Special Issues of Children and Families in Humanitarian Emergencies

Karen Olness, MD
Global Child Health Program
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, OH

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Objectives

- Participants will be able to:
  - List the special needs of children in disasters.
  - Describe how developmental variations impact the reaction of children to disasters.
  - List long term consequences for children.
Convention on the Rights of the Child

- “In all actions concerning children… the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (article 3)

- A State must ensure the rights “of each child within its jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind” (article 3)
CHILD VICTIMS OF DISASTERS

- Children are especially vulnerable during any disaster.

- In general, 75-80% of displaced persons in a disaster are women and children.
Definition

Humanitarian Emergencies

- Natural or manmade disaster situations that lead to displacement of populations with public health, economic and/or political consequences.
- They are situations in which a population does not have basic necessities and in which outside organizations must intervene to provide them.
What types of disasters affect children?

- Natural disasters such as tsunamis, typhoons, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes
- Technological disasters including industrial, chemical, and radioactive disasters
- Wars
- Terrorism
Humanitarian Emergencies

- Every week there is at least one large crisis that requires external assistance.
Recent natural disasters

- Tsunami in Japan
- Tsunami in Samoa
- Typhoon in Viet Nam
- Earthquake in Indonesia
- Earthquake in Haiti
- Floods in Pakistan—20 million displaced people, estimated 12 million children.
- Earthquake in New Zealand
Humanitarian emergencies are increasing worldwide

- Every day in 2010 there were at least 18 million people displaced by disasters.
- Half of them were children.
- In 1983 there were 6 large humanitarian emergencies; in 2010 there were 34.
Currently, more than 30 countries worldwide are facing major, often long standing crises.

Twenty other countries are at high risk for serious natural or man made events.

The total number of persons at risk is between two and three billion.
Research study of 60,000 disaster victims

2002 Norris, Friedman, Watson study of 60,000 disaster victims provide strong evidence that children are among the most vulnerable population in a disaster, and long term psychological trauma is likely to inflict lifelong problems.
Humanitarian Emergencies

- In these emergencies, children are at risk for:
  - Infectious diseases
  - Loss of family members
  - Physical injuries
  - Abuse
  - Acute psychological trauma
  - Long term psychological trauma
  - Malnutrition
Immunosuppression is a risk for children in disasters

- Several research studies demonstrate that immunosuppression can occur in both adults and children who experience either natural or manmade disasters.

- This places children at greater risk of acquiring infectious diseases.
Immunosuppression in disasters


HPA and SNS systems of children affected by disaster experience

- Sex differences in salivary cortisol, alpha-amylase, and psychological functioning following Hurricane Katrina.

Children require specialized medical care as well as intense psychological support during the acute emergency phase as well as during later recovery and rehabilitation phases of disasters.
Children are not “little adults”

- **Physiologic differences from adults:**
  - Enhanced catecholamine responses
  - Maintain “normal vital signs” longer than adults. This leads to delays in recognizing life threatening illness or injury.
  - There is a need for training in how to “decode” vital signs in children
More Physiologic Differences

- Children become dehydrated more quickly than adults.

- Careful attention must be paid to clinical signs of dehydration in children.
Behavioral Differences

- Neuropsychological immaturity
- Poor judgment by children
- Abstract reasoning begins at about age 16
- Responses reflect presence and behavior of family
Unaccompanied Minors

- The most vulnerable children are unaccompanied minors, a unique and particularly vulnerable group consisting of infants, children and adolescents who are without any parent or adult guardian secondary to a variety of reasons, including death and separation.
The following events are of the greatest significance

- Death or physical injury to a family member
- Family loss of home or possessions.
- Relocation (school changes)
- Family job loss
- Parental disorganization or dysfunction
Factors Affecting Responses

- Perceived or actual life threat
- Duration of life disruption
- Familial and personal property loss
- Parental reactions and extent of family disruption
- Child’s pre-disaster state
- Probability of recurrence
Uncertainty about Loss of Loved Ones

- This increases long term trauma
- Every effort should be made to get information and to facilitate psychologic closure with respect to loss of loved ones.
Future Concerns

- Urban areas are increasing in size and are vulnerable to both natural and bioterrorism types of disasters.
- Urban populations will exceed rural populations by 2020.
- Increased populations will place more children at risk in disasters.
Partnership with the International Pediatric Association

- Addressing needs of children in humanitarian emergencies is a major focus of the IPA.
- Educational programs on these needs have been presented at the past four IPA Congresses.
- IPA has facilitated the workshops in several countries.
We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life.

Many of the things we need can wait.

The child cannot.

Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed.

To him we cannot answer “Tomorrow”.

His name is “Today”.

Gabriela Mistral

Nobel Prize-winning poet from Chile