



Safety in Shelter Based Child Care Centers

by Judy Bezon

The first priority in for children everywhere is to keep them safe. This is particularly important after a disaster, when children feel vulnerable and are in the unfamiliar environment of a shelter. There are numerous things that can be done to ensure the physical and emotional safety of a child when they are in a child care center in a shelter that provides respite for them from the chaos of the shelter environment and for their parents.

The following strategies are offered here as guiding principles for those working with children in a shelter setting. (For quick reference see **checklist on pages**)

Access to a Respite Child Care Center

Having access to a respite child care center engenders a sense of safety for children. Children get a sense of security from things that are familiar to them, yet there is nothing about a Mass Care shelter environment that is familiar other than the members of their family who are with them. Play is both a familiar and natural activity for children. For the time they are in the center they experience a bit of “normal” that has not been available to them since the disaster. The opportunity to play with trained and certified volunteers promotes feelings of wellbeing and security.

Volunteer Certification

The volunteers that staff a shelter based child care center should be certified to document careful training and screening. The training should provide the agency or organization issuing the certification direct contact with potential volunteers. This will provide an opportunity to observe their interactions during instruction and activities. In addition, requirements for certification of a volunteer should include at least 2 letters of reference from non-family members and a rigorous criminal and sexual offender background check ^{1,2}

No Child is Ever Alone with a Volunteer

In the shelter setting, a child should never be alone with an adult that is not his or her parent. If one child needs to use the restroom, two volunteers should be required to go with him or her. This requirement then dictates a minimum of four volunteers on a team. (If there are 2 children in the center and one needs to use the restroom, two volunteers go with him or her and the other two stay with the child in the center.) If one of the team members is not present, a shelter volunteer should be asked to accompany the child and childcare volunteer to the restroom.³

Center Location and Space

As places in a shelter are assessed for a shelter based child care center the shelter manager should look for a place that can be clearly identified as a safe and secure space for children to play. Such a location needs to be clearly marked so that unauthorized people cannot wander in and the children in the center cannot wander out. The number of children in the shelter and the anticipated use of the shelter based child care center should be considered when deciding on the size of the space needed to accommodate the children.

In addition the space should be scrutinized for obvious hazards such as broken floor or ceiling tiles, protruding electrical outlets, or other things that may cause harm to playing children. When a problem is identified, it should be either fixed or, if that is not possible, another area should be found. Second to safety, another consideration when selecting a center location is convenient access to bathrooms and water. If the area assigned for the child care center is not a safe place for children, a discussion should ensue with the shelter manager to resolve the safety problems or find a location that is free of hazards.⁴

Before a Center Opens

Once there is a safe and secure space for the respite child care center, there are safety considerations as set up begins.

One volunteer should be assigned as center leadership, to be the liaison to the shelter manager and other shelter staff, to communicate information to the other volunteers on the team and to make decisions about how the center will respond to the unique needs of that shelter. (See Numbers and Ages section below) Although the rest of the team should be consulted about decisions, having a designated lead facilitates smooth operation of the center. It would be best if this person has previous experience with shelter child care centers, tact and good communications skills.

When the floor appears to need washing, it should be washed and disinfected it to prevent the spread of disease and to make the play area more inviting. This should be done before any set up takes place, regardless of the department that is officially responsible for maintenance or cleaning.

Before a center can open, an evacuation plan should be created by the lead volunteer. This plan should be put in writing along with directions to the meeting place with copies made and distributed to parent or caregiver as they register their child.⁵

When creating an evacuation plan the following factors are taken into consideration: exit routes from the building, a suitable meeting place where the children will be safe, and hazards along the evacuation route. A "Go Kit" should be created that includes a few toys, books and a blanket that can be used safely at the meeting place. A jump rope should be included for young children to hold during an evacuation. When there is a need to evacuate a volunteer takes the registration forms and sign in / sign out sheets and a pen, so that volunteers have the information necessary to continue to operate the center at the evacuation site. (See Family Registration below)

Family Registration

In a shelter based child care center, a registration procedure needs to be in place before the center opens. A parent or caregiver should be required to give the volunteers essential information about their child and how to contact the parent or caregiver should the need arise. The form used should be simple and easy to complete, including things such as identifying information about their children, allergies, special needs, and contact information for the parent or caregiver.⁶

Parents must be required to sign their child in and out of the center. In addition there needs to be a way to match parents or caregivers with their children when they return to pick up their child. Current methods include duplicate number wristbands for each child and parent given out when they sign in. When the parent signs in their child(ren) the parent and each child receive wristbands and the parent is given a copy of the evacuation plan for the center.

