

DISASTERS AND CHILD ABUSE: A FACT SHEET FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS AND PROVIDERS

This fact sheet highlights potential connections between disasters and child abuse or neglect, and offers strategies for responders to promote child safety.

WHAT DISASTER RESPONDERS AND PROVIDERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT DISASTERS AND CHILD ABUSE

- The National Institute of Justice (2011) defines child abuse and neglect as “any recent act, or failure to act, on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm to a child.”
- In communities experiencing disaster, child abuse and neglect may increase in frequency and severity. Families often face a wide range of emotional, psychological, and practical stressors in disaster situations. Parents may experience anger, frustration, and grief, as well as disrupted housing, employment, and social supports. These disruptions may increase the risk of child abuse and neglect.
- A disaster may have serious psychological effects on children as well. When child abuse and neglect occurs following a disaster, it can inflict further harm and hinder a child’s disaster recovery.
- Due to the likelihood of increased child abuse and neglect following a disaster, responders and providers should take steps to promote child safety before, during, and after an event.



DISASTERS AND CHILD ABUSE

- » The World Health Organization indicates that child abuse and neglect may be “highly prevalent” after disasters.
- » In North Carolina, the counties most affected by Hurricane Floyd saw a five-fold increase in cases of very young children with abuse-related traumatic brain injury.
- » Reports of child abuse and neglect were significantly higher in the months after Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS AND PROVIDERS

BEFORE A DISASTER

- **Learn about child abuse and neglect.** Disaster responders and providers should:
 - » *Know what child abuse and neglect is.* Review the resources under “About Child Abuse and Neglect” below, and learn the potential signs of child abuse and neglect in children (e.g., child injuries or stress-related illness, fear, anxiety, shame, hopelessness, depression, and withdrawal).
 - » *Know potential connections between disasters and child abuse and neglect.*
 - For parents, disasters can intensify feelings of anger and aggression, substance abuse, stress, and mental health concerns, which are all risk factors for child abuse and neglect.
 - When families lose stable housing or experience restricted access to churches, schools, child-care programs, or extended family, high-risk situations may arise in which children are poorly supervised and adults have less accountability, potentially increasing the risk of child abuse and neglect.
 - » *Establish uniform protocols for reporting child abuse and neglect.* Protocols should be developed by and communicated clearly between appropriate social service agencies, local law enforcement, justice officials, and other emergency and disaster response providers. Policies for reporting suspected child abuse and neglect should be as detailed as possible, so that all staff and volunteers know exactly when, how, and to whom they should report, and whether failure to report may result in professional or legal consequences.

DURING A DISASTER

- **Collaborate to prevent child abuse and neglect.** Disaster response networks should include partners with expertise in child abuse and neglect (e.g. clinical specialists or child welfare administrators) whose role in the network is to guide strategies for improved child safety. Other essential partners include child protective services; child advocacy coalitions; law enforcement and emergency management; and representation from religious, business, media, and government sectors.
 - **Ensure child safety in mass care emergency shelters.** To promote child safety, shelters should:
 - » Conduct background checks on **ALL** shelter volunteers, regardless of their age or expected
- » contact with youth. For detailed guidelines on background checks, see the Center for Disease Control’s “Preventing Child Sexual Abuse.”
 - » Train all shelter workers and volunteers to identify possible signs of child abuse and neglect, and to respond appropriately to suspicious activity.
 - » Consider optimal sleeping arrangements for families. Children should be sheltered with their parents or guardians, and parents should be reminded to closely monitor the whereabouts of their children at all times. When possible, set aside restroom and shower facilities (or establish designated times) for family use.
 - » When possible, offer temporary child care so that parents can rest or run errands. Even an hour or two of child care support may temporarily ease disaster-related strain for a parent or guardian. Ensure that at least two trained staff or volunteers are watching children at all times, and that other basic child care policies are in place. For detailed guidance on offering child care in emergency settings, see “Keeping Children Safe” resource below.
 - » Inform parents of specific steps they can take to care for themselves and their children after a disaster, such as expressing and sharing emotions; remaining in contact with friends, family, and faith communities; and taking time away from news coverage of the disaster. For helpful resources on family self-care, see “Resources for Families” below. Make crisis counseling hotline numbers available to all families.
 - » Provide safe play areas for children. Active play can reduce stress for children, which in turn may reduce stress for parents.
 - » Post child abuse and neglect hotline numbers and contacts in emergency mass care and shelter areas.



