Child Friendly Spaces: protecting and supporting children in emergency response and recovery

Susan Davie (Save the Children), Elise Erwin (Department of Human Services) and Marie Stuart and Fiona Williams (Save the Children) explain what child friendly spaces are and their role in emergency management planning. ®

ABSTRACT

The needs of children and young people are easily overlooked in the chaos that follows an emergency or disaster event, when families have many competing priorities including sourcing food and shelter and accessing relief and recovery services. Children's experience of emergencies can be improved by the implementation of child friendly spaces, which are specific, identifiable spaces that protect children and young people from physical harm and psychosocial distress while assisting them to play and develop through participation in organised and supervised activities during emergencies. These spaces provide a safe site for all families within a highly stressful emergency environment and provide a vital link to support services. At a minimum, child friendly spaces offer a place for all children and young people to participate in supervised, safe and structured activities that integrate psychosocial support in order to strengthen resilience and wellbeing for children, young people and families.

This paper describes what child friendly spaces are and the role they play in the relief and recovery phase of Australian emergencies. Key principles of child friendly spaces are outlined along with a description of their operation their importance of incorporation into Australian emergency management plans.

Introduction

The unique vulnerabilities of children in disasters has been documented by many authors (Allen *et al.* 2007, Anderson 2005, Brandenburg & Arneson 2007, Peek 2008, Williams *et al.* 2008). The need to incorporate the unique needs of children into emergency management plans has also been documented in a wide range of literature, including Flynn & Nelson 1998, Allen *et al.* 2007, Anderson 2005, Gribble & Berry 2011, Writer 2007, Bullock, Daddow & Coppola 2011, and Ronan & Johnston 2010. To date in Australian emergency management planning, the needs of children are addressed in an *ad hoc* way with no standard practice specifically targeting the needs of children embedded into emergency management plans (Davie 2013).

Child friendly spaces have been used in a number of settings globally to care for and protect children in conflict zones and disaster areas. Following an emergency or disaster, child friendly spaces are generally a short-term response and have been recently adopted in some areas in Australia. The purpose of a child friendly space is to support the wellbeing of children in the midst of an emergency or disaster through safeguarding them by providing safe spaces with supervised activities. Child friendly spaces can be set up with minimal infrastructure. A space can be defined by simply using a mat on the floor or using chairs to provide a physical barrier in an evacuation centre. In other settings a child friendly space may be set up in its own room attached to evacuation centres. Those who operate child friendly spaces have expertise related to the physical, psychological and developmental needs of children.

Child friendly spaces are supervised by trained, pre-screened staff and volunteers and they assist in reducing a range of distressing effects that arise from a child's exposure to emergencies and disasters. Child friendly spaces are flexible and adaptable to different contexts; they are low cost and can be tailored to support children of all ages (Save the Children 2013a).

The child friendly space model is designed to identify possible risks to children, put in place mitigation strategies, and provide a much-needed link to early recovery services (The Sphere Project 2011, Metzler *et al.* 2013). Child friendly spaces provide places for

integrated play, informal education, and psychosocial support. Staff can also provide information and referral to more formal help services for children and families.

The first child friendly space was created by UNICEF in April 1999 in response to the war in Kosovo. Child friendly spaces were then implemented following the 1999 Turkey earthquake. They have since become widely used by humanitarian agencies in response to many crises. Following the 2004 Asian Tsunami hundreds of child friendly spaces were established in several countries across the region (UNICEF 2009, Ager & Metzler 2012).

A similar program was established in the United States by the Church of the Brethren in 1980 with the development of their Children's Disaster Services (CDS) program. The program was established in collaboration with child development experts and recognised the special physical and emotional needs of children. The need for a specific service for children was identified by a Church of the Brethren disaster responder who witnessed the challenges for families and children in post-disaster assistance centres. Since its inception the CDS, which operates in a similar way to child friendly spaces, have been established in response to countless man-made and natural disasters including hurricanes, aviation disasters and The World Trade Centre disaster (Peek, Sutton & Gump 2008).

