

Building coping strategies and resilience among young children after a catastrophic storm: Tips to educators

Patrice Juliet Pinder

The University of the West Indies, Jamaica

ABSTRACT

Parts of this contributing article for educators was taken from a presentation given on December 1, 2022 by Dr. Patrice J. Pinder in collaboration with the University of the West Indies' (UWI) Mona Faculty of Science and Technology who hosted a UNESCO sponsored Disaster Heritage Webinar, i.e., Disaster heritage – Jamaica National Commission for UNESCO (jncunesco.gov.jm). The webinar presentation focused specifically on natural disasters such as catastrophic storms or hurricanes like the powerful Category 5 Storm—Hurricane Dorian, which hit the Bahamas' northern islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama on September 1, 2019. Hurricane Dorian caused major damages to homes and properties, and resulted in loss of lives. The presentation and this current paper were developed as educational advisory guides to give teachers and other education professionals ideas on how to help young children to cope after natural disasters. Thus, it is important for teachers to help young children (students) to undergo various coping mechanisms in order to build resilience. Using stories/storytelling sessions, games, and comic sketches are some of the suggested tools and strategies that can be used with young children to help them better cope after psychologically disturbing events like the Bahamas' Hurricane Dorian.

KEYWORDS

Natural disasters;
Hurricane Dorian;
disaster heritage; coping
mechanisms; building
resilience

Case of Hurricane Dorian, Category 5 Storm, Bahama Islands

On September 1, 2019, Hurricane Dorian hit the Bahamas as a VERY strong Category 5 Hurricane. It was the STRONGEST hurricane ever reported to hit the Bahamas; hitting the northern islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama. It caused MASSIVE damages, power outages, flooding, and loss of lives. It was estimated to cost damages in excess of 5.1 billion US dollars, which left the Bahamas, a developing country in financial hardship (Mercy Corps, 2020; Wikipedia).

In offering suggestions and strategies on how best to help young children/students cope after powerful storms, I begin with the words of Pastor Ricardo Miller and then offer my suggestions. The words echoed by Pastor Ricardo Miller in the article “*Helping Children after Hurricane Dorian*” best articulate things as it relate to the need to help children after traumatic storms:

*“The nation was rocked to [the] core as we helplessly witnessed Hurricane Dorian ravish Abaco and Grand Bahama. Little-to-nothing could prepare us for the fury Dorian brought. Worse, there was no way of understanding the magnitude of what we would face in the aftermath. Scores of residents from both islands have had to walk through the pain of losing everything – including loved ones – and having to pick up the broken pieces and work on moving forward. So many gave heart-wrenching accounts of the storm. **Yet, very few asked about the impact on their children, and even fewer have been encouraged to be intentional in pursuing emotional help for their children (The Nassau Guardian, September 26, 2019).**”*

“The 20-year children’s ministry veteran said an ordeal of the magnitude of the recent storm can psychologically disrupt children, just as it would adults, and that it is imperative that parents [and teachers] find creative ways to help children cope with the stress and trauma (Ricardo Miller quoted by Shavaughn Moss, September 26, 2019, The Nassau Guardian).”

Just “be creative:”

“Find the positive, fun and enriching ways for children to express themselves [. . .] Allow them to peruse positive interests like learning to play a new instrument, singing, dancing or drawing. A happy soul makes for a happy child (Pastor Ricardo Miller quoted in Shavaughn Moss’ Lifestyle Article, September 26, 2019, The Nassau Guardian).”

So, playing games and play like activities have been positively linked to educational psychology and resilience building. Other suggestions to help children cope and build resilience after storms or other natural disasters are as follows:

1) Encourage play, playing, and use of games:

For examples: “Play-Therapy” or “Coping through Play”—involves *encouraging “informal” or “formal play” sessions with school peers (friends) or without peers (individually). The aforementioned are suggested as important for two reasons: first, it can serve as a coping mechanism, and secondly, over time, it can help to build resilience in young children (students) [Chatterjee, 2018].*

There are also:

- Relatable “*cultural games*” that can be developed and tailored to relate specifically to the region and disaster area(s) affected,
- Also, “*games on future disaster preparation have been developed.*” For example, The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) has developed a virtual game on disasters for children that is available to the public.

