

Victimized children involved with disasters more likely to have mental health issues

August 26 2010

A new national study not only has confirmed that children who have been exposed to disasters from earthquakes to fires are more prone to emotional problems, but many of those children may already have been experiencing maltreatment, domestic abuse or peer violence that could exacerbate those issues.

Researchers found that [children](#) who had experienced such victimization on top of exposure to disaster had more anxiety, depression, and aggression than children who only experienced a disaster. But, the authors say, these [disasters](#) can offer an opportunity for community organizations and first-responders to be in contact with children that might be suffering silently and need support.

"We have known for a long time that children who experience disasters have emotional and behavioral problems that seem to be related to the disaster. This study makes it clear that, for some children, those problems may also be related to other stress events in their lives," said lead author Kathryn Becker-Blease, a child development psychologist with Oregon State University.

Becker-Blease and colleagues at the University of New Hampshire looked at data from a nationally representative sample of 2,030 children aged two to 17 years. Their findings are in a special issue of the journal *Child Development* that focuses on disasters and their impact on children. The research was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

The study, taken from phone interviews with children and parents, shows that 4.1 percent of children had experienced a disaster in the past year and that 13.9 percent of the sample reported a lifetime exposure to a variety of disasters. In the study, disaster was defined to include both minor disasters, like home fires, and major disasters, like large earthquakes.

In the Child Development study, only two of the 70 children who experienced victimization in the past year received counseling for emotional or behavioral problems.

"It is a good time to screen children, to put them in contact with people who can help them because issues such as sexual abuse or neglect are still incredibly stigmatized," she said. "So a disaster like a fire or flood can put these children in contact with social services that can then identify other issues beyond the immediate trauma."

Children's reactions to disasters and other kinds of stressful events varied widely, especially for adolescents.

"After a disaster, we tell parents to remain calm, to resume a routine, and to assure children that adults will keep them safe. In reality, not all families provide calm, safe places with predictable routines. This study shows that children in those families are at higher risk for emotional and behavioral problems. We should be thinking about ways to help those families, while recognizing that most families cope with disasters well with less support."

Bob Porter is a retired licensed clinical social worker who volunteers as a Disaster Mental Health responder for the Oregon Trail Chapter of the American Red Cross. He has spent more than 30 years in the field of disaster mental health and post-trauma psychological intervention, including extensive work with victimized and traumatized children.

Volunteers like Porter who are part of the organization's disaster mental health team, assess what types of psychological support might be needed for survivors and victims following major disasters and traumatic events. They also train other Red Cross disaster and emergency responders on how to sensitively deal with disaster victims.

"We provide people with a variety of psychological supports, both in the immediate aftermath of disaster and in the short-term, connecting people with key resources and making referrals when there are more serious mental health issues involved," he said. "We provide a back-up to local mental health services and help people get additional psychological support, and appropriate treatment if indicated, that they may need."

Porter said the results of Becker-Blease's study are not surprising to him. It is consistent with his impressions over the years in working with disaster [victims](#) and survivors, especially children who may have had previous traumas in their life.

"One of the things we try to prepare disaster mental health and crisis responders for is that under the stress of a disaster, people can experience a wide range of reactions and behavior," he said. "We advise them to be aware that some of the reactions they are seeing in survivors may be related to other stressors and underlying issues, possibly even traumas, that children and other family members have experienced prior to the current event happening."

Porter is currently in the process of training Red Cross mental health teams who will be heading to the Gulf Coast in a few weeks to help with some of the ongoing psychological and [mental health](#) issues in communities affected by the Gulf Oil Spill disaster.

Provided by Oregon State University

Citation: Victimized children involved with disasters more likely to have mental health issues (2010, August 26) retrieved 15 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-08-victimized-children-involved-disasters-mental.html>

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