



Photo credit: Save The Children

Child Care in Disasters:

Why It's Best to Prepare for the Worst

by Sarah Thompson

The 2017 Hurricane Season was the worst the U.S. has seen in recent history, with Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria forcing millions to evacuate their homes and costing billions of dollars in damage. In the past few months alone, we've seen historic wildfires tear across the West Coast and a Bombogenesis walloped the East. Bearing the brunt of these disasters were the youngest survivors: children whose lives were uprooted overnight. They spent days in evacuation shelters surrounded by strangers, their homes were damaged or destroyed, and the aftermath of graphic images played repeatedly through the media.

But perhaps a disaster's greatest impact on children and these communities is actually its effects on child care.



Sarah Thompson is the director of U.S. Preparedness for Save the Children, where she helps families and communities prepare for emergencies through the Get Ready Get Safe initiative. In addition to developing training resources that help caregivers

prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters, she is the author of the Prep Rally curriculum, an innovative program that teaches children preparedness skills through play and has reached more than 100,000 children. Thompson also manages national partnerships in building momentum around youth preparedness, including as a leader of FEMA's National Youth Preparedness Strategy. She holds a master's in health communications from Johns Hopkins University and is a certified emergency manager.

Following a disaster, not only do children need to return to care to help them get back to a familiar routine with caring peers and adults, but a community's resilience is dependent on child care as parents cannot return to work without it.

For Joni Council, director of Kidiversity Child Care and Development in Victoria, Texas, returning to her center after Hurricane Harvey was scary. She found the power out, water pouring in through the ceiling, and many of the books, toys and office supplies destroyed by flood waters. But for Joni, not reopening was never a question. "Some parents were threatened with being fired if they didn't go back to work," she said, "and I really missed the kids."

In the Houston area alone, more than 4,000 child care programs were affected by Harvey, with needs ranging from minor external damage, to loss of materials and mold, to major reconstruction for some that have yet to reopen.

Despite recent tragedies, many child care providers remain unprepared to face and recover from a natural disaster, which could threaten their very existence. Even though the Child Care Development Block Grant Reauthori-

zation of 2014 requires state-regulated child care to meet basic emergency preparedness requirements—including having evacuation, family reunification and children with special needs plans—there have been significant delays in the trickle down and implementation of this guidance, partially because of the lack of funds to help educate and enforce. Making the issue even more complex is a current gap in policy that makes for-profit child care programs ineligible for disaster recovery funds released through the Stafford Act (a presidentially declared major disaster), meaning that if a child care center is not prepared prior to a disaster, it will be even more difficult to recover and reopen child care programs quickly if at all.

It seems that threat of the next big disaster is a matter of when not if, as climate trends are indicating more frequent and more extreme weather events in the future. While we can't prevent disasters from happening, we can be better prepared to face them. And when it comes to protecting children, it takes the cooperation of the whole child care community and engagement at all levels including child care resource and referral agencies, providers and the families they serve.

Building Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies to be Resilience Hubs

Child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies can play a unique role in helping their programs prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. That's why it's crucial that CCR&Rs have their own emergency plan that includes a plan for continuity of operations, clarifies emergency roles for staff, and includes a protocol for communicating with and assessing the operational capacity of their programs during a disaster.

As a primary facilitator of training opportunities, the CCR&R should also prioritize the emergency training opportunities, ensuring offerings go beyond planning requirements and help providers problem solve for practical implementation problems—which may include helping providers connect to other community programs to create mutual aid agreements or emergency management or first responders who can offer technical guidance and connect plans to larger community plans.

The CCR&R can and should be a champion for children in emergencies in their communities. Too often, children are left out of the emergency planning process, but by creating relationships with emergency services, CCR&Rs can help ensure that first responders are aware of children's needs, caregiver plans and know where children may be during an emergency. Conversely, during an emergency, CCR&Rs can be more connected with emergency and community services that can help providers recover.

Helping Care Providers Plan and Connect

Caregivers are on the front lines of children's safety every day but practical preparation for emergencies is still lacking. Save the Children and Child

Care Aware of America developed eight best practices to help child care providers create plans that protect kids in a variety of emergency situations.

