



Psychosocial disaster preparedness for school children by teachers



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ABSTRACT

Disaster impacts physical, psychological, social and economic aspects of the individual, family and the community. The impact of disaster on children of different age group is many times greater than that of the adults. Psychosocial disaster preparedness, through teachers, is one among the best ways to prepare children to face the psychosocial consequences of disasters. The hypotheses of the study are (i) better the psychosocial intervention methodology, higher the knowledge level on psychosocial care and preparedness among the teachers and (ii) higher the psychosocial disaster preparedness knowledge among teachers, better the knowledge among children training by them. The aim of the study was to develop psychosocial disaster preparedness among school children by imparting training on psychosocial preparedness to them through trained teachers. Quasi Experimental Design – pre- and post- with control group was adopted for the study. Results showed that teachers who were provided training on psychosocial disaster preparedness had better knowledge than the control group. Higher the psychosocial disaster preparedness knowledge among teachers, better the knowledge among children subsequent to training by them compared to children from control group ($t=43.6$, $p<0.001$). Development of psychosocial disaster preparedness program and its integration with existing policies, programs and services would help children to be psychosocially prepared as well as make the school system more effective in dealing with the psychosocial issues of children during disasters.

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1. Introduction

Among the affected population in any disaster, children are identified as the most vulnerable group along with women, aged and disabled people. Between 1991 and 2000 an estimated 77 million children under the age of 15 years on an average had their lives severely disrupted by a natural disaster or an armed conflict each year [1]. Children are the most affected since they lose the familiar environment, loss of parents, witness death of their loved ones, and fear the reoccurrence of the disaster event. The impact of disaster on children of different age groups is many times greater than that of the adults that leads to various psychological problems in children [2,3].

1.1. Psychosocial effects of disaster on children

The impact of disasters on individuals is substantial. Particularly for children, the loss of their familiar environment like home,

school, peers are seen as highly distressing. Children feel safe and secure when they have consistent and predictable routines in life. Disasters disrupt this sense of well-being by destroying normal life routines. Caregivers, during such times, are also often unable to give the care and comfort they provided before the disaster. This can cause anxiety, fear, and a sense of insecurity among children.

Children's reactions differ from adults because they are in the process of developing emotional, cognitive, behavioral and sensory skills. Children who are exposed to single traumatic experiences often recuperate and do not develop any psychopathology. If traumatic reactions are fixed in his/her developmental stage, the child feels too unsafe to experiment with new situations [4]. Their worries and fears manifest themselves through a range of reactions which generally vary by age [5]. Children may have an extensive support system, but usually do not have the life experiences or coping skills that would assist them in responding to the dramatic changes in their lives caused by disaster [6].

Thus children not only have physical vulnerability and risk in a given disaster but also a psychosocial vulnerability and risk that would worsen their psychosocial status after the disaster. This could very well be reduced by an integrated and effective disaster management programs.

Abbreviations: MHPSS, mental health and psycho social support; DOQ, Disaster Opinion Questionnaire; SSQ, Semi Structured Questionnaire; KPSC, knowledge on psycho social care; ANOVA, Analysis of Variance

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1.2. Psychosocial preparedness

Disaster preparedness is a program of long term developmental activities whose goals are to strengthen the overall capacity and capability of a country to manage efficiently all types of emergency and bring about an orderly transition from relief through recovery, and bring about an orderly transition from relief through recovery, and back to sustained development.

The preparedness activities like training can be used to limit exposure, alter the type of exposure, decrease surprise and the unexpected, and maximize the sense of mastery and hope as opposed to hopelessness and defeat. Training can be provided for individuals or groups [7]. Nevertheless the more knowledge available to people beforehand about what to expect and what to do, the less likely it is that they will be severely traumatized by their experience [8].

Inter Agency Standing Committee [9] explains the need for strengthening the capacity of national educational systems for school based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in emergencies, establishing general and psychosocial crisis plans for schools, strengthening emergency education capacities by using participatory methods among children, training and supervising teachers in basic psychosocial support, children's rights, participatory methods, positive discipline and code of conduct.

In the past, disaster preparedness programs have given less attention to psychosocial preparedness activities. Effective disaster preparedness programs for children could be achieved by introducing psychosocial preparedness activities in ongoing disaster preparedness programs for the children in schools. When psychosocial competence is built among the children, it gives a holistic care and support for the children. To provide such programs, teachers are found to be the effective resource with in the school system. Psychosocial preparedness programs can be included in the teacher training curriculum [10]. Teachers and other school personnel should be provided with regular supervision and capacity building activities on topics related to psychosocial preparedness and support. As teachers are always available to help children when they are in difficult situation, there is a need to include teachers in the process of preparing children to improve their psychosocial competence.

The impact of disaster on children could be minimized by preparing them to face the psychosocial situations followed by any disaster in a very effective manner. Disaster preparedness that includes the psychosocial aspects along with the physical preparedness would help in achieving this goal. The paper discusses the effectiveness of psychosocial preparedness in disasters program especially designed for school children. The program was

carried out by the school teachers who were trained in advance in psychosocial preparedness in disaster management. This strategy was adopted to ensure the sustainability of the program.

2. Methodology

The aim of the study was to develop and examine the effectiveness of psychosocial disaster preparedness program among school children by teachers. The study was carried out in phases such as development of intervention package on psychosocial preparedness for school children, pretesting knowledge of children on the given package, intervention phase followed by posttest. Prior to the program for school children by teachers, the teachers were trained in psychosocial preparedness by the researcher. The current study was part of the psychosocial care and support program for the survivors of Tsunami in India carried over by National Institute of Mental Health And Neuro Sciences, Bangalore, India in collaboration with CARE India, an organization working in Disasters. Institute Ethics Committee has approved the conduct of the study.

The hypothesis of the study was “better the psychosocial intervention methodology higher the knowledge level on psychosocial care and preparedness among the teachers” and “higher the psychosocial disaster preparedness knowledge among teachers, better the knowledge among children subsequent to training by teachers”.

Study adopted quasi experimental design, ‘before and after with control group’. Theoretically the researcher adopted Mills Cannon ‘Method of Difference’ as the method of experimental inquiry for the current study by making use of two groups of subjects equal in relevant characteristics and introduced inputs to the experimental group and waitlisted the other school to form a control group.

2.1. Sampling design

All Saints Higher Secondary School situated at Muttom as experimental group and St. Helanas High School, Enayam as control group both situated in Kanniyakumari District, Tamil Nadu formed the universe for the study. The impact of Tsunami disaster on both the schools was similar as rated by the Education Department of the District Administration. To avoid the contamination bias, it was ensured that the selected schools were situated approximately 50 km away from each other.

Study involved the total enumeration of the population frame. The complete list of all units of students and teachers in the

Table 1
Intervention package for children.

Module	Session	Methodology
Understanding disaster and consequences of disaster	Understanding disasters Consequences of disasters Needs of the children	Brain storming Group discussion Brain storming
Psychosocial consequences of disaster	Vulnerability mapping Emotional reactions Special groups of children	Drawing/group activity Identifying emotions/group activity Group discussion
Psychosocial disaster preparedness in different disaster	Review of pamphlets on disaster preparedness Quiz program on review materials Need for disaster preparedness	Group discussion Group quiz program Power point presentation
Psychosocial disaster preparedness (PSDP) at individual, family and community level	PSDP at individual level PSDP at family level PSDP at community level	Role play, case stories, group discussion

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