



Helping Children Recover from Disaster

An Important Role for Child Care

By Beryl Cheal



CDCC Caregiver Lori Cienciala sharing time with Brock and Ryobi Fisk

Following a disaster, when parents are evacuated and taken to a Reception/Recovery Centre, one of their first tasks is to complete paperwork for the various assisting agencies. Adults, who are telling and retelling their stories, may be accompanied by children who were told to sit quietly while the adults talk. Consequently, children may be unable to realistically process the events they have experienced.

Child care programs play unique roles in helping children recover from disaster. Within these programs children are with peers and adults who get to know them well and can respond immediately to their needs. Children's behaviors sometimes change as a result of the disastrous event. Children may become more active or they may revert to behaviors like thumb sucking, bed wetting, etc. They may seem distracted, may be afraid to be left alone, may demonstrate angry behaviors, or may show symptoms of illness.

Remember, children do not intend to change their behavior. These changes

are normal reactions to abnormal circumstances. When children talk about their experiences, it is important to listen without judging, to give extra attention, to provide physical comfort, and to provide predictability and consistency. Reassure children that you care about them and that you will do everything possible to keep them safe. Even if children do not initiate a discussion, caregivers and teachers will want to provide many activities and materials to assist in the child's recovery. Art, music, the dress up area or the block corner give children opportunities to symbolically play out their experiences, telling their stories or expressing their fear, sadness, uncertainty, and relief, even if they can't verbalize it. Small emergency vehicles like fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars add to the block play. In the dress-up area, doctor and nurse clothing, "caution" tape used on disaster sites, flashlights, hard hats, goggles, and work gloves give children opportunities to play out their feelings. Board games and puzzles are especially good for children who feel their lives

are out of control: a feeling that is a frequent result of disaster. Clay and play dough provide mediums for children to create images of their fears. These images may then be destroyed; thus helping the child to control nightmares they may be experiencing. A quiet place with pillows and other soft items helps children relax and renew their spirits. Large muscle activities, either indoors or out, are particularly important for children to relieve some of the stress they may be feeling. Within any of their activities, it is of primary importance that all children are safe at all times.

It is important to remember that not all activities need to be in the "heal-

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Canadian Disaster Child Care (CDCC) is a national network of individuals, who prepare and commit themselves to reach out and comfort young children in disaster situations.

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ing” category. Sometimes children just need to play for the pure fun of it! And by the way—it is a good idea to turn off the TV when disastrous events are being shown. Children may become more frightened by watching the scenes play out. Also, if adults feel they need to talk about the situation, their discussions should take place outside the hearing of children.

Remember some children return to normal within a few days, while others take weeks or even months. If a child’s fears, worries, or behavior problems continue or increase, parents should consult a mental health counselor, social worker, community religious leader, or others who could give specific mental health assistance.

PLEASE NOTE: Whereas this article was written for professionals working with young children much of the information can also be very useful for parents within their own families.

About Beryl...

Beryl Cheal is an early childhood educator experienced in a diverse range of early care and education settings. She worked with children in New York City following September 11, 2001, at Canadian Military Base Borden with refugee children newly arrived from Kosova, and with directing a kindergarten system in refugee camps. She holds a M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education and a M.A. in Middle East Studies. She is the author of the video “Helping Children Cope With Disaster...What You Can Do!” from which this article is drawn. For further information pertaining to the video please contact: <http://www.edact.com> or by writing to: Educational Activities, Inc., PO Box 87, Baldwin, NY 11510, USA

The Monster in the Mountains

By Marlene Mulder

The summer of the fiery mountain monster will live in the hearts of the residents of Kelowna for many years to come, for the summer of 2003 marked a change in many lives. The monster consumed 248 homes, 20,000 hectares of land and forced 30,000 people to flee. Fire-fighting heroes from across Canada worked long hours and took many risks to keep the monster at bay. In the end, the fire fighters won the battle, and the fiery beast retreated to its hiding place. To show the fire fighters their appreciation, the people of Kelowna made “Thank You” signs and tied yellow ribbons on trees.

One morning in September, the fire-fighters said the monster was gone. People in the valley began to put lives

and homes back together. During the summer the children had been separated from their friends, and they did not know how to contact each other. For children coming back to school was scary because the school smelled like smoke and they were worried that the monster would return and seek them out. Coming back to school, children could see each other again, they could share their stories, and they could come back to a place that they knew.

The teachers helped the children. They honoured the children by giving them a safe place to tell their stories. They listened. They heard. The principal found a special place for the children to display their drawings and stories. The teachers encouraged the children

to talk, write, and draw about their encounters with the monster. The children learned that they were not alone. The monster had eaten the homes of others too! The classroom was a safe place to be—to be angry, to be scared, to be sad, to be happy, and to feel whatever you felt.

Marg Boyd is one of the heroes in this story as are all the teachers and staff at Anne McClymont School in Kelowna. When the children returned to her grade six class, Marg listened to and honoured their stories. She encouraged the children to talk about their experiences and provided a variety of medium and opportunities for them to share their experi-

ences. She provided a safe and caring environment. She honoured the strengths of parents and supported them.

