

## Katrina Response: *Protecting the Children of the Storm*

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc along the U.S. Gulf Coast, leaving more than 1,300 people dead, forcing 1 million people from their homes, and inflicting unprecedented property damage. It also left 372,000 children without schools.

The brunt of the storm fell hardest on the region's poorest and neediest children and adults, who fled their homes and took shelter in hastily improvised facilities in convention centers, churches and even cruise ships. Assistance for displaced families came from all quarters: Federal, state and local agencies joined forces with nongovernmental organizations, churches and community groups to provide shelter, food and medical care.

However, as in most large-scale crises, the unique needs of children were not a priority in disaster relief or recovery plans. Children struggled to cope with the aftermath of the storm, often in overcrowded, noisy, poorly equipped shelters without safe places to play and surrounded by strangers. Many had experienced the devastating loss of family members, neighbors or friends. Virtually all had lost their homes, schools and neighborhoods. The routines that defined their daily lives—studies, school activities and play—were swept away overnight.

Now, a year after the storm, children still face enormous challenges. Many still live in temporary and often unwelcoming situations. They have lost their communities and schools, disrupting social networks and learning. And studies have found high rates of depression, anxiety and behavioral problems among many children trying to make their way in a post-Katrina world.

Save the Children, the leading independent organization creating lasting change for children in need in the United States and abroad, has been responding to the world's major disasters for decades—most recently the South Asia tsunami, Pakistan earthquake and the ongoing crisis in Darfur, Sudan. On the Gulf Coast, the agency responded within days of the storm. An emergency response team assisted thousands of displaced children, providing more secure environments for them under difficult conditions. Save the Children—with the close collaboration of corporations, local school systems, volunteer and nonprofit groups, universities and government agencies—continues to work across the Gulf region, helping to ensure that school programs, summer camps and child care are available, and that children can play, learn and work through emotional distress in safe places.



**“One key lesson learned from Hurricane Katrina is that the unique needs of children in crisis situations must be addressed in future national emergency response plans. Save the Children’s goal is to ensure that children are a top priority at every phase of a U.S. humanitarian response.”**

Mark Shriver, Vice President and Managing Director of U.S. Programs, Save the Children



Kyla, age 9, relives her experience of Hurricane Katrina. She says it made her brave.

### WEATHERING THE STORM: KYLA'S STORY

Just as flood waters from Hurricane Katrina broke through the levees in New Orleans, the power went out in Kyla's house. The storm raged outside: "The water got higher and my uncle and grandmother were trying to hold the door. But then—BAM!—the water came through," Kyla began to tell the story she will remember for the rest of her life. "We all rushed upstairs. My mom kept telling me to pray. We were all crying," she says. Then they sat for long hours in the dark, waiting to be rescued.

At one point during the second day, her mother and uncle commandeered a small boat drifting past. Paddling with a stick, they tried to rescue two elderly neighbors, who couldn't climb into the boat.

"They died," Kyla says in a whisper.

## *For Children, Recovery Starts with Education*

Save the Children anchors its emergency response efforts in education. The agency has helped re-equip schools, and developed and funded in-school, after-school and summer programs so that children could get back to learning as soon as possible. The classroom is key to restoring normal routines and a sense of community to children who are adrift in crisis situations, helping them to:

- deal with traumatic experiences;
- re-engage in learning through formal and non-formal programs; and
- participate in structured, supervised play activities in safe spaces.

This strategy to restore normalcy and structure to the lives of children has benefited parents as well. Many adults spent long hours waiting in line for disaster-relief services and, as the shelters began to close down, faced increasing pressure to find permanent housing and employment. Knowing that children were in good hands made their work easier.

#### **Even before Hurricane Katrina:**

- In Mississippi, 24 percent of children lived at or below the poverty line; 23 percent of children in Louisiana lived at or below the poverty line.
- In Mississippi, 30 percent of children could not read at grade level; in Louisiana, 29 percent of children could not read at grade level.