- **Know what to do if a child approaches you directly about abuse or neglect or if you suspect child abuse or neglect.** Recommendations include:

- » *Know your obligations.* First responders should know their own legal and professional responsibilities as mandated reporters (those who are required by law to report child abuse or neglect to the proper authorities). While laws may vary between regions, we encourage all disaster responders to immediately report suspected child abuse or neglect.
- » *Speak up.* Professionals or concerned citizens should call their local Child Protective Services division, law enforcement agency, or statewide hotline to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect. Remember not to interview a child about alleged abuse or neglect unless you are trained and specifically authorized to do so. Instead, simply report the information as it was presented to you and the appropriate authorities will handle necessary follow up and investigation.

- **Review/revise protocols.** In the event of a disaster, responders should refresh themselves on all policies and protocols related to child abuse and neglect. After a disaster, consult with local agencies to determine whether listed contacts or resources have changed, and update protocols accordingly.

AFTER A DISASTER

- **Raise public awareness about child abuse and neglect.** Coordinate with child advocacy organizations, law enforcement, and other partners to develop and disseminate public service messages aimed to reduce the risk of disaster-related child abuse and neglect.

These messages might include:

- » Lists of local resources for families disrupted by disaster (e.g., temporary child care, emergency shelter, or counseling).
- » Alerts to families and service providers about disaster-related risk factors for child abuse and neglect.
- » Advice to families on preventing child abuse and neglect before it starts (e.g., “step away and count to ten”).
- » Guidance on reporting suspected child abuse and neglect.
- Distribute this information at shelters and throughout the disaster-affected community. Use a range of media platforms for public service announcements (check to see if media providers will broadcast these PSAs for free or at reduced rates).
- **Connect families to established local resources.** In the longer term following a disaster, when temporary aid services begin to end, many families will continue to experience poverty, displacement, crime, mental and physical health concerns, and other stressors, each of which may increase the risk of child abuse or neglect. Connecting families with long-term local resources – including housing, child care, counseling, substance abuse treatment, law enforcement, and family support groups – may help to reduce the ongoing risk of post-disaster child abuse and neglect.



ABOUT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Child Welfare Information Gateway - <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/whatiscan.pdf>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network - www.nctsn.org

Factors that Contribute to Child Abuse and Neglect (DHHS) - <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/factors/contribute/>

RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

Disaster Distress Helpline - <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov/>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network - <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters>

Self-Care for Parents (SCAN) - <http://www.scanva.org/support-for-parents/parent-resource-center-2/self-care-for-parents/>

“Surviving a Family Crisis” (University of Delaware) <http://extension.udel.edu/factsheets/surviving-a-family-crisis-2/>

“How to Support Your Child’s Resilience in a Time of Crisis” (HealthyChildren.org) <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/How-to-Support-Your-Childs-Resilience-in-a-Time-of-Crisis.aspx>

RESOURCES FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS

Keeping Children Safe: A Policy Agenda for Child Care in Emergencies (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies) - http://www.naccrra.net/sites/default/files/publications/naccrra_publications/2012/keepingchildrensafe.pdf

Participant Handbook Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect in Disaster Emergency Shelters: Workshop for Staff and Volunteers (National Resource Center for Child Protective Services) – http://www.nrccps.org/documents/2006/pdf/Shelter_Participant_Handboo_final_Mar_2007.pdf

Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations (CDC) - <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/PreventingChildSexualAbuse-a.pdf>

The Role of First Responders in Child Maltreatment Cases: Disaster and Nondisaster Situations (Children’s Bureau) - <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/first-responders/>

Trauma-Informed Approach and Trauma-Specific Interventions (SAMHSA) - <http://www.samhsa.gov/trauma/?from=carousel&position=1&date=02282012>

OTHER REFERENCES USED IN THIS FACT SHEET

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