



## What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Disaster Preparedness and Response Professionals

In preparing and responding to the safety and well-being of children and families during all phases of disaster, child welfare and disaster preparedness and response (DPR) professionals work most effectively in partnership.<sup>1</sup> This guide provides an overview of child welfare, describes how DPR and child welfare professionals can support one another's efforts, and lists resources for more information.

### What Is Child Welfare?

Each State or locality has a public child welfare agency responsible for receiving and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect and assessing child and family needs. These agencies are governed by State laws that define child protection roles and processes. (See <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/>)

Child welfare comprises an array of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care successfully for their children. Child welfare agencies typically:

- Support or coordinate services to prevent child abuse and neglect
- Receive and investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect
- Assess child and family needs, strengths, and resources
- Provide services to families that need help protecting and caring for their children
- Arrange for out-of-home care (foster care, kinship care, or other) when children and youth cannot remain safely at home
- Support the well-being of children living with relatives and foster and adoptive families, including ensuring that their health, mental health, and educational needs are addressed
- Work with children, youth, and families to achieve family reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children and youth leaving out-of-home care

During a disaster, DPR staff may work with child welfare agencies to take on some of the traditional child welfare roles of helping children and families. It is vital that child welfare and DPR staff work together in planning for disaster response to ensure the safety of children and their families involved with child welfare and others who may need child welfare services.

<sup>1</sup> Disaster preparedness and response professionals include a broad range of public health, behavioral health, and emergency management personnel such as nurses, doctors, rescue and recovery responders, crisis counselors, EMTs, and other community-based staff who are trained as responders or who volunteer in preparedness efforts.

## How Can DPR Professionals Assist Child Welfare Professionals Before, During, and After a Disaster?

Many professionals and organizations have trained responders available to help child welfare providers meet the needs of their clients before, during, and after a disaster. These include emergency management, law enforcement, fire services, EMTs, nurses, physicians, and crisis counselors, as well as volunteers who are trained as responders. It is vital that all DPR professionals are aware of the child welfare staff's efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of children receiving child welfare services and to support families and mitigate any increased risk for maltreatment.

The following are some ways that DPR professionals may work with child welfare:

- **Planning for disaster response.** DPR professionals can help child welfare agencies develop and refine plans to deal with natural, manmade, and medical disasters (i.e., an all-hazards approach to disasters). Federal law P.L. 109-288 requires States to have disaster plans for child welfare services. Child welfare plans should address the needs of children in out-of-home care and those receiving in-home services, those in privatized systems, families and foster families, and child welfare staff. Plans should cover information/records, communication, equipment, funding, and management/leadership needs over both the short and long term. DPR professionals can help agencies identify their disaster planning needs, provide input on disaster plans, and help agencies practice drills and make physical preparations. Working together will ensure that child welfare agency plans coordinate with other community disaster plans.
- **Supporting child welfare agency work during a disaster.** DPR professionals familiar with local child welfare agency disaster plans may find it easier to help agencies carry out their plans. As agencies monitor children and families to ensure that there is adequate communication, safe housing, food, medical care, transportation, and other necessities, DPR professionals can provide the necessary disaster-specific information and instruction as well as any emergency resources, such as shelters and transportation.
- **Connecting children and families affected by disaster with child welfare services, as appropriate.** After a disaster, children and families who have never been involved with child welfare may suddenly require child welfare services. Children may be orphaned, abused, neglected, or otherwise injured. They may be separated from family. DPR professionals can help connect these children with child welfare staff and services.
- **Identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect.** Most DPR professionals are mandated reporters and thus required by State laws to report suspected abuse and neglect to the appropriate child welfare agency (see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/manda/>). In a disaster, children may be more susceptible to abuse and neglect, particularly if they have been displaced from their homes. DPR professionals should be vigilant in watching for signs of abuse and neglect in both residential and institutional settings, including shelters. For information on identifying maltreatment, see *What Is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/whatiscan.pdf>.
- **Using combined disaster crisis intervention and trauma-informed approaches.** Experiencing a disaster may be expressed by children and youth as stress (or trauma) reactions, and these vary by the age of the child/youth. They often include behavior changes such as withdrawal or defiance, aggression, or mood swings. Supporting children and youth can reduce these problems; however, when problems persist, they may result in psychiatric diagnoses, substance abuse problems, social problems, and school problems.<sup>2</sup> Responses to disaster may be exacerbated if a child/youth or family is already involved in the child welfare system. Both DPR and child welfare staff may be interested in Psychological First Aid, the evidence-informed model for use in the acute phase of disaster response.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on adverse childhood experiences (ACE), see <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm>.

