

Universal Preventive Interventions for Children in the Context of Disasters and Terrorism

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KEYWORDS

- Children and adolescents • Disaster • Disaster interventions
- Disaster mental health services • Preparedness • Screening • Terrorism
- Universal interventions

KEY POINTS

- Universal disaster services are used for children in general populations without consideration of their disaster exposures, experiences, or reactions.
- Universal disaster services include screening and case finding as well as preparedness and postevent preventive interventions.
- Universal services are typically administered in a group format in settings where children naturally congregate, such as schools.

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- Most universal preventive interventions delivered to children before and after a disaster are multimodal and rely heavily on cognitive behavioral techniques.
- Most universal preventive interventions have demonstrated benefit for at least some of the outcomes measured.
- The field awaits research on several key issues related to the relative efficacy of universal preventive intervention approaches and components, the timing and setting of intervention delivery, and the preparation of providers.

INTRODUCTION

Children are especially vulnerable to the effects of disasters and terrorism, and they constitute an important focus of disaster mental health services. Because disasters threaten children's assumptions that the world is safe and predictable,¹ disaster services may be needed for children who reside in the general community where a disaster strikes as well as for those who are more directly affected by an event through physical presence, the experiences of significant others, damage to property, and/or exposure to secondary adversities. Preventive interventions are classified along a spectrum of risk and need, with universal preventive interventions designed for the general population of children in a disaster community not identified for individual risk. These interventions are contrasted with selected preventive interventions for children who are at an increased risk of developing a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder based on biologic, psychologic, or social factors and with indicated preventive interventions for children at high risk and identified as being predisposed to, or having minimal detectable signs or symptoms that presage, a disorder.² Universal, selected, and indicated services can be linked through a stepped approach with assessment and sequenced interventions based on need.³

This article addresses universal preventive interventions administered to general populations of children without consideration of their disaster experiences or emotional states. Thus, these interventions address children with a range of disaster exposures and conditions rather than focusing only on the needs of children who were directly exposed to an event, children whose significant others were directly exposed, or children whose prior experiences or preexisting conditions increase their risk for adverse outcomes. This report describes the organization and structure of services used to meet the needs of children in the general population (practice applications), examines screening and intervention approaches (tools for practice), and suggests future directions for the field.

LITERATURE SEARCH AND REVIEW

A systematic literature search on child disaster and terrorism mental health services and interventions was conducted in July 2013 (Fig. 1). Much of the literature described services addressing multiple populations—universal, selected, and indicated—covering a variety of disasters and issues across disaster phases. This literature included empirical studies and descriptive works on disaster services in general (eg, mental health services, crisis intervention, school-based activities) and on specific disasters (see Fig. 1).

Forty-seven articles described empirical studies of interventions. In one study that described a 2-phase trial,⁴ the 2 stages discussed were analyzed separately. Hence,

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