

Guidance on Reunification

During an emergency, children can become separated from their families. There are steps child care programs can take in advance to help reduce the potential this will occur. There are also steps that can be taken during the emergency. If children do become separated from their parents there are national, federal and local resources available to help child care programs reunite families.

What Child Care Programs Can Do In Advance

There are several actions a child care program can take in advance to ensure they will be able to reunite children with their families after an emergency. To be prepared for emergencies center staff and family child care providers should:

- Ensure they have multiple phone numbers for family members including home, cell and work phone numbers for both parents or guardians and others to whom the child can be released.
- Ensure parents or guardians have designated in writing the relatives or friends to which children can be released after a disaster, including one or more individuals outside the area.
- Inform parents in advance where the children will be taken if an evacuation is required.
- Ensure they have the phone number of a family member or trusted friend out of the area such as a grandparent or other relative who can be contacted to locate the parents.
- Establish an 800 (toll-free) or other emergency number for the program outside the area that parents can contact to learn where their child or children have been relocated.
- Take and maintain a current digital photo of each child enrolled in the program that can be used if it is necessary to post the child's photo to aid in reunification; with the parents' permission email a copy of the photo files to a location outside the area for use in reuniting children with their parents during a disaster.
- Become familiar with the National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System (NEFRLS) and the National Emergency Child Locator Center and the American Red Cross systems which have been developed to help reunite families who are separated during a disaster

What Child Care Programs Can Do During the Emergency

During the emergency it is critical for programs to keep children safe and with program personnel who will be able to reunite children with their parents after the event. If there is sufficient warning and it is safe to do so, child care programs should strive to reunite children with their parents before the event occurs. If this not possible and an emergency response is required the program should:

- Place an identification bracelet on each child or pin information on each child that will help reunite the child with his or her parents or other trusted individuals.
- Assign an individual (staff member or assistant) and a backup to be responsible for each child's safety during the event.
- Release children only to individuals the parents have designated as approved to take the child from the program; require any such individuals to show photo identification before releasing a child to them.
- Keep parents informed when children are evacuated from the facility to a nearby or distant location

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What to Do If Parents or Other Designated Individuals Cannot Be Contacted

Following the 2005 hurricane season, Congress passed the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA) of 2006, amending the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, and authorizing the establishment of the National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System (NEFRLS). During a disaster, NEFRLS is activated to reunite families that have become separated as a result of a disaster. Individuals and families can register online at www.fema.gov. Call centers may be reached at 1-800-588-9822, 24-hours a day when it is activated. NEFRLS enables FEMA to provide a Web-based system for people to voluntarily register and share specific information on their post-disaster well-being or location with specified family members.

By going online or calling the Family Registry System, people who have been separated from their families and friends can provide information about themselves and where they can be found. At the same time, families looking for a lost family member also are urged to go online at www.fema.gov or call the toll-free number as they search for them. For those who have become separated from children 21 years of age and younger, FEMA will activate the National Emergency Child Locator Center (NECLC) to help families, local and tribal governments, and law enforcement agencies track and locate children separated from their parents or guardians because of the disaster. The toll-free number for the Emergency Child Locator Center is 1-866-908-9572 and is staffed 24-hours a day. The Center's operations are managed by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, with support from FEMA. People who call the Family Registry to locate children will be directed to the Child Locator Center.

If a child remains in the program's care and it is not possible to locate the child's parents or another trusted individual, notify the local emergency management office and the state child care licensing office and contact the NECLC. When requested, provide a digital photo of the child and the information required by the Center. Keep the child safe and comfortable until contacted by the child's parents or another individual the parents have approved to take the child from the program. If no one can be found to release the child to and the program is no longer able to provide care of the child, contact the state Department of Social Services to obtain temporary foster care for the child.

Resource: Protecting Children in Child Care During Emergencies , Recommended State and National Regulatory and Accreditation Standards for Family Child Care Homes and Child Care Centers and Supporting Rationale, Developed by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies and Save the Children, Domestic Emergencies Unit, Pages 54-55.

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