
Issues in Clinical Child Psychology

Children and Disasters

Edited by
Conway F. Saylor

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CONWAY F. SAYLOR

The Citadel

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To Bart, Sara, Paul, and Maggie Jo
and
to the family, friends, and former strangers
whose support enabled us to recover after our own disaster

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Foreword

This book is one most people would rather not think about—until they need it! Natural disaster, technological catastrophe, and calamity caused by aberrant human behavior are things most of us would rather not have to think about. By definition they are overwhelming, generally beyond preventive control, and highly disruptive. Often they leave death, massive destruction, mind-numbing exhaustion, and utter helplessness in their wake. Dr. Saylor's moving preface sums up the reality well: One cannot truly grasp the psychological impact of a disaster unless one lives through it.

A hurricane, earthquake, flood, industrial plant explosion, nuclear accident, airplane crash, or armed hostage taking is a story for the nightly news until it happens in your neighborhood or affects someone you love. Many disasters leave adults feeling helpless, depressed, looking for answers that do not exist, or experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress. Given their cognitive, emotional, and social immaturity, children would seem to be at even greater risk. Magical thinking, the loss of family and caregivers, immature coping systems, and other characteristics of children all seem destined to yield ever greater distress for child survivors of disasters. Until now, there were only isolated scholarly papers peppered about the literature for emergency planners and mental health professionals to draw on in assisting such children.

As its centennial gift to the nation, in 1993 the American Psychological Association developed a disaster intervention program in coordination with the American Red Cross. How fitting it is that this book should follow closely on the heels of that event. The effort to integrate theory, research, and practice in a single volume is highly successful. Saylor and her colleagues have provided a valuable resource for disaster planners, crisis interveners, clinicians, and social science investigators. This book truly

complements psychology's efforts to facilitate the protection and rehabilitation of children who will be victims in future disasters.

Nietzsche told us, "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger." Some would say that is making the best of a bad situation. Unsatisfied with mere survival, Saylor and her colleagues show us the way to prepare for and foster the recovery of our children in ways Nietzsche could not have imagined.

GERALD P. KOOCHER, Ph.D.

Harvard Medical School

Series Preface

The untoward events of *any* year call for this book on disasters and children. Events of 1992 in particular emphasized the need we saw for a compendium of research-based and intervention-oriented presentations on the psychological aspects of children who have experienced disasters, whether natural or human-caused. Thus, we find it appropriate that the first volume in this book series, *Issues in Clinical Child Psychology*, clearly and directly fulfills the specific needs of mental health professionals working with children in practice and research under extraordinary circumstances.

Indeed, this book series was established to provide necessary professional resources on traditional as well as newly emerging issues within the psychological, behavioral, and developmental perspectives on childhood problems. The books in the series will present a variety of viewpoints, representing the divergent approaches to children's healthy development. The series will feature authored and edited books focused on the conceptualization and assessment of, intervention in, and prevention of problems within clinical child and pediatric psychology. A wide range of topics will be included, from developmental psychopathology and child psychiatry to explorations of the communities, schools, and family systems within which children grow, from behavioral pediatrics and child health to considerations of psychology's role in the evolving public policy that affects children. The series' central theme will be challenges to and contributors of behavioral science to the developing child.

We are pleased to present this first volume in the series, *Children and Disasters*, edited by Conway F. Saylor, with chapters by carefully selected contributors, each presenting an important aspect of the prevention and treatment of children's mental health problems following crises. Dr. Saylor has prepared a highly useful and valuable composite of what is currently

known in this field. Its worth will particularly be demonstrated in future years, within the inevitable panoply of calamities affecting children and families in the world.

MICHAEL C. ROBERTS
LIZETTE PETERSON

Preface

This is the book I needed in September of 1989. As my family, my neighbors, my friends and colleagues, and I faced the staggering task of rebuilding after hurricane Hugo, I wished I knew what psychology had to offer by way of wisdom and data. As a clinical child psychologist, I knew of relevant research in the areas of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress and coping, and trauma in children. However, the disaster situation seemed distinct from other areas in its widespread impact on children and their families. It seemed important that someone generate a comprehensive volume that would combine relevant theory and basic research, critical reviews of the studies and procedures available to date, and practical observations for the professional thrust into the disaster environment either by choice or by happenstance.

