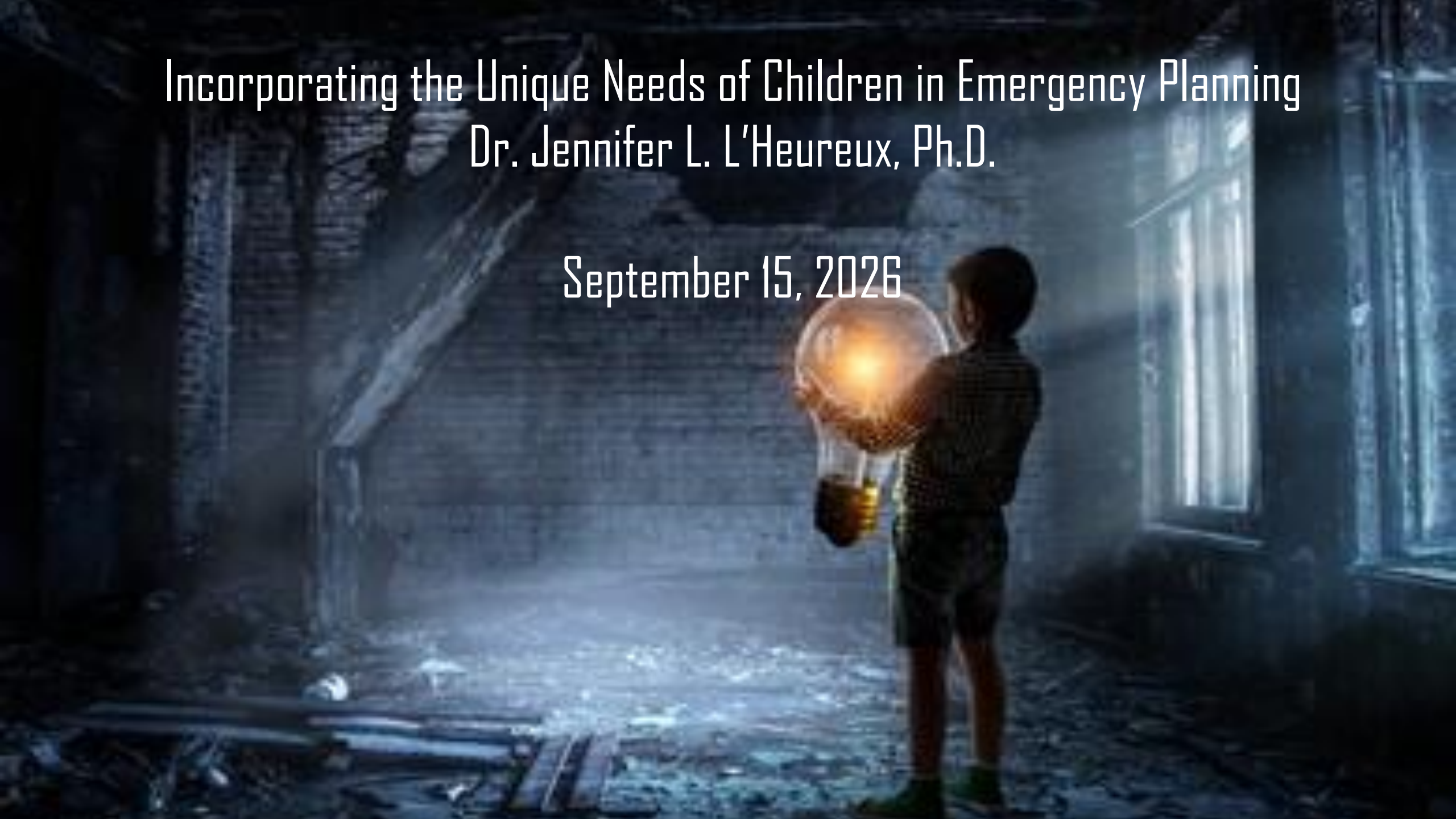


Incorporating the Unique Needs of Children in Emergency Planning

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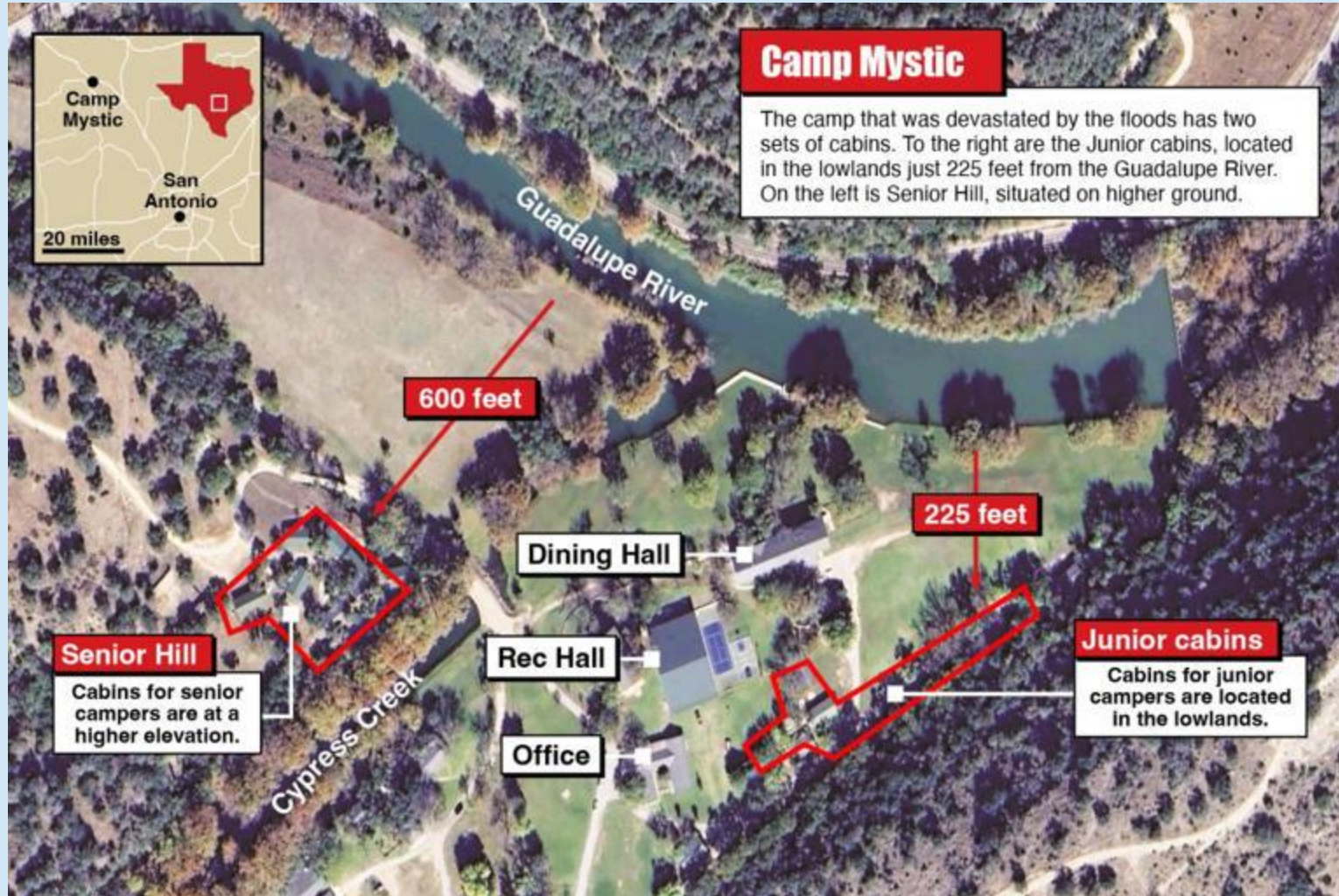


Introduction

“Behavior is the language of trauma. Children will show you before they tell you that they are in distress” by, Micere Keels

- **Children are not just small adults. They have distinct physical, emotional, and developmental needs that must be considered in every phase of emergency management. One size does NOT fit all.**
- **Whether it's evacuation planning, shelter operations, or recovery efforts, integrating child-focused strategies is essential to building resilient communities.**
- **In today's session, we will cover:**
 - **Why is it important to consider the specific needs of children in disasters**
 - **What vulnerability looks like in children and the different kinds of vulnerability**
 - **What you may not know about children in disasters but need to know, gaps in knowledge**
 - **Children's capacities, supporting and protecting children**
 - **Increasing children's resiliency**
 - **Incorporating the needs of children into disaster planning**
 - **Stories of resiliency and related factors**
 - **Resources**

?Why is it important to consider children's needs in disasters?