This model teaches workers to help survivors reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning (see <http://learn.nctsn.org/course/index.php?categoryid=11>).

- **Understanding distress responses in the aftermath of a disaster.** DPR professionals can advise on and model distress responses that will help children cope. Furthermore, providing information to parents and other caregivers on ways to protect children from intense exposure to disasters (e.g., evacuating when necessary, limiting television exposure of graphic and disturbing images, using calming techniques if children are injured or afraid) may help children fare better. Children and youth involved with child welfare may already be at higher risk for stress reactions,<sup>3</sup> so it becomes essential that their caregivers respond appropriately. There is no set timeline for reactions and recovery. In general, after approximately 1 month, if children and youth continue to have serious disaster distress responses, screening and referral by trained behavioral/mental health professionals may be necessary.

## How Can Child Welfare Professionals Assist DPR Professionals Before, During, and After a Disaster?

DPR professionals and other emergency staff need to be aware that child welfare staff can offer unique assistance in helping children and youth affected by disasters. Child welfare staff can provide information to DPR professionals about the impact of trauma on children. Sharing information and looking at the overlap of responses will help provide appropriate support of children, youth, and families in times of disaster:

- **Providing input on State disaster preparedness and response plans.** The training and inclusion of child welfare workers in disaster preparedness planning, integration with emergency management, public health and behavioral health response activities, and development of information-sharing processes is crucial for the success of overall State disaster planning.
- **Leveraging their disaster plans to meet the needs of children and families.** Child welfare agencies can draw on their disaster plans for communication, management, and resources to track the children and families receiving services and arrange for them to continue receiving services and funds—sometimes in a predetermined alternative location. The required planning by child welfare agencies across jurisdictions may alleviate needs at the disaster site.
- **Using their expertise in child maltreatment to enhance child protection.** Child welfare workers can help monitor shelters or other relocation environments and provide expertise on keeping children safe from child maltreatment.
- **Working across agencies to help families receive services.** Child welfare workers have experience working with professionals in related disciplines, such as housing, substance use, education, and community services to support families. They may be able to direct DPR staff to the right resource when needs are identified.

Working together, DPR and child welfare professionals can plan for disaster response and ensure that children, youth, and families receive appropriate supports in the aftermath of disaster. This collaborative approach also increases the likelihood of resilience and an overall healthy recovery.

## Resources

- Child Welfare Information Gateway: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/disaster-preparedness/>
- *Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems: A Framework for Child Welfare Agencies* by the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement: <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/rcpdfs/copingwithdisasters.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families. (2013). *Child well-being spotlight: Children placed outside the home and children who remain in-home after a maltreatment investigation have similar and extensive service needs*. Retrieved from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/children\\_placed\\_outside\\_spotlight\\_2\\_final.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/children_placed_outside_spotlight_2_final.pdf)

- *Disaster Preparedness Resource Guide for Child Welfare Agencies* by the Annie E. Casey Foundation: <http://www.aecf.org/resources/disaster-preparedness-resource-guide-for-child-welfare-agencies/>
- Emergency Preparedness and Response, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/>
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA):
  - Resources for children: <http://www.ready.gov/kids>
  - *Post-Disaster Reunification of Children: A Nationwide Approach*: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/85559>
- The Ready Campaign:
  - *Listen, Protect, and Connect: Psychological First Aid for Children and Parents*: [http://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/documents/files/psychological\\_firstaid\[1\].pdf](http://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/documents/files/psychological_firstaid[1].pdf)
  - Military Family Preparedness: <http://www.ready.gov/considerations/military-family-preparedness>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <http://www.nctsn.org>
- *National Commission on Children and Disasters 2010 Report to the President and Congress*, Administration for Children and Families: <http://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/nccd/20110426214356/http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohsepr/nccdreport/index.html>
- Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response, Administration for Children and Families: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohsepr>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):
  - Disaster Distress Helpline: <http://www.disasterdistress.samhsa.gov/>
  - Disaster Behavioral Health Disaster App: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-Behavioral-Health-Disaster-Response-Mobile-App/PEP13-DKAPP-1>
  - Disaster Technical Assistance Center: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>
  - *Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event: A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers*: <http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA12-4732/SMA12-4732.pdf>

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The Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is the Federal agency with primary responsibility for administering Federal child welfare programs. The Children's Bureau works with State and local agencies to develop programs that focus on strengthening families, protecting children from abuse and neglect, and finding permanent families for those who cannot safely return to their homes. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/index.htm>

The Children's Bureau's information clearinghouse, Child Welfare Information Gateway, links professionals to thousands of child welfare resources (<https://www.childwelfare.gov>), including items on disaster preparedness (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/disaster-preparedness>).



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