Kids Need Help to the Silver Lining

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Searching for Hurricane Katrina's silver lining, some have suggested that perhaps young children evacuated from New Orleans to other cities are getting a new and better start in life. Perhaps safer neighborhoods and better schools could translate into a brighter future.

But this tempting picture ignores what we know about the damage Katrina and its aftermath inflicted on young children. Yes, better neighborhoods and more effective schools, whether in New Orleans or elsewhere, could eventually benefit children -- but only if these kids and their families get the help they need to repair the trauma.

Young children's ability to learn is grounded in a sense of security. After Katrina, as buildings were flooded and families uprooted, children lost at once their homes, neighborhoods, and beloved kin and caregivers who are now scattered across the United States. And parents' ability to help young children feel calm and secure is crucial to children's recovery. But if parents remain in limbo themselves, experiencing anxiety and depression, the risks of derailing children's development deepen.

On a recent trip to New Orleans and Baton Rouge, I heard about the continuing chaos of parents' lives. At Renaissance Village outside Baton Rouge, 1,500 people live crammed into 500 small trailers with no permanent home after nine months. A child care teacher told me of a medically fragile baby evacuated to Baton Rouge with her mother, already mentally ill before the storm and further disoriented afterward.

Research suggests that children like this baby, whose lives have already been the harshest, suffer most from added disruptions. Unfortunately, New Orleans' children were deeply at risk before Katrina: Four in 10 children under six lived in poverty, and many faced other stresses, such as parental ill health or neighborhood violence.

Taken together, these findings imply that many of the 40,000 children under six who lived in New Orleans before Katrina -- as well as tens of thousands more elsewhere on the Gulf Coast -- face emotional damage and setbacks in learning that could cloud their futures.

Could these conclusions be too pessimistic? Could children have a resilience that academics don't see? Child care providers and social workers in Louisiana told me that's not true: The research fits the reality of the distressed, anxious children they see every day.

And a recent survey by Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness bears them out. Half of the parents surveyed (Katrina evacuees in temporary housing funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency) reported having at least one child with new behavioral problems since Katrina. Over half the mothers scored at very low levels on a mental health checklist, pointing to depression or anxiety disorders.

What can we do about this grim picture? Strong research evidence points to the programs that could heal the damage, such as the Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Early Head Start, designed by a team of national experts during the years that I oversaw children's programs at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, helps babies and toddlers learn by providing early education, health, and mental health services and coordinates community services, such as counseling or job training, for their parents.

Given the harm children have already endured and the threat to their futures for years to come, the nation should reach every young child affected by Katrina with services based on these proven models. It can be done because Baton Rouge is already starting to do it. There, the federal government, community partners and private philanthropists are expanding Early Head Start to all babies and toddlers evacuated there after Katrina struck. In New Orleans, the federal and state governments should finance ambitious model programs available to every baby, toddler and preschooler who returns.
The cost would be far below other components of the rebuilding -- perhaps $35 million beyond the cost of current programs, depending how rapidly parents return.

Far from a silver lining, Katrina will leave a lasting legacy of damage for young children unless we act now. Yes, better neighborhoods and more effective schools, whether in New Orleans or elsewhere, could eventually benefit children -- but only if these kids and their families get the help they need to repair the legacy of trauma left by Hurricane Katrina.

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