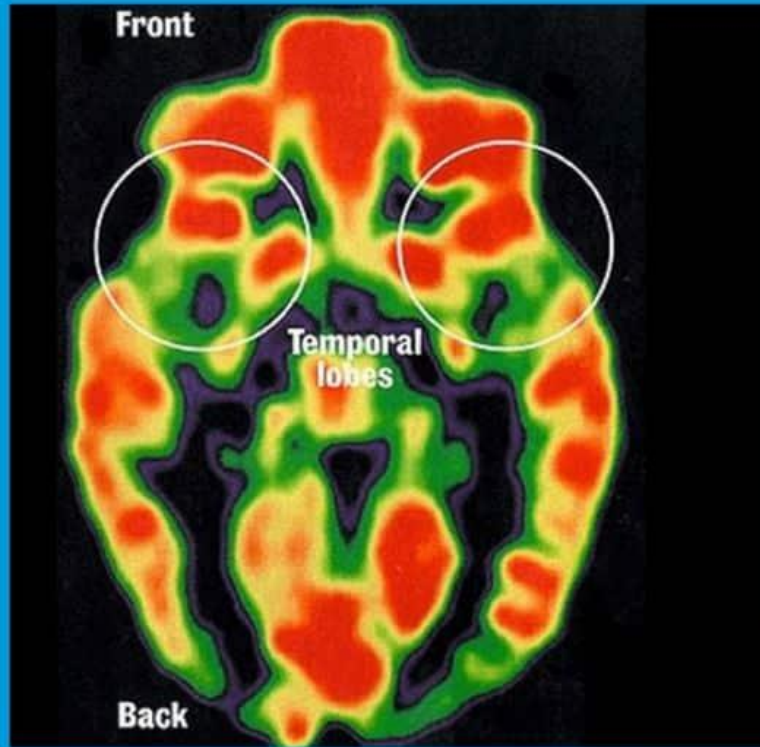
What does vulnerability look like in children?

Psychological Vulnerability

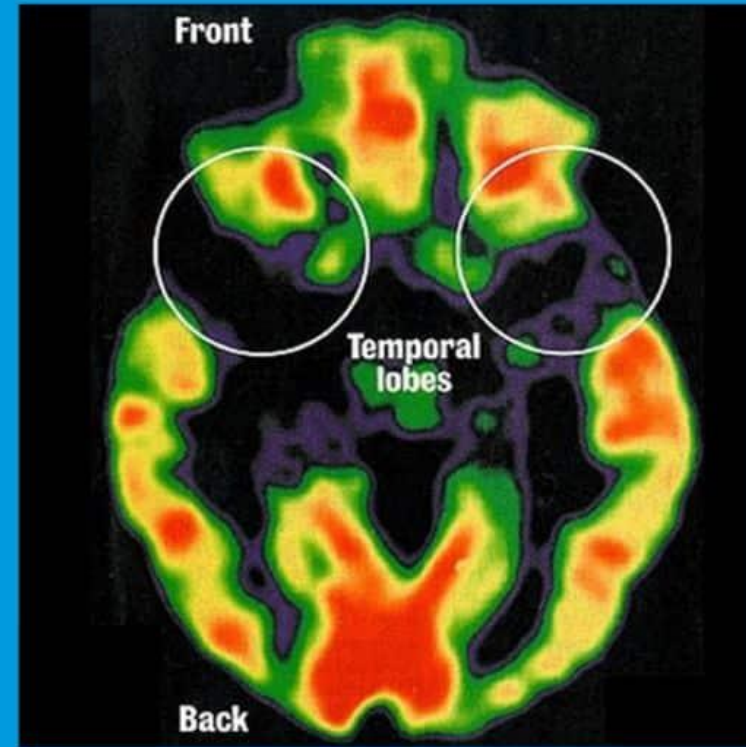
- **Children's psychological vulnerability during disasters can manifest in a range of emotional, behavioral, and developmental responses—often shaped by their age, prior experiences, and the support systems around them.**
- **Common emotional and behavioral signs to watch for:**
 - **Intense fear or anxiety**
 - **Regression**
 - **Withdrawal**
 - **Sleep disturbances**
 - **Somatic complaints**
- **Younger children are more dependent on adults and may struggle to express their feelings.**
- **Risks are amplified by separation from caregivers, exposure to the media, preexisting conditions, and social and economic factors.**

What does vulnerability look like in children?

Psychological Vulnerability



Typically Developing Brain



Brain of Child Exposed to
Neglect, Trauma and Abuse

What does vulnerability look like in children?

