



Hurricane Katrina

Working With Parents and Children in the Aftermath

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I had the distinct honor of being one of the many volunteers who were assigned to participate in the relief efforts. I arrived in the New Orleans area less than two weeks after the storm slammed into the Gulf Coast.

The impact of this disaster on children was indescribable. Many were separated from their parents or had lost them in the storm. Children and their families were without sufficient food, water and shelter for days. They lost their belongings and their security.

In the shelter filled with 400 residents, every effort was made to let families have their area and build some semblance of a normal family routine. Children are more vulnerable to trauma because they are dependent on their parents to help them manage negative emotions such as fear and anxiety. Like adults, children can have flashbacks and nightmares as a reaction to trauma. Parents affected by Katrina were surprised at how much their children had taken in. At times crisis counseling focused on parents who were so overwhelmed that they could not comprehend what their children were communicating. For those parents, we needed to hear their cries so that they could hear the cries of their children. We worked to help both adults and children clarify their confusion, help them envision how things would get better, and ways in which the situation would be resolved in the long run. The children had many questions, wanting to know how the water would be drained, wondering if they would build more houses and schools. We all had to be patient with repetitive questions for which there was no satisfactory answer.

Katrina was not a single traumatic event. For many it continues to be a series of traumatic experiences compounded by the compromise of two stabilizing factors for children: family and community.