Monsters reek a lot of suffering but they also show us our heroes.

As time passed, the children began to feel better. They were not as afraid. The monster began to take up less space in their hearts and minds. Things are getting better. Sometimes the monster's shadow appears, usually on days that are special – when the children remember that he ate their Halloween costumes, or the Christmas ornaments. The monster will always be a part of their lives but the heroes will also be there. The heroes have helped to send the monster to its proper place.

A CDCC workshop is being offered in Kelowna, BC on June 11/12. If you would like more information or would like to attend our workshop, please contact Donna Grobell (250 489 5058), Beryl Itani, ESS Director for Kelowna or check our website (www.canadiandisasterchildcare.ca).

Monster in the Mountains

A selection of poems from Marg's Grade Six Class:

EVIL MONSTER
EATING AWAY
AT THE
MOUNTAIN
PEOPLE CRYING,
HEROES TRY
TO SAVE
HOUSES.
HOPE DYING,
WATER BOMBERS FLYING.
SUNDAY MORNING
PEOPLE FOUND
OUT,
THAT THEIR
HOUSES WERE
JUST AN
EMPTY LOT
STREETS WERE
FILLED WITH
ASH AND SMOKE.
PEOPLE CRYING
BUT
THE HEROES
STILL TRYING.
MELTED HOMES,
TOTALLY DEMOLISHED.
IT IS
SOMETHING
THAT WE
WON'T
FORGET.

— KATIE S.

Monster in the Mountains
The fire fiercely raged
over the mountain top
nervous and scared
I watched
and waited
no sign of control
rapidly the fire spread
through the mountains
smoke was in the air
the fire's flames were getting bigger
the sun was going down
and all firefighters were going to rest
I was frightened
I wish the fire would go away
GO AWAY NOW!

— CLAIRE M.

We were worried
at first
sorrow
and sadness,
scared
and helpless.
As the
fire was blazing and
the winds were mad
it ate the houses
bite by bite.

— ADAM S.

Is CDCC ready for the summer of 2004?

By Donna Grobell

If you had asked me five years ago when I was appointed the Emergency Social Services (ESS) Director for the City of Cranbrook if there was real potential for evacuating our city of 20,000 residents, I would have said “not really”. It had never happened in the last hundred years and would probably not happen soon. Oh, we had small evacuations of up to 80 people but never the whole city. Last summer reality taught me otherwise.

I had not considered the improvements firefighters had made in extinguishing lightning strikes before they were able to spread. Because of these improvements over the past ten years, our forests are covered by tons of groundcover, dead leaves, and branches; histori-

cally, this would have been cleaned up by forest fires. This ground cover was waiting for an opportunity to ignite, and last summer that chance occurred. The Lamb Creek fire southwest of Cranbrook was, at times, a rank six fire that devoured 12,000 hectares.

The RCMP, Regional District, and City officials had good plans in place to evacuate our population into the five small rural communities north of Cranbrook. The ESS Directors from these communities were prepared to open Reception Centres and Group Lodging sites. Many Directors and volunteers from these communities had attended Canadian Disaster Child Care workshops and were prepared to activate volunteers when the centres opened.

The first week of September we waited for an anticipated weather cell to develop

over our fire. This cell would have caused 80 kilometer per hour winds that would have pushed the fire into our community. As September 6 approached, the forecast remained in place until Saturday’s early hours. The cell missed the fire by a few short kilometres. The forecasted 2 mm of rain turned into 6 mm; the dry hot days became cool, and devastation was avoided.

The long-term weather forecast is for continued drought in 2004 and 2005. This translates into an earlier more devastating fire season next summer with 2005 being the worst yet. Government and municipal officials are making plans, and now is the time to ensure Canadian Disaster Child Care is ready to respond. Thank you to those of you who have already returned your application package. If you have not had the opportunity to do so, please send your package as soon as possible, so we will be prepared for this year’s challenges.

TRAINERS NEEDED

To expand and strengthen our program to communities across Canada, we need trainers to facilitate CDCC volunteer workshops. Should we be successful in our current grant application for funding, we anticipate holding a trainers workshop within the next year. We are looking for people who are certified CDCC volunteers, have experience working with children, and are willing to facilitate two workshops per year. Experience as a teacher/trainer, working at a CDCC response, and/or cross cultural experience is an asset. Upon successful completion of the training, new facilitators will be mentored into the program. We invite you to submit a resume and letter outlining your qualifications and why you are interested in becoming a trainer to:

Marlene Mulder
Training Coordinator
Canadian Disaster Child Care
6120 - Ada Blvd
Edmonton, Alberta T5W 4N9

Bits & Bites

New CDCC website:

www.canadiandisasterchildcare.ca

Charity Status

We are now an official registered charity

Workshops:	April 17/18, 2004	Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, Edmonton, AB
Upcoming workshops to be held:	April 24/25, 2004	Richmond, BC
	June 11/12, 2004	Kelowna, BC
	June, 2004	Edmonton, AB
	October 15/16, 2004	Burnaby, BC