Physical Vulnerability

- Smaller size and developing systems make children more susceptible to injuries, malnutrition, and heat stress.
- Higher risks for injuries and fatalities. Children can be up to THREE times MORE likely to suffer a fatality in disasters <https://www.srcd.org/research/understanding-impacts-natural-disasters-children>
- Children separated from their caregivers are at risk for abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
- Exposure to unsafe environments that can pose physical risks.

What does vulnerability look like in children?

Physical Vulnerability



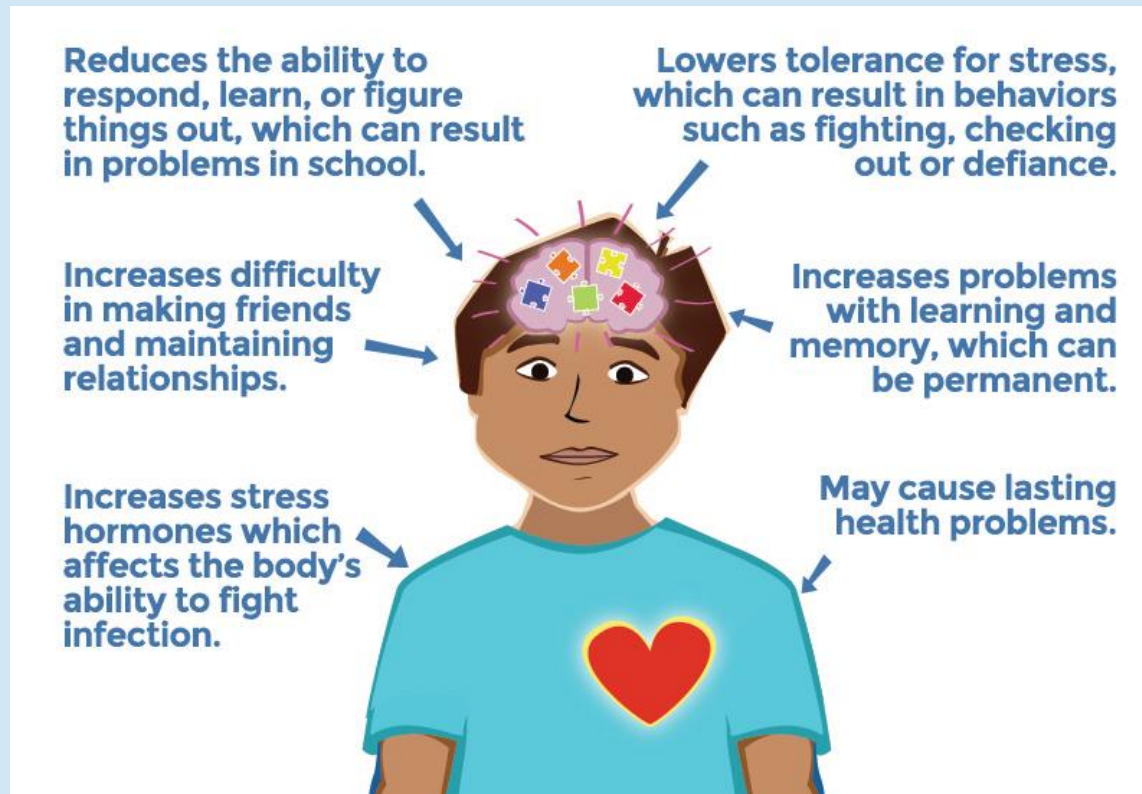
What does vulnerability look like in children?

Educational Vulnerability

- **School closures and destruction of schools.**
- **Interrupted learning, inconsistent school attendance, problems with focus.**
- **Loss of books, computers, and other needed items further make learning potentially difficult.**
- **Possible delayed enrollment without necessary documentation.**
- **Increased dropout rates as older children may now be needed to care for younger children.**
- **Inequitable access to needed resources for recovery especially for children with disabilities.**
- **Academic setbacks and delays.**

What does vulnerability look like in children?

Educational Vulnerability



**What do we not know but should know about children's
vulnerability in disasters?**





Gaps in Our Knowledge

- **Psychological and Emotional Impact:**
 - Fewer studies on the long-term impact of disasters on children across age groups and multicultural contexts.
 - Many studies rely on the reports of the adults and not the actual voices of the children.
- **Health and Medical Preparedness:**
 - Insufficient data on pediatric-specific medical needs of children during disasters such as size-appropriate equipment and dosing.
 - Gaps in understanding how children with special healthcare needs are affected and what resources they may need, and where to obtain them during disasters.
- **Educational Disruptions:**
 - Few strategies exist for integrating disaster preparedness into schools prior to disasters and lack even more in post-disaster care.

