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By SCRA Web Admin – November 21, 2010



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Helping families and communities recover From disaster: Lessons learned from hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Kilmer, R. P., Gil-Rivas, V. Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (Ed.), (2010). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

An ad-hoc subcommittee on disaster recovery for the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs held hearings in 2009 as a follow up to the interim report done by the National Commission on Children and Disasters (2009). This initial report offered mental health recommendations related to integrating children's mental/behavioral health in preparedness and response activities, enhancing the research agenda for children's mental/behavioral health and the training of the pediatric disaster workforce. The book, Helping

Families and Communities Recover From Disaster: Lessons Learned From Hurricane Katrina and its Aftermath, addresses these recommendations by presenting a blend of scholarly research and operational wisdom drawn from the Katrina experience. Editors Ryan P. Kilmer, Virginia Gil-Rivas, Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun have assembled chapters written by a host of authors to systematically review the current literature in disaster behavioral health, present results of funded research in response to the Gulf Coast Hurricane experience for children, families and systems, and present recommendations that align with the initial conclusions of the National Commission on Children and Disasters.

The editors of the book intend it to serve as a reference for professionals and scholars interested in the impact of disasters on children, families and communities. Each of the twelve chapters in the book is heavy with scholarly references, but the most compelling and memorable part of each chapter is the lessons learned and actionable recommendations. The authors use the human and environmental context post- Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi to illustrate research and its application to real world psycho-social issues. An ecological theory unifies the work contained in the volume with each chapter's authors referring specifically to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (2005) as a way to frame their work and conclusions. This model emphasizes the interaction of

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(2005) as a way to frame their work and conclusions. This model emphasizes the interaction of person and environment while logically leading the reader to a conclusion that individual reactions to disaster are influenced by a constellation of variables that are not easily deconstructed.

The book begins with a review of previous research and presents new findings to assist the reader in understanding proximal influences of a child's reaction to disaster (e.g., family, caregivers, and teachers). This section is memorable because it led the reader to a recognition of the need to bring indicators of child well-being and protection to a higher standard rather than just back to pre-disaster functioning. Comparisons between Katrina relief efforts and humanitarian responses to emergencies in developing countries in the first section prepare the reader to enter the second part of the book, which focuses on the distal influences of systems and communities making up a child's world post-disaster. The authors of these chapters offer frank recommendations to improve systems prior to and during a disaster response based on research and experience. The third and final part of the book ties the work and recommendations of the previous two sections together with lessons learned through the Katrina experience.

Each chapter in this book can stand alone, but taken together they paint a multi-dimensional picture that seems to hang meat on the skeleton offered by the initial recommendations of the National Commission on Children and Disasters (2009). I am a frequent critic of disaster research and writing that doesn't translate well to operational settings. Although this volume is research heavy, the authors and editors have made a concerted effort to frame actionable recommendations for clinicians, policy makers and scholars. For example, a discussion on use of evidence-based practices includes the caveat that most teachers and clinicians working in a post-disaster context have little time or capacity to assess the quality of all the programs being offered to meet the needs of their communities or students. The authors advocate stepping back and offering assessment expertise to affected communities prior to imposing "programs" for recovery.

Bottom line, this isn't light reading - but to date is one of the most thoughtful and complete volumes available for scholars, graduate students and professionals involved in disaster mental health/behavioral health planning, response or recovery work with children, families and communities. This book is timely and should be on the reference shelf for anyone involved in behavioral health disaster planning or response work.

References

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