

In a disaster, where would your kids go? View

Barbara Garbarino, Jeff Schlegelmilch and Jennifer Smith 1:52 p.m. ET April 21, 2017

If children are able to bounce back after a disaster, it is a positive indication of the resilience of the entire community.



(Photo: U.S. Geological Survey)

By now, readers have likely heard about — and some may have even felt — the [minor earthquake that struck near Putnam County](/story/news/local/putnam/2017/04/13/earthquake-putnam-dutchess-pawling/100418590/) (</story/news/local/putnam/2017/04/13/earthquake-putnam-dutchess-pawling/100418590/>).

On the scale of earthquakes, 1.3 is quite small, but what if it had been a larger and more devastating event? What if major infrastructure had been destroyed and daily operations of hospitals, government agencies and businesses had been disrupted? If you're a parent, your first thought would be to ensure the safety of your children, but what if you were not able to reunite with your child within a few hours? In this worst-case scenario, would Putnam County be prepared to meet the needs of its children?

For the last two years, Putnam County has partnered with Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness and Save the Children, supported by a grant from biopharmaceutical and health-care company GSK, to take an innovative approach to disaster emergency planning for the county's children. The Resilient Children/Resilient Communities initiative is mobilizing local stakeholders across sectors to assess gaps and create a child-focused disaster planning and community resilience approach that will serve as a model for other communities throughout the United States.

PUTNAM: 1.3 earthquake hits region (</story/news/local/putnam/2017/04/13/earthquake-putnam-dutchess-pawling/100418590/>)

Children are particularly vulnerable in major disasters as they often lack the ability to advocate for themselves and their needs. Moreover, children rely on many different parts of the community for their well-being such as schools, after-school programs and health systems. Nationwide, 69 million children spend the day away from their families at school and other child-serving programs. Should a disaster occur, it may negatively affect the safety and well-being of the child in that moment but can also lead to long-term emotional and developmental impacts that hinder the course of their future. So the ability of a community to protect children before, during and after disasters, and connect families to critical supporting services is critical to the vitality of a community. In other words, if children are able to bounce back after a disaster, it is a positive indication of the resilience of the entire community.

Nationwide, children as a specific population and the broad array of child-serving institutions, are not directly included in county emergency plans. A national survey released last year by NCDP found that 35 percent of American parents are not familiar with their child's school evacuation and emergency plan, and 41 percent do not know where their children would be evacuated to during a disaster. In addition, 54 percent believe they will be reunited with their children within several hours in a major disaster. This is unfortunately not always the case. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it took almost seven months for the last child to be reunited with her family.

To keep Putnam's children safe, the RCRC initiative has built a Community Resilience Coalition composed of key local stakeholders which includes child-care leadership, school districts, centers and representatives, schools, public health officials, emergency management and non-profit leaders. The coalition's charge is to create a comprehensive planning effort to protect Putnam's children before, during and after a disaster or emergency. The plan will include staff training and action steps for child-serving institutions, communication materials for families and a set of specific guidelines for government personnel. More importantly, the coalition has fostered unprecedented cooperation among these child-serving institutions which is critical to the success of any community resilience plan.

In the next few weeks, the coalition will conduct a disaster exercise to identify priorities in creating an emergency plan that better meets the needs of children. Experts from NCDP and Save the Children will lead emergency personnel through a hypothetical scenario in which a major earthquake strikes Putnam County. This "tabletop exercise" will allow the members of the coalition to simulate how they would respond to rapidly changing circumstances if such a crisis were to occur. comprehensive improvements in emergency plans and wrap-around services.

The RCRC Initiative has put Putnam County at the cutting edge of child-focused disaster planning. As last week's earthquake demonstrated, a disaster, whether natural or manmade, can strike at any moment without warning. But it doesn't have to be a major disaster to alter children's lives. A house fire, a tornado that destroys a child care, or a flood that requires evacuation to a shelter, all uproot children and families from the routine they need to thrive. And when communities aren't prepared, little disasters become big disasters. It is incumbent upon each community and family to take responsibility to prepare, and protecting children ought to be paramount in that mission. The model being developed by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness, Save the Children, and the Putnam County Community Resilience Coalition will help communities around the country achieve that goal during and after a disaster.

Barbara Garbarino is project liaison for the Putnam County Community Resilience Coalition within the Resilient Children/Resilient Communities initiative; Jeff Schlegelmilch is deputy director for the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute and the project director for the Resilient Children/Resilient Communities Initiative; Jennifer Smith is a community preparedness manager for Save the Children.

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