Gaps in Our Knowledge

- **Children's Role in Disaster Planning**
 - Minimal research on how children can actively contribute to disaster preparedness and recovery efforts.
 - Disaster planning often excludes children's input despite their having valuable insights.
- **Socioeconomic and Equity Considerations**
 - A lack of research on how poverty, race, and disability may intersect with disaster vulnerability in children.
- **Research and Policy**
 - Emergency responders may lack specific training in child development.
 - Limited interdisciplinary collaboration to establish robust models that accurately reflect the complete range of children's experiences and responses to disasters.

Supporting and Protecting Children

- **Child Friendly Spaces:** Creating safe zones where children can begin to process and heal from what happened.
- **Family Reunification:** The sooner this can happen, the lesser the trauma experienced by children.
- **Age and Developmentally Appropriate Therapy:** Mental health and psychosocial support from people trained in children's development.
- **Training emergency responders to understand and prioritize the needs of children in disasters.**
 - **IS 366.A: Planning for the Needs of Children in Disasters**
 - [Integrating the Needs of Children Participant Guide](#)
 - <https://youtu.be/I2a0DezEA7Y> (Dr. Lori Peek)
 - https://archive.cdc.gov/www_cdc_gov/childrenindisasters/emergency-responders.html

Building on Children's Strengths to Increase Capacities

- **Integrate Preparedness More into Education:** Use STEM and arts-based activities to teach awareness and preparedness.
- **Youth Led Initiatives:** Encourage participation in school safety committees or community emergency planning.
- **Culturally Sensitive Planning:** Tailor disaster plans to reflect children's diverse backgrounds and perspectives.
- <https://extensiondisaster.net/three-disaster-preparedness-games-for-children/> (This contains information about some excellent games that help children better prepare for disasters):
 - **Disaster Master:** An online game where kids help a diverse group of cartoon heroes cope with seven different types of mayhem.
 - **Disaster Hero:** A multilevel video game that tests children's knowledge about natural disasters.
 - **Are You Ready?:** A game that tests know-how in a wide range of emergencies and teaches how to build an emergency kit.
 - **Build a Kit:** An online game that teaches how to build safer villages and cities against disasters.

Increasing Resiliency in Children

- **Age-appropriate communication:** Talk openly about disasters in ways children can understand. This helps reduce fear and confusion.
- **Routine and structure:** Maintaining daily routines (meals, sleep, schoolwork) provides stability and a sense of control.
- **Monitor media exposure:** Limit graphic or sensational content and watch news coverage together to provide context.
- **Long-term support:** Emotional recovery takes time—ongoing support from family, friends, and professionals is essential.
- [Resilience in Children Exposed to Trauma, Disaster and War: Global Perspectives | Coursera](#)

I get it, children in disasters are important, so now what???

Incorporating the Needs of Children into Disaster Planning: How to Do it

- **Include Child-Specific Stakeholders**
- **Collaborate with pediatricians, child-care providers, schools, and child welfare agencies**
- **Engage youth-serving organizations and families in planning discussions**
- **Develop Child-Centric Emergency Operations Plans**
- **Address evacuation, sheltering, reunification, and medical care for children**
- **Ensure plans account for infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities**
- **Train Staff on Pediatric Response**
- **Offer specialized courses like FEMA's Youth Preparedness Council and [Ready.gov/kids](https://www.ready.gov/kids)**

Incorporating the Needs of Children into Disaster Planning: Why is it Important and How to Do it

- Safeguard Emotional and Developmental Well-Being
- Integrate mental health support and trauma-informed care into response plans
- Prepare for rapid reunification to reduce stress and confusion
- Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Planning
- Consider diverse backgrounds, languages, and abilities
- Protect child data and obtain necessary consents in advance
- [Youth and Emergency Planning | FEMA.gov](#)
- [Children-and-Disasters-An-Integrated-Approach-to-Disaster-Planning-Response-and-Recovery.pdf](#)



GROWING RESILIENT KIDS

Resilient Children: Post-Disasters

Missy Mendo was just 14 years old when Columbine happened, killing 13 people and wounding at least 20. Immediately after the disaster, Missy slept between her parents out of sheer terror and refused to remove her shoes...in case she needed to run again. She struggled to see herself as a survivor because she was not directly wounded, but there were wounds, unseen ones. 25 years later, a mother herself, the trauma is re-lived when she hears about other school shootings and thoughts about having to send her own child to school.