Establishing child friendly spaces in the Australian setting provides a focus on the unique needs and vulnerabilities of children in emergencies. Children are easily overlooked in the chaos that follows an emergency event when families have many immediate priorities including shelter, food and accessing recovery services. Increased levels of parental stress also place some children at risk of exposure to and experience of violence (Parkinson 2011). In an emergency situation there are immediate and long-term benefits to addressing the needs of children and

Children participating in many age appropriate activities in a Child Friendly Space following *Cyclone Yasi.*

young people, alleviating parental stress, and allowing other essential services to maintain focus on their activities (Dale & Wilson 2011). However, despite the benefits for children, child friendly spaces are not currently a standard inclusion in Australian emergency management plans.

Key principles of child friendly spaces

The establishment of child friendly spaces in emergencies helps to protect children from physical harm and psychosocial distress. Child friendly spaces are inclusive of all children and help to reduce a range of distressing effects of emergencies by providing a protected environment in which children can participate in age- appropriate activities under the supervision of trained staff and volunteers (UNICEF 2009, Save the Children 2013a).

Child safeguarding and identifying threats or risks to children

When operating a child friendly space in an evacuation centre, child safeguarding measures are implemented to minimise the risk of harm occurring to children. Child safeguarding is a proactive approach to creating a safe and friendly environment for children participating in a child friendly space and attending an evacuation centre. For example when Save the Children staff establish a child friendly space they conduct a risk assessment of the evacuation centre with a child-focused lens to identify possible risks to children. This includes practical assessments of physical hazards (like boiling water for tea and coffee) along with consideration of the location of children in relation to toilets and bathrooms (Save the Children 2013b).

Some of the key child safeguarding factors to promote safety and wellbeing of children and young people are:

- Pre-screening of all staff and volunteers includes a police check and current Working with Children check, if applicable to the jurisdiction.

- All staff are specifically trained in the operation of a child friendly space as well as being trained and experienced in working with children.

- All staff and volunteers know how to raise or report a concern for the safety or wellbeing of a child or young person.

- All staff and volunteers know how to raise concerns or to report any people who are displaying potentially suspicious or unsafe behaviour.

- All staff and volunteers wear identity badges or tabards.

- Child Safe Officers or staff who act as Focal Points are easily identifiable. These personnel are the main contact point for children, young people, parents, staff and volunteers if they have a concern about the safety or wellbeing of a child or young person.

- All staff sign a Code of Conduct for working safely with children.

- All staff and volunteers are trained to respond appropriately to bullying, targeting or scapegoating.

- All staff are systemically appointed (there is inherent risk associated with unsolicited volunteering). While it is understood many people wish to assist and are well-meaning, it is not a risk that should be tolerated and spontaneous volunteers are invited to use established systems to register their interest.

- All parents and children/young people can report any person who is displaying potentially suspicious or unsafe behaviours or can raise a concern about the safety or wellbeing of a child/young person.

- Reporting mechanisms for concerns about a child/young person or an adult are clear to everyone in the child friendly space and evacuation centres. This includes local statutory mechanisms.

- Child Protection and Health and Safety risk analysis is conducted on the child friendly space and evacuation centre.

- All contracts, agreements or MOUs include an agreement on child safeguarding principles and procedures.

- Attendance forms are completed with parent contact details, children's food allergies, pre-existing medical conditions, and who is authorised to collect the child.

Psychosocial support

Child friendly spaces provide a space where children can receive psychosocial support amid the chaos that can ensue following a disaster. Children's perceptions about events are influenced by adults and peers, and by what they see and hear around them. Children are aware of problems that their parents face and they often modify their behaviour to decrease strain on their families (McDermott & Palmer 1999).

