

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Supporting Children After a Disaster: A Case Study of a Psychosocial School-Based Intervention

Powell, T., & Holleran-Steiker, L. K. (2017). Supporting children after a disaster: A case study of a psychosocial school-based intervention. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 45, 176-188. doi:10.1007/s10615-015-0557-y

SUMMARY: Children are vulnerable after a natural disaster, and psychosocial programs can be helpful for them to cope with stressors caused by disasters. This study examined the effectiveness of the Journey of Hope program by interviewing children participants who were impacted by a tornado as well as school social workers and facilitators. Results revealed that children, social workers, and facilitators all regarded the program as helpful for children's mental health after a natural disaster.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Students, social workers, and facilitators reported that the Journey of Hope program helped students build affect regulation skills and self-psycho-education skills (the ability to understand and cope with adversities) that were useful for students to normalize their emotions.
- Students stated that the program taught them self-expression skills that transferred to settings outside of the program.
- The program helped students cope with bullying in school by bravely standing up to bullying behaviors not only for themselves but also for friends who were being bullied.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Closely monitor the physical and mental health of children who experienced traumatic events (e.g., military parents' combat exposure, death of a family member, natural disaster)
- Inform military families about available programs that may help child dependents of Service members cope with negative life events

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for child dependents of Service members who experienced traumatic events
- Provide workshops for military parents to teach them how to monitor and improve children's mental health after a traumatic life event

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness by holding educational events of the negative impact of traumatic events on children's mental health
- Continue to support research and programs that promote child dependents of Service members' physical and mental well-being

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METHODS

- Students and social workers were recruited using a convenience sampling method (i.e., they were selected because of their convenient accessibility) from three schools which were highly impacted by a tornado in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 2011.
- Participants were interviewed in focus groups or individually about their experiences of the Journey of Hope program; topics included fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, bullying, self-esteem, and taking action.
- Data were analyzed to examine the effects of the Journey of Hope program on children's behaviors and mental health.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 30 students who were enrolled in the Journey of Hope program in 2011; the average age of students was 9.4 years (age range = 8-12 years) and there were 18 girls and 12 boys.
- The majority of students were Black (N = 26); the race/ethnicity of the other four students was unknown.
- Participants also included five school social workers and 14 facilitators who participated in the Journey of Hope program; the age, gender, and race/ethnicity of the social workers and facilitators were not reported.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants were not chosen randomly, so it is possible that students and social workers who were in favor of the program were more likely to participate than those who did not like the program, which may have caused selection bias.
- Some of the researchers were also the creators of the program; therefore, they may not have a neutral view of the effectiveness of the intervention.
- The study was limited to participants who were impacted by tornado in one city; therefore, caution must be taken when generalizing the results to other natural disasters and other geographical regions.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use random sampling methods to recruit participants in order to avoid selection bias
- Replicate the study with researchers who are not directly associated with the program so that the researchers' opinions of the program are neutral and will not bias the study results
- Examine the effectiveness of the program in other geographical regions that are impacted by natural disasters other than tornadoes (e.g., earthquakes)

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