Make a written plan. The size of your program will determine how detailed a plan you need. However, depending on the disaster at hand, children and staff may need to shelter in place, assemble outside the center, or leave the premises entirely. A disaster can render any option unusable, so well thought out alternatives should be in place. A comprehensive emergency plan:

- Addresses the different needs of children, volunteers and staff.
- Identifies a clear leadership structure in emergencies and informs everyone about their roles and responsibilities during an emergency.
- Can be shared with local emergency response agencies, partners, staff, volunteers and parents/guardians.
- Accounts for the care, evacuation and transport of children and employees with disabilities and those with access and functional needs.
- Provides proof of your preparedness activities to licensing and accreditation agencies.

Maintain current health and safety information for children and staff.

Up-to-date data files, in portable storage devices, are vital during an emergency. In case of an offsite evacuation, all children, staff members and volunteers should have current emergency contact information, emergency releases and identification badges that identify the center name and phone number. Also be sure to compile rosters identifying the unique needs of each individual child and staff member.

Develop and implement family communication and reunification plans and backup plans. Families expect to be quickly notified when an emergency

happens. Routinely update parent or guardian contact numbers and emergency information. Plan how you will alert parents or guardians in an actual emergency. Because telephone service could be disrupted, prepare a backup plan, perhaps asking a local radio or television station to broadcast your program's status.

Identify emergency team and procedures for evacuation, sheltering and lockdown. When disaster strikes, each volunteer or staff member needs to know his or her responsibilities. The emergency team (no matter how big or small) should ensure the following critical tasks are covered:

- Overall response coordination
- Parent/Guardian communication
- Disaster supplies kit distribution
- First aid provision
- Child supervision
- Evacuation

Once roles are set, establish an emergency warning system that will alert all staff and volunteers to an emergency situation and provide instructions on how to respond.

Assemble emergency equipment and supplies. With the proper materials, you will be able to better handle many of the issues that occur during an emergency. In addition to a first aid kit, have basic emergency equipment like a battery-operated NOAA weather radio, flashlights and phones on hand. Also assemble a disaster supplies kit with enough materials like non-perishable foods, bottled water, diapers and toilet tissue to last at least 72 hours. With these tools, you will be better prepared to communicate with first responders and parents, provide first aid, monitor weather reports, and feed and care for children during a prolonged shelter-in-place or lock-down emergency. Ensure

that emergency supplies are up-to-date and stored in an easy-to-carry container in an accessible location.

Practice your plan. Having an emergency plan will be of little value unless you practice it. Create a schedule for emergency drills that cover different types of emergencies and include all children, staff and volunteers. Drills should occur throughout the year at different times of the day, including nap time.

Include children and adults with all levels of abilities in your plans. Ensure that your emergency plan accounts for the care, evacuation and transport of children and employees with disabilities and those with access and functional needs.

Protect program information and assets. Disasters can significantly damage child care facilities, hindering business operations. Safeguarding important enrollment data, employment records and financial information can help your program recover more quickly after a disaster and help restore a sense of normalcy to the children in your care.

Engaging Families In Preparedness Activities at Site and at Home

Having a great emergency plan on paper won't matter unless parents know their role in it. Educate families on key parts of your emergency plan including communication systems, family reunification protocol, and primary evacuation locations. Help parents keep their emergency contact information current by creating a schedule to regularly update records or making it part of a family engagement event.

Currently, fewer than half of U.S. families have an emergency plan, meaning they haven't had a conversation about safety with their children, which may complicate the effectiveness of your program plan when children are worried about where Mommy is or

that Mommy doesn't know where they are. Encourage parents to make a family emergency plan at home by sending home preparedness resources. Another great way to get the message home is through children themselves. Teaching children basic safety skills from the start can encourage them to share what they learned or what they practiced with their families.

Preparing Yourself and Your Family

When a disaster strikes we can't help but worry about the safety of our own children first. Personal preparedness is the bedrock of resilience throughout child care communities and though each disaster situation is different, having basic decisions made and plans in place will help you focus on the safety of the children in your care.

Learn about the emergency plans of your child's school and caregivers, and create your own family plans that include details such as knowing emergency contacts, meet up locations, and gathering basic disaster supplies so they are ready to go.

Starting Small Can Pay Off Big

Thinking about all the risks your program faces or all the steps needed to thoroughly prepare may seem overwhelming. But remember that even simple steps can go a long way in protecting children. You may not have the funds to purchase all your emergency supplies, but you may be able to get updated parent contact information. You may not be a computer or IT expert, but you can keep copies of program documents in an offsite lockbox. You may not be an emergency expert, but there is someone in your town who is. At the end of the day, as care providers, we do our best for children, no matter what it takes.