on the guidance and direction of adults to keep them safe. During a disaster, all little eyes will be on their caregiver to know how to respond, including where to go, what to do, what to take, and how to reunite with their family. If parents, guardians and other caregivers are unprepared for a variety of disasters, children are left vulnerable, scared and at risk of harm.

SAFETY AND PROTECTION

Items that adults use every day can harm children. Medications, cleaning supplies, knives, plastic bags, coins, batteries and other small objects are unsafe for unattended children to be around. In the chaos of an emergency, it's important to have enough adults to care for children and also provide them with the supplies that they need. This rule also applies in disaster shelters, where planners and shelter managers should consider how the shelter setup can best (protect?) children. For example, are there family areas and family bathrooms set aside for parents or guardians with children?

COMMUNICATION AND IDENTIFICATION

Young children may not be able to verbally identify themselves or family members. Older children may not know who their emergency contacts are or how to reach them. The approximately 68 million children in U.S. schools or child care are separated from their family many hours a day, so all caregivers need to be equipped with the correct ID information for each child. This is critical to ensuring quick family reunification following a disaster.

MOBILITY

Infants and toddlers are unable to walk and young children may need to hold hands for balance, and move at a slow pace. Emergency plans must ensure there is a way to safely evacuate every child and necessary evacuation equipment (e.g., car seats, cribs, transportation) especially if there are a limited number of caregivers available to assist during an evacuation.

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PHYSICAL NEEDS

Children's bodies are smaller and less developed, putting them at greater risk of illness or harm during an emergency. For example, because children have thinner skin, take more breaths per minute, and are closer to the ground than adults, they are more susceptible to harmful chemicals or carbon monoxide poisoning from fire smoke or chemical leaks. Children also require age and size appropriate doses of medication, which should be included in disaster supplies kits.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Children, no matter what age, are deeply affected by experiences of death, destruction, terror and the absence or powerlessness of their parents or guardians during a disaster. Their caregivers' reactions and responses can often add an additional layer of stress. Children process these events with limited understanding, and require specialized support to develop the knowledge and healthy coping skills needed to heal and recover.

ROUTINE AND COMFORT

Children depend on routine to help them make sense of their surroundings and feel comforted. Whether it is nap time, snack time or story time, keeping schedules consistent following a disaster is crucial in helping children cope and recover. Children also tend to be comforted by certain items they can touch or hold such as blankets, stuffed animals or toys. It's critical that parents, guardians and caregivers include such items in their disaster supplies kit.

NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

Children also have unique nutritional needs that require special emergency planning. Children require more fluids pound for pound than adults, which should be accommodated by keeping plenty of fluids in disaster supplies and ensuring children continue to hydrate even in stressful situations. Kids also require healthy and nutritious food to help them grow. Children can be picky eaters, so storing child-friendly snacks such as granola bars or fruit snacks with disaster supplies kits is advisable.

DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS

A disaster may disrupt the school year or participation in child care. Children may also fall behind when they struggle with long-term physiological or psychological issues following a disaster. These setbacks, without the appropriate intervention can cause children to lag behind their peers educationally and developmentally, potentially changing the course of their lives and ability to thrive.