Missy has worked through and continues to work through the trauma to serve as a Community Outreach Director of “The Rebels Project”, a nonprofit named after the Columbine High School Mascot. The organization connects mass shootings survivors with critically needed supports. The Rebels Project seeks to embrace, support, and connect survivors of mass tragedy and trauma by creating a safe environment to share unique resources, experiences, and provide education surrounding the varying effects of mass trauma.

<https://www.therebelsproject.org/>

Resilient Children: Post-Disasters

Mimi Hymel was just three years old when Hurricane Katrina happened. More than 1800 people died and damages exceeded \$100 billion dollars. Her favorite and comforting teddy bear, Cuddles had to be left behind as Mimi and her family fled their home eventually losing everything. The memory of that bear never left Mimi as she and her family fought to recover in a post-Katrina era. The sleepless nights, anxiety, and flashbacks forever impacted Mimi. Mimi took all of this and went on to found "Comfort Bears in a Catastrophe." This nonprofit gives stuffed animals, cards, and support to children who have been impacted by natural disasters.



As a child in a disaster, you don't really realize "you'll never go back home. ... You're just really missing those comfort items."

Mimi Hymel

<https://www.comfortbearsinacatastrophe.org/about>

Resilient Children: Post-Disasters

Cecil Cornish was just 17 years old when an EF5 tornado devastated Joplin, Missouri. At least 160 people died and more than 1100 were injured. Surrounded by the mass devastation, Cecil reported that it seemed like the Rapture had happened, and he believed that God had left him behind. Cecil was working at a frozen yogurt store at the time and did everything he could to protect his customers. He recalls the first glimpse of what had been his hometown, and seeing nothing but complete destruction, with screams for help. Cecil never forgot this life-changing experience and went on to create a nonprofit called “Joplin Missouri Equality” to help people deal with the same emotions that he has learned to manage.



<https://www.equalityjoplin.com/>

Additional Resources

- American Psychological Association offers a comprehensive *Healing Guide* inspired by *The Color Purple*, plus science-backed strategies for coping with trauma, PTSD, anxiety, and depression.
- Prepare with Pedro: <https://www.ready.gov/kids/prepare-pedro>
- Disaster Resiliency Toolkit: www.jacksoncountysoc.com
- Youth Preparedness Councils, children as positive influencers, and more can be found at: [Youth and Emergency Planning | FEMA.gov](#)
- Behavioral Health Strike Team and other resources available through MO DMH: [Disaster Services | dmh.mo.gov](#)
- Disaster Wallet Card: [Disaster Wallet Card | dmh.mo.gov](#)
- Children's National Medical Center has a "Handbook of Frequently Asked Questions Following Traumatic Events: Violence, Disasters, or Terrorism" at: [The Handbook of Frequently Asked Questions Following Traumatic Events: Violence, Disasters, or Terrorism | dmh.mo.gov](#)

Additional Resources

- Red Cross has some excellent resources to help kids become better prepared and that can help with anxiety responses: [How Families Can Prepare for Emergencies | American Red Cross](#)
- Resilient Children Resilient Communities: [Resilient Children Resilient Communities | RCRC Toolbox](#)
- Ready Wrigley series on hurricane preparedness, earthquake preparedness, and coping after a disaster: <https://www.cdc.gov/natural-disasters/communication-resources/ready-wrigley-prepares-for-hurricanes-activity-book.html> (These books are a great way to learn more about disasters from a child's perspective, what thoughts and questions that they may be having).

Conclusions

- **Incorporating the needs of children into disaster planning is not just a best practice—it's a moral imperative. Children are uniquely vulnerable during emergencies due to their physical, emotional, and developmental differences from adults.**
- **We need to recognize children as a distinct population.**
- **Integrate child-focused strategies across all phases of disaster management—mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.**
- **Ensure equitable access to resources, especially for children in underserved or high-risk communities.**
- **Promote community education and resilience, empowering children and youth to participate meaningfully in preparedness efforts.**

Questions?

A black marker is shown drawing a curved line under the word "Questions?". The marker is positioned at the bottom right of the word, with its tip pointing towards the end of the word. The word is written in a cursive, handwritten style on lined paper. The background of the entire image is a solid light blue color.

Contact Information

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**Systems of Care in Community
Emergent Events and Disasters**



Kansas City Regional COAD