Simple interventions can alleviate stress and anxiety for young children (Williams *et al.* 2008, Madrid *et al.* 2006). Staff who operate child friendly spaces provide a safe environment where children can engage and express themselves in a variety of ways. This can be through play, art, and interaction with calm adults. Implementing child friendly spaces in evacuation centres ensures that mental health interventions are available immediately after a disaster. This is a practical way to address the needs of children by creating opportunities for them to express their feelings and concerns and to feel safe while establishing a sense of normality as soon as possible.

Focusing on providing support using a psychological first aid model for children ensures that appropriate activities and support can be delivered in a child friendly space. Psychological first aid is an evidence-based approach for assisting children, young people and families. It involves brief supportive interventions for children and families in the aftermath of emergencies

(ANU 2012). Employing this model in a child friendly space has the advantage of improving transition into early recovery activities for those children who may be more significantly affected by an emergency.

Child friendly spaces are also an avenue to provide support to parents, not only by giving them the space to address immediate needs, but also by providing relevant information with regard to caring for children in the aftermath of disaster. As part of the psychosocial support provided by staff in the child friendly space, general advice can be given to parents about the behavioural responses of children and young people, enabling parents to be prepared and to better understand the responses of their child or children to the emergency. As Madrid and colleagues state, 'demonstrating empathy, validating feelings, and providing psychoeducation to parents is essential in the early stages of relief'. These interactions can have a significant positive impact on children (Madrid *et al.* 2006).

Inclusive of all children

A key principle of child friendly spaces is that they are inclusive of all children regardless of age, mental or physical ability, health issues, race and ethnicity or gender. Efforts are also made to engage with marginalised groups like homeless young people.

The number of people in the community with disabilities generally is also reflected in the population of children and youth. As noted by Boon *et al.* (2011), contrary to expectations, children with disabilities do not constitute a negligible number in the Australian school population and that in 2009, 168 500 Australian children had a severe disability. Further, while schools may have a risk management plan for those with disabilities, there is no provision made (at present) to cater for these students in an evacuation or lockdown situation. Boon and colleagues also note that developed protocols will safeguard students so that appropriate responses and procedures are not left up to the staff present on the day an emergency arises who may or may not know how to manage the situation safely (Boon *et al.* 2011). The need for forward planning is equally

A child making a mask with a Save the Children staff member in the Child Friendly Space in Tully.

Image: Jim Holmes, Save the Children Australia

applicable to those managing evacuation centres who may have limited experience in dealing with children with disabilities, cognitive delays or challenging behaviours. Child friendly spaces play an essential role for children with disabilities in relief centres by assisting children and supporting parents.

Unaccompanied children and young people

It is an important priority for those working in emergency management that children are reunited with their families as soon as possible should separation occur. There is recent anecdotal evidence of children being alone at evacuation centres and unaccompanied by their primary carer. This situation may arise for a variety of reasons including separation due to the nature of the emergency or parents leaving their children unattended while they deal with pressing needs outside the evacuation centre. This situation leaves children in a particularly vulnerable situation.

Setting up child friendly spaces

A child friendly space provides an ideal place for children to be cared for by trained staff who have the capacity to care, protect and provide psychosocial support to them while the appropriate authorities undertake the task of locating carers and resolving complex issues. Child friendly spaces have been operated by staff from Save the Children who have expertise and experience with regard to their operation. However there are many professionals in communities who have the knowledge and skills to operate a child friendly space. They include teachers, child care workers, community services personnel, and health care workers.

Child friendly spaces are flexible and adaptable to different contexts. They are low cost and can be adapted to support children of all ages (Save the Children 2013a). They can be quickly and easily set up in evacuation centres and have also been set up in tents and temporary shelters. A child friendly space should be a clearly defined space for children and, depending on the situation and available resources, may be as simple as an area demarcated by a row of chairs within an evacuation centre. However the spaces can also be more sophisticated and can be supported with other resources. For example Save the Children can provide mobile play buses and mobile youth buses if it is logistically possible to make them available during an emergency response.

