

**Abstract:**

Family reunification after disasters continues to challenge emergency response planners at all levels—local, state, and national levels. This article highlights current resources available to assist family reunification plans as well as provides input on key concepts and stakeholders necessary for family reunification plans at the state and local levels. This article also discusses research in family reunification practices and addresses next steps to achieve an integrated functional family reunification plan.

**Keywords:**

Family reunification; disaster; children; organization and administration; tracking; identification

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# Family Reunification After Disasters

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In today's age, natural and manmade disasters continue to grow in magnitude because of factors such as global climate change, deforestation, population growth, and environmental toxins.<sup>1</sup> The number of natural disasters tripled in 2000 to 2009 compared with 1980 to 1989.<sup>2</sup> Although the occurrences of disasters are considered low probability, these events can severely impact affected families and their children in devastating ways through sudden displacement and emotional stress.<sup>3,4</sup> Children can be separated from their families after any disaster.<sup>5</sup> In fact, separation of the family is a likely scenario as each day, 67 million children are away from their parents or caregivers in school or childcare.<sup>6</sup>

Children are particularly vulnerable if separated from their caregiver or parents. Depending on their age or developmental level, children may not be able to identify themselves or their loved ones. In unfamiliar circumstances, younger children may be afraid or too shy to offer information. Because of anatomical and developmental differences, children are at more risk for injuries that require medical attention.<sup>7</sup> In children, the effects of being separated from parents/caregivers for extended periods can have dire consequences with increased risk for victims of maltreatment, abuse, kidnapping, and, in the most severe case, exploitation.<sup>8</sup> Parents may unintentionally hinder response efforts and overwhelm staff as they frantically search for their children. In a survey, 63% parents stated that they will disregard an evacuation order and go directly to a child's school after a disaster.<sup>9</sup> Family reunification policies need to take into consideration the vulnerabilities of children and the actions of loved ones looking for their children.

Although the goal of family reunification after disasters is simple, how to achieve this goal is incredibly complex and requires a multidisciplinary approach during planning and implementation for a successful outcome. As early as 2006, the Institute of Medicine

reporting on the future of emergency care stated that the needs of children are overlooked in disasters and indicated that the separation of children from their parents was a critical issue. This was the basis of the recommendation that “policymakers develop strategies to minimize parent-child separation and improved methods for reunifying separated children with their families.”<sup>10</sup> The lessons from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 continue to provide us with an example of inadequate planning and unanticipated consequences—more than 5000 children were separated from their families, some winding up in different states. Because of the efforts of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a nongovernmental agency, all children were reunited with their families, although some families were separated for as long as 6 months.<sup>11</sup> In 2010, the bipartisan National Commission of Children and Disasters under federal law (P.L. 110-161) recommended to the President and Congress to “develop and deploy a national information sharing capability to quickly and effectively reunite displaced children with their families, guardians, and caregivers when separated by a disaster.”<sup>12</sup> In March 2012, the Federal Emergency Management Agency released the National Preparedness Report, which noted that “planning and technological gaps present challenges to post disaster family reunification.” The report cited that few states have family reunification plans after evacuation, a particular concern during the day when children are in school and daycare and away from parents. In addition, although there are many reunification tools, no single comprehensive source for information exists.<sup>13</sup>

There is no dispute that family reunification after disasters is a priority, but how to accomplish an integrated approach remains a challenge to all involved in emergency response. In this context, the definition used for reunification is the “process of assisting displaced survivors including children in voluntarily reestablishing contact with family and friends after a period of separation.”<sup>6</sup> The objectives of this discussion are to highlight family reunification resources in the public and private sector, provide examples of policies that sought to achieve an integrated approach, discuss research/innovative advances, and address next steps.

## FEDERAL RESOURCES

### **Federal Emergency Management Agency: Postdisaster Reunification of Children: A Nationwide Approach**

The goal of this document is to create a framework that involves the whole community including nongovernmental organizations, faith-

based and community organizations, disability and pediatric organizations, and public agencies to assist in creating and deploying a family reunification policy for a region. Aimed to assist local, state, tribal, territorial, and insular area government, the document contains a comprehensive overview of logistics and coordination necessary for family reunification in a mass casualty event. The document describes federal assets such as reunification strike teams that can be used after a large event. Important roles to consider in lead and supporting agencies such as emergency management, emergency operations center, child welfare agencies, law enforcement, educational systems, and medical examiners are identified. Principles described can also be applied to school and hospital policies for family reunification.<sup>6</sup>

### **National Center for Disaster Medicine and Public Health: Tracking and Reunification of Children in Disasters: A Lesson and Reference for Health Professionals Education Module**

Established in 2008, the National Center for Disaster Medicine and Public Health's goal is to create education, training, and educational research in disaster medicine and public health preparedness. One of their online learning modules prepares health care providers to understand the complexity of family reunification. The online module describes 3 vignettes to emphasize key tasks for tracking and reunification of children in disasters including the role of the responding health care provider as well as roles within an institution and local/state agencies necessary for family reunification ([http://ncdmp.h.usuhs.edu/Learn/PedsTR/TRCD\\_0a.htm?fs=0](http://ncdmp.h.usuhs.edu/Learn/PedsTR/TRCD_0a.htm?fs=0)).

### **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children: Unaccompanied Minor Registry**

The Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform act of 2006 mandated the initial registry National Emergency Child Locator Center be established within National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization, with policies established to facilitate family reunification. Based directly on the recommendations of the National Commission on Children and Disasters, the Unaccompanied Minors Registry was created in order for anyone to report an unaccompanied minor. The registry is operational daily and uses text-based fields to collect and store information but does provide the opportunity to download a photograph. Although the registry is in its initial versions, it has the potential to be used by law

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