#### **Damage from the storm has made the challenges for children even greater:**

- 1,100 schools in Louisiana and Mississippi were closed following Hurricane Katrina.
- 80 percent of child care facilities in Mississippi's two hardest-hit coastal counties were damaged or destroyed by the storm.

## *Caring for Children in the Community*

Working with a network of diverse partners, Save the Children has engaged in a range of educational services and programs for thousands of children throughout the region:

**Keeping young children safe.** In emergency situations, young children need safe areas to play and supervised activities led by adults. In collaboration with Chevron and the Early Childhood Institute at Mississippi State University (MSU), the agency is rebuilding child care centers in the hard-hit coastal area of Harrison and Hancock counties, where 80 percent of child care facilities were damaged or destroyed. In Harrison County, 33 licensed child care centers serving 2,500 children will be restored. In addition, Save the Children has launched a campaign to reconstruct playgrounds that will help protect children from playing in hazardous debris on the streets and signal the return of community life in the Gulf Coast.

**Restoring local schools.** Save the Children began helping re-equip schools within days after the storm, the first of many essential steps to getting children back into the classroom. The agency distributed school supplies, educational games and toys to 2,500 children in shelters in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Jackson, Vicksburg, Hattiesburg and Gulfport, Mississippi. For the 2006-07 school year, the agency is working with Scholastic Book Clubs to provide books to children in New Orleans schools and Mississippi day care centers.

**Providing emotional support activities in the classroom.** Save the Children's classroom-based program helps children affected by war, conflict and disaster through structured activities in the classroom, combining art, music, storytelling and drama. Modified for the United States, this approach has proved just as effective with Gulf Coast children as it has with children from the tsunami-affected coast of Indonesia. Save the Children has trained more than 1,000 teachers, counselors and other adults in emotional support activities to help children recover from stress. To date, more than 10,000 children have completed the program, which will continue into the new school year. The agency also provided "care for the caregiver" workshops for an additional 450 teachers and other adults who requested help in coping with their own issues related to the storm and its aftermath.

**Supporting after-school programs and summer camps.** Save the Children has funded programs to accommodate the needs of displaced students in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi throughout the school year and summer. The agency organized 10 camps in December 2005 during the holiday break, and more than 10,000 children have attended summer camp programs supported by Save the Children. The agency will assist summer camps in 2007, and after-school programs will continue into the 2006-07 school year.

**Preparing for the next emergency.** During its summer camp programs, Save the Children has helped prepare children and parents for the possibility of another storm. For children, the activities have stressed the importance of making a plan, pulling together emergency contact information and following directions. Children have received an evacuation backpack, containing hygiene items, a notebook and coloring pencils, a teddy bear and a flashlight. Parents have received information on how to help children feel safe, including how to create a family disaster plan, how to pack an emergency kit and how to manage stress.



The student cast of “Remembering the Gift” relaxes after their performance dramatizing their experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina.

## ON STAGE, THE DRAMA OF RECOVERY AND ACCEPTANCE

Any theater is magic when the lights go down—but the debut of “Remembering the Gift” was special. On an evening in February 2006, high school students from Baton Rouge and New Orleans performed a play about the changes in their lives post-Katrina.

These high school students were brought together by a natural disaster and they had to make the best of it. Only 60 miles from New Orleans, the schools of Baton Rouge opened their doors to the evacuees, but the children from Baton Rouge had little understanding of what the new kids had gone through. And that made for tough times in the school hallways, cafeterias and on the athletic fields.

This performance was a direct expression of their experiences. Out of disaster came dramatic change and the need to adjust and accept one another for the gift of their common humanity. Emotion gripped the audience as students actors struggled to keep imaginary waters from pulling them down. At one point Teresita Catherine described losing her father: “He could swim,” she cried. “I know he struggled. I know he fought.”

