

# Conditions of Children's Place, Play, and Services in Emergency Shelters

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## Introduction

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The recently released *Interim Report of the National Commission on Children and Disaster* (NCCD 2009) characterizes current US policies toward children (age 0-18) in disaster-related emergencies as tantamount to "benign neglect" (ii). These conditions arise from the lack of research on age-specific support or services tailored to the unique needs of children during and immediately after a large-scale disaster. This deficit in planning and response was especially obvious during the 2005 Gulf Coastal hurricane season (Abramson et al. 2008). The events that unfolded after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in fall of 2005 prompted the US Congress to pass the *Kids in Disasters Well-being, Safety and Health Act of 2007*, which established the NCCD and served as the impetus for the interim report (NCCD 2009). Previous research has also identified the unique pressures on children in disaster settings. For example, Murray (1994) reported that "children, even in good times, are often unheard but in distress they are apt to be simply not seen...especially children in families have an invisibility that requires unusual perceptiveness (and concern) to penetrate" (192). The NCCD report identifies nine areas of focus for future research and planning ranging from how child care organizations should respond to disasters to the need for a national database and resource center devoted exclusively to the needs of children and those responsible for child safety and welfare during disasters.

## Research Questions

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The research proposed here will address some of the deficits in information, planning, and management identified in the NCCD report. Specifically, our team proposes to conduct field work in the wake of a large-scale US natural disaster. Our team will assess the type and degree of activities, accommodations, and services provided to children (0-18) in emergency shelters. The proposed research could be mobilized for a disaster event in a five state region, including Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi. This geographic scope is proposed to enable the team (based in Central Texas) to conduct the field assessments in a timely and cost efficient manner. Research questions have been developed across three related dimensions of emergency sheltering (activities, organization, and accommodation). The specific research questions are:

### Activities

- What activities (*educational or entertainment*) are provided specifically for children ages 0-18?
- To what degree are activities aimed at play (*active vs. social*), education (*cognitive vs. creative*), or distraction (*physical vs. fantasy*)?

### Organization

- To what degree are these services *pre-planned vs. ad hoc*?
- What are the sources (*local contributors vs. national NGOs*) of the educational or entertainment resources provided?
- Who is in charge of the distribution and management of the resources provided to children?
- What differences exist between shelter sites and/or shelter providers (FEMA, Red Cross, churches, public schools, etc.)?

### Accommodations

- Are there designated areas for families with small children?
- Are children afforded designated areas for rest, recreation, or peer-interaction?
- Are there services at the shelter meant to specifically provide aid, support, or counseling to children?

## Data and Methodology

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The research team will consist of the three Co-PIs and one graduate student recruited from the Co-PIs' departments at Texas State University. In the event that any of the Co-PIs are not available at the time of a disaster event, additional graduate students will be invited to fill out the 4-person team. The research team will conduct site visits at as many shelters as time permits in the immediate aftermath of a large-scale disaster event. A list of shelters will be gathered from the American Red Cross, local news reporting sources, local city websites, and FEMA notices during the pre-event evacuation process. Loosely following a *snowball sample* method, additional shelters will be identified during visits to the primary sites. This approach may be particularly important in identifying church or school-based shelters within the impacted community.

At each shelter team members will first identify themselves and the granting-source to shelter managers to gain permission to make non-intrusive observations of the site conditions. Based on the research questions above, a hard-copy survey rubric will be developed prior to the field visit, these documents will allow researchers to quickly and consistently gather primary data regarding the type and degree of accommodations and/or services being provided for children onsite. This portion of the data collection will render a nominal (*type*) and ordinal (*degree*) data set. Where appropriate, photographs will be taken to support the empirical data on the areas or accommodations designated specifically for children. Surveys and photographs will be compiled at the end of each day and entered into a computer database for future analysis.

Every attempt will be made to preserve the anonymity of the staff, volunteers, government officials, and especially the children and their families in these efforts. When time and opportunity permit, team members will conduct open-ended interviews with staff, volunteers, and parents regarding the child-oriented accommodations and services provided onsite. In the presence, and with the permission, of parents, children may be asked to describe (verbally or graphically) their own impressions of their experiences at the shelter. These secondary interview data will only be collected when convenience and discretion allow.

## Need for Quick Response Data Collection

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There exists very little research and empirical data on the sheltering conditions afforded children in disaster events. There is even less relating to the specific services or activities that are provided. In some cases, the American Red Cross and FEMA provide post-event reports containing broad assessments of the demographics of shelter participants, but there is no formal database describing the number of children served in shelters during past events or the specific opportunities for play, education, or distraction afforded them. Without visiting shelters in full operation in the immediate aftermath of a disaster event, these data could not be collected with any degree of accuracy or validity. In the event that shelter staff and volunteers were to be interviewed after the fact, the detail and accuracy of the data related to our research questions would be greatly reduced.

## Theoretical and Applied Benefits of Research

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The data collected here could prove particularly useful in helping to achieve the goals of the NCCD as they relate to child care in emergency shelter conditions, child welfare in disasters, and as seed-data for a national resource center on children and disasters. In addition to the required Quick Response Report, the Co-PIs anticipate presenting their results at national conferences, pursuing a journal publication, and leveraging this research for additional external funding on the topic.

Theoretical benefits of this research are related to geographic education theory associated with place, play, and environment, as well as psychological theory on children in disaster. The play area is an environment of social learning and interaction for children. Environmental characteristics such as space size, interaction opportunity, and explorations potentially influence behavior and cognition (Moore 1974, Smith 1974, Moore 1990, Goodenough 2008, Brown and Vaughn 2009, National Institute for Play 2009). The researchers expect to extend the utility of the data collected through this research in an effort to develop standards of play-space at emergency shelters where children continue to learn and engage in social interactions despite the disruptions of the event. Additionally, this research will aid in developing a list of age appropriate educational materials to encourage formal learning and discussion of experiences at emergency shelters. Children's mental and behavioral health needs are not systematically documented nor well understood (Hepburn 2006, NCCD 2009, Wessells 2009). The present project will also assess the need for psychological first aid, social support, bereavement counseling and cognitive-behavioral interventions as well as the availability of these services from professionals and paraprofessionals in the disaster area.

## Budget

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### Four Day Trip:

Day 1	Night 1	Day 2	Night 2	Day 3	Night 3	Day 4
Travel from San Marcos	Hotel	Site Visit	Hotel	Site Visit	Hotel	Return to San Marcos

Auto Rental	\$ 325.00
Gas (1200 mi. max. round trip / 24mpg / 3.50 per gal.)	\$ 175.00
Hotel (3 nights / two rooms / approx. \$90.00 per room)	\$ 540.00
Per Diem (4 participants / \$60.00 per day)	\$ 960.00
Estimated Maximum Total	\$2000.00

In the event that travel costs can be minimized due to distance or the availability of less costly housing for the research team, up to two additional graduate students may be invited to participate. Photography equipment and field survey documents will be provided by PI's and university departmental support.

## Works Cited

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**Complete CVS for Co-PIs are attached to email submission**