Chapter 9
Disaster Relief

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ABSTRACT

Child life specialists have been supporting children and families in disaster relief settings for years. It is imperative to understand the needs of children affected by disasters and continue to integrate child life services to best support the psychological and emotional outcomes of children and families. This chapter will define disasters and the disaster management cycle, overview key factors in assessing children's needs related to disasters, identify how child life services are utilized during each phase of disaster relief, and identify future opportunities for child life services in disaster relief.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 400 natural disasters and 35 armed conflicts occur worldwide each year. In 2021, nearly 10,500 people lost their lives due to disastrous events such as the Haiti earthquake and flooding in India (AON, 2021). Active shooter incidents are on the rise; in 2000 the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported 3 incidents, by 2020 that number increased to 40 (*Active Shooter Incidents 20-Year Review, 2000-2019*, 2021). About 73 million children live in the United States in 2022, approximately 13.9% of those children have been exposed to a disaster and a fourth of those will experience multiple disasters during childhood (Becker-Blease et al., 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2022).

With increasing numbers like this, it is imperative to understand the impact these disastrous events have on children. Certified Child Life Specialists can support resilience by implementing effective interventions to the most vulnerable populations. This chapter will define disasters and the disaster management cycle, overview key factors in assessing children's needs related to disasters, identify how child life services are used during each phase of disaster relief, and identify future opportunities for child life services in disaster relief.

DEFINING DISASTERS

Disasters can be broadly or narrowly defined. In general, disasters are natural or human-made events that cause sweeping damage, hardship, and/or loss of life across one or more strata of society (Bonanno et al., 2010; R. W. Perry, 2018). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) defines disaster as:

An event that results in large numbers of deaths and injuries; causes extensive damage or destruction of facilities that provide and sustain human needs; produces an overwhelming demand on state and local response resources and mechanisms; causes a severe long-term effect on general economic activity; and severely affects state, local, and private sector capabilities to begin and sustain response activities. (Emergency Management in the United States, n.d.)

There is not one universal categorization of disasters, however, consistency does exist in that they tend to be organized into 2-3 categories: 1) natural disasters 2) human-made disasters, and 3) a third variation that includes disasters such as technological, infrastructure, or public health disasters. Natural disasters include events such as: flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and wildfires. Human-made disasters include events such as: incidence of mass violence, school shootings, terrorism, and human conflicts. Examples often put into the third category include: pandemics, building or bridge collapses, transportation crashes, nuclear reactor incidents, and gas explosions.

The key differentiation between an emergency and a disaster is in the size of the event and the resources needed to support and manage the event. Disasters are larger scale, sweeping across a community, and require response and recovery services that are greater than what local entities can provide. Whereas, emergencies are typically smaller in size and resources needed are usually matched locally. Disaster declarations largely decide the resources requested to support the community impacted by the disaster. Declarations are first declared at the local level; once those resources and local capabilities are expected to be exceeded or are exceeded, the state is requested to respond. This repeats at the state and federal level as needed. For example, when a tornado occurs, the local emergency responders, hospitals, and other local community resources are the first on the scene providing support and help to rescue survivors. As those resources are overwhelmed, additional support from nearby communities is requested. From there the disaster response circle broadens to include state resources and support; if needed federal and international resources are requested. Due to this structure, it is imperative that child life services collaborate with disaster management organizations, managers, and officials on all levels: local, state, federal, and international to maximize their reach and effectiveness and decrease their response time.

RESPONDING TO DISASTERS - THE DISASTER MANAGEMENT CYCLE

Disaster management requires that a variety of disciplines, practitioners, academics, professionals, volunteers, governmental agencies, non-governmental agencies, and international organizations coordinate efforts to respond to and reduce, avoid, or mitigate the potential losses that occur when disasters strike. For this collaborative work, the disaster management cycle focuses on four phases: mitigation (or prevention), preparedness, response, and recovery (*Emergency Management in the United States*, n.d.). Figure 1 is the Disaster Management Cycle used to organize efforts to support communities during disasters.

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