Only the person who registered the child for the center is allowed to sign them out and wristband numbers are checked as well as the signature match. If a parent loses the wristband that matches their child's, we ask for and check a photo ID

The parent or caregiver might opt to give another person authorization to pick up their child. (This authorization could be a section on the Family Registration form.) If an authorized person comes to pick up a child, a photo ID should be checked before releasing the child to their care. If they bring the parent's wristband we check the number against the one on the child's wristband.^{7,8} Unauthorized persons should never be allowed to sign a child out of the center.

Numbers and Ages of Children Served

Another safety consideration is the number of children that can be safely supervised in shelter based child care centers. Although numbers and ages can be given to answer this question, no two centers are the same. After considering the size of the space available, the number of volunteers working in the center at one time, the ages and behavioral needs of the group being served, the person leading the childcare team should make a decision on the numbers and ages of children that can be served at one time. In large centers, when there are more children needing care than can be served at one time in a center, a schedule can be created that gives as many children as possible a chance to be in the center each day.⁹

Sanitizing Toys

To maintain a healthy environment, toys and tables in a shelter based center should be sanitized daily. If a child appears ill, after he or she leaves the toys they used should be sanitized immediately. If it is not possible to sanitize them immediately, the toys should be put in a place not accessible to other children until they can be made safe for others. Each day a solution of one tablespoon of bleach in one quart of water should be prepared for sanitizing purposes.¹⁰ This can be put in a spray bottle for use.

Reporting Abuse

Part of keeping children safe is being aware of the possibility of abuse and reporting credible suspicions of mistreatment. If a volunteer sees signs of or suspects abuse, the volunteer should report it immediately to

the team lead, who should report it to appropriate shelter personnel, who then decide how and when to report it to the authorities.¹¹

Photos

If photos of the children are to be taken, permission of the parent or caregiver must be recorded. This could be on the registration form.^{12, 13}

Emotional Safety

In addition to physical safety in a shelter based childcare center, it is important that the center is an emotionally safe place for children. Correcting children with rules and admonishments can create an atmosphere that feels confining and adversarial, which may cause children be “on guard” and wary of breaking a rule.

Much of the ambience we in a center can be accomplished by following the child’s lead in play.¹⁴ To maintain the child’s sense of emotional safety limits need to be set, volunteers should use techniques that take a positive approach. At times they should redirect a child’s behavior by suggesting another use for a toy or another activity. Other times they should state the rule in an impartial manner, for example, “Hands are for helping” or “The cars stay on the floor.”¹⁵ For additional techniques for setting limits in a positive manner are referenced below.

Often shelters have televisions for the use of the residents. Children should be protected from media coverage of the disaster. When children see scenes of the disaster repeatedly in the media, they often believe the destruction is continuing long after it has actually stopped.

It is best that televisions are not located near a shelter based child care center. If a television is visible, the volume should be low and the programming displayed while children are in the center should be appropriate for children and, above all, not about the disaster.

Another aspect of emotional safety is freedom from the pressure proselytizing creates for both the child and his or her family. When children and families have experienced a disaster they are feeling vulnerable. It is not right to take advantage of that vulnerability to advocate for religious beliefs of any kind. If a volunteer is observed proselytizing, the center leadership should take the volunteer aside to explain the reasons that proselytizing can create more problems for children or parents after a disaster.

Volunteer Safety

In Addition to the safety of children, volunteer safety should also be a priority. When volunteers arrive at the response they should fill out a form that requires identifying information, medical information and family contact numbers, in case there is a need to get in touch with them.¹⁶

When not with the team, volunteers should be required to stay with another volunteer, since parts of the disaster area may be unsafe and the area is unfamiliar to them.

Conclusion

Safety for the children in shelter based child care centers requires everyone to work together: parents or caregivers, shelter managers, shelter volunteers, child care volunteers, etc. When all the people involved with shelter work together to keep children safe, they can begin to heal from the trauma of their disaster experience.

¹ *Children's Disaster Services, Equipping volunteers - Certification*. March 7, 2011. <www.brethren.org/CDS Certification>

² *National Commission on Children and Disasters 2010 Report to the President and Congress* AHRQ Publication No. 10-M037 (Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. October, 2010) p165.

³ *Children's Disaster Services Volunteer Workshop Participant's Manual* (New Windsor, MD: Children's Disaster Services, 2009) Module 4 p 5.

⁴ *Idem*.

⁵ *Children's Disaster Services Project Manager's Manual* (New Windsor, MD: Children's Disaster Services, 2005) pp 39, 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 85.