Like many of my fellow authors, I underestimated the extent to which my personal experiences with a disaster and its aftermath would motivate and shape the character of my work. It is striking to me that this is one of the hallmarks of the disaster area: Those who touch it professionally are inevitably moved by it personally, and many who have been personally touched by it go on to make contributions to developments in the field. This phenomenon makes sense in the context of the definition we have chosen here for disaster: a traumatic event out of the realm of ordinary experience that is relatively sudden in onset and adversely affects a large group of individuals, in this case, children. Fortunately, it is out of the realm of "ordinary experience" for most of us to enter a scene in which children have been gunned down on their school playground, have witnessed the destruction of their homes and communities by natural disasters, have hidden in fear of death from military assaults, and/or have discovered the adults on the scene to be as powerless as themselves in the face of sudden and terrible danger. We are necessarily jarred loose from

our cool objectivity, at least temporarily, as we find ourselves drawn to understand and assist children who are victims of disaster.

Although the disaster environment does have the special qualities of being rare and personally compelling, there is a solid foundation of basic and applied research to orient and guide the professional entering this area of clinical intervention and/or research. It is both possible and necessary for those becoming involved with children and the systems that surround them (families, schools, and communities) to be familiar with the disaster literature, including theory as well as the observations and data already accumulated. This work is too important and complex to be approached without the proper orientation.

Perhaps you have picked up this book because you are suddenly in the midst of a disaster involving children: A tornado struck your town, a train derailed in your community, or a school selected for senseless violence was close to your home. Suddenly, you are being called on to become an "instant expert." I designed this volume with you in mind. I encourage you to immerse yourself in Chapters 1–4, which orient you to the crucial basic knowledge of stress, coping, PTSD, and grief in developmental and systems contexts. Take the time to discover what has already been observed about children in similar crises by examining the extensive reviews in Chapters 5–8. Finally, take to heart the thoughtful and practical observations made on assessment and intervention in Chapters 3, 9, 10, and 11. Most of these authors have been where you are now and have tried to capture, in succinct form, the key issues you may face.

Ideally, you have picked this book up before you have been called on to assist with intervention and/or research with child disaster victims. The field is recognizing that extensive training and networking of professionals before a disaster ever occurs are the most effective way to approach the mammoth task of disaster work. Training initiatives currently under way with the American Red Cross, the American Psychological Association, and state psychological associations reflect this awareness and hold great promise for our enhanced capability for proper disaster response. Unfortunately, the specific and unique needs of children are typically under-represented in such initiatives, so it falls on the professional to seek out and incorporate this body of knowledge into his or her work.

I am grateful to several individuals whose support and commitment made *Children and Disasters* happen. Mariclaire Cloutier, my Plenum editor, is an extraordinary person whose genuine compassion for these children, coupled with her expertise in volume development, was the driving force in its inception and completion. Michael Roberts proved to be a mentor, friend, and colleague of the highest caliber in my early years of breaking into the field, in my recovery and research after hurricane

Hugo, and now in the production of this book. I am honored and appreciative to be associated with these editors, both personally and professionally.

During the years in which I completed my own disaster studies and edited this volume, I was partially supported in my research with “trauma” victims of a different sort—premature infants and their families—by the Early Intervention Research Institute and Follow-up Institute of Utah State University (U.S. Department of Education Contracts 300-85-0173 and HS90010001). My colleagues in Utah, especially Glen Casto, have made valued contributions of personal support and research consultation throughout this period. I am indebted to Nancy Miller, Fran Trotman, and Mary Cave for clerical support at various points in this project. I also thank Sherri Stokes, who went above and beyond the call of duty in her editing assistance, truly adopting the book as a “labor of love.” Finally, I acknowledge the never-failing calm and wisdom of Al Finch, who has encouraged me through this and just about every other crisis of birth, life, and transition in my professional career.

It is the support of family, friends, and colleagues that keeps us moving through the day-to-day adventures as well as the major life events. It is these same individuals who make the difference between mastery and defeat for the disaster victim. If this volume contributes to the reader’s being a more effective professional in the disaster environment, a more insightful colleague, or a more compassionate friend or relative, all our efforts will have been worthwhile.

CONWAY FLEMING SAYLOR

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