So, after an initial disaster, we can use it as an opportunity to teach children on how to better prepare for the next possible event like a storm.

2) Creative Talks and Story-telling Sessions

Little booklets of short story sessions can be presented as a series of little talks and check in sessions with young children at various intervals after they experienced the storm event.

Talks and story-telling sessions can center on the disaster itself, monitor and assess students /children’s emotional state, and give them information on how to prepare, in their own ways, for future disaster(s). A good guide has been made available to teachers and parents/guardians by the U. S. Center for Disease Control (CDC). See:

- ***Coping after Disasters—Fun Activities for Young Children/Students [[Coping after a Disaster \(cdc.gov\)](#) US Dept. of Health & Human Services CDC].***

Relevant pages of importance from the CDC guide are as follows:

Page 1: Presents an overview to parents, teachers, and guardians,

Page 2: With children’s help: identify types of disasters; for example: hurricanes or storms, tornadoes, and so forth,

Pages 3 & 6: Conduct emotional check in exercises to assess the emotional state or feelings of the young children in your care. Show them face emoji: a sad face versus a happy face,

Page 10: With children’s help, identify simple coping strategies to help them deal with the trauma/traumatic event,

Page 11: Assess for posttraumatic symptoms or signs in the child; for example, sleep disturbance patterns, and, withdrawal from the usual playing with friends,

Pages 13 & 14: Identify simple word games/play activities to help in the emotional recovery and

- Bouncing back efforts of the child (CDC guide [Coping after a Disaster, US Dept. of Health & Human Services CDC](#)).

- For More Fun Activities Visit: www.cdc.gov/phpr/readywrigley
- And, <https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/readywrigley/books.htm>

Other research findings and educational suggestions

- Study have found: students underperformed in reading and math up to 5 years after a disaster; and that 2 years after a natural disaster, 70% of children ages 7-13 showed moderate to severe posttraumatic stress symptoms of: anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and attention problems (*Learning Undefeated*).
- Some other suggestions that have been offered to address students' posttraumatic anxiety, depression, and withdrawals are: teachers should (1) foster peer-to-peer social connections at school through play and sports; and, (2) teachers should encourage students' reconnections through friendship bonding. These exercises are believe to provide emotional support and coping assistance after a hurricane or any other major disturbance (Pacheco, Parrott, Oktari, & Joffe, 2022).

Conclusion: Lingering Questions Post Hurricane Dorian

These questions remain: what efforts have been made to help surviving victims especially children to cope with the grief and to build some level of resilience? How are students in the affected areas of Abaco and Grand Bahama faring in school both psychologically, socially, and achievement wise? What were the effects on education and learning loss? And, have efforts been made to effectively move communities to resiliency? In part or in whole?

References

- Chatterjee, S. (2018). Children's coping, adaptation and resilience through play in situation of crisis. *Youth and Environments*, 28(2), 119-145.
- Mercy Corps. (2020, August 4). The facts: Hurricane Dorian's devastating effect on The Bahamas. [Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas | Facts and how to help | Mercy Corps](#)
- Moss, S. (2019, Sept. 26). *Helping children after Hurricane Dorian* (Ricardo Miller's quotes stated). Lifestyle. <https://thenassauguardian.com/helping-children-after-hurricane-dorian/>
- Pacheco, E. M., Parrott, E., Oktari, R. S., & Joffe, H. (2022). How schools can aid children's resilience in disaster settings: The contribution of place and social representation theories. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1-13, 13.1004022. DOI10.3389/fpsyg2022 (pages 1-13).