⁷ *Children's Disaster Services Volunteer Workshop Instructor's Manual* (New Windsor, MD: Children's Disaster Services, 2009) Module 4 p 13.

⁸ *Project Manager's Manual*, op.cit., pp. 60-61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 62-63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 63.

¹¹ *Participant's Manual*, op.cit., Module 4 p 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, Appendix p 6.

¹³ *Project Manager's Manual*, op.cit., p 77.

¹⁴ *Instructor's Manual*, op.cit., Module 4 pp 2-7.

¹⁵ *Instructor's Manual*, op.cit., module 4 pp 8-11.

¹⁶ *Project Manager's Manual*, op.cit., pp 37-38, 43, 91-92.

Judy Bezon is the Associate Director of Children's Disaster Services, part of Church of the Brethren Disaster Ministries. The strategies described above have developed in centers run by Children's Disaster Services (CDS) for over 30 years. All of the policies and procedures noted above are implemented in CDS Centers.

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Check List

Safety of children and other vulnerable populations should be one of the highest priorities of shelter managers. People in the population it will require shelter leadership, parents and families working together to keep children safe. Having an area set apart for children designed with safety in mind can decrease stress in the whole shelter while helping address the needs of the child. The following safety considerations are offered here as best practice for those working with children in a shelter setting.

Shelter Based Child Care Center Safe Child Practices

Staff/Volunteer Training & Screening

All staff or volunteers with contact or authority over children should be specially trained in caring for children impacted by a disaster.

- Training should include information and ideally experiential learning about:
 - changes in children after a disaster
 - children's needs after a disaster
 - the importance of child led play after a disaster
 - interacting with traumatized children
 - Setting limits in a positive manner
- All staff or volunteers should be carefully screened through all of the following:
 - references from non-family members
 - rigorous criminal background check
 - sex offender registry check.

No Child is Ever Alone with anyone other than a parent or legal guardian

- A minimum of two staff/volunteers should be required to be with a child or group of children.
- If staff/volunteers take children to the restroom, two need to stay with the remaining group and two take the child/children to the restroom

Center Location and Space

- Location needs defined boundaries to limit access and ensure children cannot exit without staff/volunteer knowledge
- Children should be protected from all unauthorized people, including the press.
- the size of the Center should determine by the number of children being served at one time
- Remove or mitigate obvious hazards
- Cover sharp corners, radiators and electrical outlets
- A location near bathrooms and water is preferable

Before a Center Opens

- Carefully clean the floors, surfaces and walls
- Develop a written evacuation plan with clear exit routes and a safe meeting place outside for the children and their families to reunite.
 - Take a few books, toys and blanket if possible
 - Take the registration information with parental information
 - Print copies of the evacuation plan to give parents when they register their child

Family Registration

- In a shelter based child care center, a registration procedure needs to be in place before the center opens.
 - A parent or caregiver should be required to give the volunteers essential information about their child including identifying information, allergies, special needs and contact information for the parent or guardian. Parents must be required to sign their child in and out of the center.
 - Use duplicate wristbands to match parents or caregivers with their children
 - Unauthorized persons should never be allowed to sign a child out of the center.

Numbers and Ages of Children Served

- Another safety consideration is the number of children that can be safely supervised in shelter based child care centers. The center leadership should consider the
 - size of the space available
 - number of staff/volunteers working in the center
 - ages of the children
 - behavioral needs of the group being served

Sanitizing Toys

- Toys should be sanitized with a bleach mixture at least daily or more often if a child becomes ill. (1 T bleach: 1 Qt water made fresh daily)

Reporting Abuse

- Staff/Volunteers must report credible suspicions to appropriate shelter personnel to jointly determine how to proceed

Photos

- Children should be protected from being photographed by unauthorized visitors or the press.
- Photos should only be taken with written permission from the children's parents/guardian.

Emotional Safety

In addition to physical safety in a shelter based childcare center, it is important that the center is an emotionally safe place for children. Correcting children with rules and admonishments can create an atmosphere that feels confining and adversarial, which may cause children be anxious, “on guard” and wary of breaking a rule.

- Follow the child’s lead in play.
- When setting limits, use a positive approach that state limits in a way children learn what they can do.
- No televisions in or near the center with news and images of the disaster.
- No proselytizing with children or parents

Volunteer Safety

- Gather identifying information,
- medical information and
- family contact numbers
- when not with the team, volunteers should be required to stay in pairs

Conclusion

Safety for the children in shelter based child care centers requires everyone to work together: parents or caregivers, shelter managers, shelter volunteers, child care volunteers, etc. When all the people involved with shelter work together to keep children safe, they can begin to heal from the trauma of their disaster experience.

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