When a child friendly space is operated by Save the Children all children are welcomed and staff actively seek to engage with those who may be marginalised (for example children with disabilities and homeless young people). Materials to establish a child friendly space can vary depending on culture and context, however some key considerations are:

- that all forms of learning and play material is culturally-specific and appeals to both boys and girls of all ages and that are appropriate for children with disabilities and language differences

- that all resources are age and capacity appropriate

- that all resources are guaranteed safe for use by children

- that hygiene aspects of materials are considered (i.e. there are no soft toys unless given to a child to keep), and

- that consideration is given to consumables that may need to be restocked quickly (Save the Children 2013b).

Children participating in art play in a busy relief centre in Tully. These activities allow children to express themselves in the immediate aftermath of emergencies.

Exit strategy and transition to recovery

Save the Children's use of child friendly spaces in any emergency is designed to transition children from an emergency response to a self-sustaining development model if necessary. This is achieved through the active participation of the community in its own relief and recovery and is relevant in the Australian context. The needs of children, resources available, and local solutions that reflect local options will help to determine the transition or exit strategy of a child friendly space. Possible options are:

- Closing down the child friendly space by a stated time and distributing materials locally. This has been the most common scenario to date.

- Transitioning the child friendly space into community or agency supported initiatives which are incorporated into ongoing recovery programming.

Child friendly spaces in Australia

Child friendly spaces have been increasingly incorporated into emergency management response in the Australian context. This has occurred in Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania in response to recent major bushfires and floods. Child friendly spaces have been established by Save the Children, Red Cross and the Uniting Care Community (Davie 2013, Dale & Wilson 2011). The establishment of child friendly spaces has occurred due to the increasing recognition that children are vulnerable in the aftermath of emergencies. Addressing the needs of children also assists families and those who work in emergency relief and recovery. The needs of children are not currently addressed in emergency management planning in a systematic way in Australia, however planning for and establishing child friendly spaces is one key activity that can be incorporated into standard emergency management planning in the Australian context (Davie 2013).

Feedback to staff in child friendly spaces established in evacuation and recovery centres in the Blue Mountains in October 2013 includes the following:

'Respite was the top request from parents. Some were emotional and exhausted and came by the space to express that what they really need right now is "a break". One mother left her daughter for the first time since the fire affected them so she could buy groceries, saying her daughter had clung on to her since the fire but now she was at least having fun with other children.'

'A father thanked us because he was able to leave his girls with us while he went to his property alone to tear down some of the walls saying he did not want them to see their place like that.'

These comments help to illustrate the benefit of child friendly spaces to both children and parents. However, there are benefits to all who attend evacuation centres. Evacuation centre staff have described their relief at seeing children distracted from the trauma of the

Children playing calmly with play dough in a Child Friendly Space in Tully.

event. They also describe the difference between centres without a child friendly space where children were distressed and crawling over their parents and touching everything as parents tried to deal with paperwork (Dale & Wilson 2011).

Conclusion

The needs of children are largely silent in emergency management planning in the Australian context (Davie 2013). This is a gap that can go some way to being addressed by the inclusion of child friendly spaces in emergency management plans to provide a focus on the unique vulnerabilities of children in emergencies. In recent years child friendly spaces have been established following fires and floods in several Australian states by Save the Children and others in collaboration with Red Cross, local and state governments. They have been very well received by children, families and those working in emergency management (Dale & Wilson 2011). Child friendly spaces provide a number of benefits for children, parents and those who work in emergency relief and recovery. Despite this, the inclusion of child friendly spaces into emergency management plans is not currently routine practice. Expertise with child friendly spaces exists in the non-government sector in Australia as staff from organisations like Save the Children have worked to establish child friendly spaces in evacuation and recovery centres following bushfires and floods. This experience could be harnessed either directly or by seeking technical advice to ensure that child friendly spaces become standard practice to safeguard children when they are affected by emergencies and disasters in Australia.

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