*The production was a joint project of Health Care Centers in Schools; Epic Theatre of New York City, whose founder is from Baton Rouge; and Project Return, a New Orleans community-building agency; and Save the Children.*

# Partners Make the Difference

Hurricane Katrina was an unprecedented disaster requiring a response larger than any one agency could provide. As in its emergency efforts around the world, Save the Children is collaborating across the spectrum of government agencies, public and private organizations and local entities to assist children and families along the Gulf Coast. Among its partners are:

- **Corporations.** Working with Chevron, Save the Children is rebuilding child care facilities in Mississippi so parents can re-establish their lives and return to work.
- **Local school systems.** Save the Children introduced its emotional support program to Washington and Jefferson parish schools in Louisiana, training more than 1,000 teachers, counselors, after-school staff and child care providers to help children deal with troubling experiences during the storm. To date, more than 10,000 children have completed the program. Save the Children also equipped two Baton Rouge schools, enabling them to take in hundreds of children from New Orleans.
- **Volunteer and nonprofit groups.** The New Jersey Firemen's Mutual Benefit Association and Mercy Corps worked with Save the Children to build a playground at North Bay Elementary School in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Save the Children joined with the United Way for the Greater New Orleans Area, Mercy Corps and the Emeril Lagasse Foundation to fund summer camps for children in Louisiana. Local organizations, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCA-Baton Rouge and the New Orleans Community Service Center, also are working with Save the Children to provide after-school and summer camp programs.
- **Universities.** Child care specialists from Mississippi State University are working with Save the Children to restore child care in the state. One outgrowth of this collaboration was a request from Louisiana officials to assess the child care situation in New Orleans.
- **Government.** To help improve the difficult circumstances families face in temporary housing camps, Save the Children is working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on the Safe and Protective Communities project. Starting in one Louisiana camp, the partners will introduce safe play areas for children and meeting spaces for adults, and identify and fund youth-focused community projects.

Thanks to the New Jersey Firemen's Mutual Benefit Association (FMBA), girls from North Bay Elementary School, Mississippi, select new playground equipment.





## Moving from Disaster Relief to Recovery

Nearly one year after Hurricane Katrina left its trail of devastation across the Gulf Coast, more than 100,000 people—thousands of them children—are still living in FEMA-supplied trailer camps.

Although intended as a short-term solution, the camps are likely to remain home for thousands of displaced families for the next two to five years. The camps are unsafe and unwelcoming, and child protection issues abound. While parents look for permanent housing and jobs, children need safe play areas, transportation and supervision in these difficult and disorienting conditions.

Save the Children and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are implementing a new pilot program to improve services for children and families living in temporary housing group sites in the Gulf Coast region. The Safe and Protective Communities project will create community spaces where residents can gather to receive essential services and support, and help to build a sense of community among the residents. The spaces also will serve as venues for after-school and other programs for children.

### A HAVEN FOR KIDS FAR FROM HOME

At Scotlandville School (K-8) in Baton Rouge in May 2006, the bell rang to end classes as usual. But for 148 children displaced from New Orleans, the school day was not over. Instead of returning to Renaissance Village—an isolated encampment of 500 FEMA-provided travel trailer homes without access to community resources—they raced off to the gym for a snack, basketball and homework. This after-school program was organized with a local partner, Big Buddies, within three weeks after Hurricane Katrina because children are most vulnerable to drug use, gang violence and sexual activity in the hours after school.

Two students taking warm-up shots at the basketball hoop stopped to talk briefly. Adrianna, age 14, remarked, “It’s better to come here because of the drugs in our trailer park.” Joel, age 13, added, “I love school. It keeps us busy and out of trouble.”

## Preparing for the Future

With the 2006 hurricane season well under way, Save the Children is working to prepare families along the Gulf Coast for any future disaster. The agency has developed hurricane preparedness plans—one for children and another for parents—as part of summer activity programs. Children learn about the importance of making a plan, the questions they should ask parents, the need for an emergency contact and identification card, and how to follow directions. Parents receive information on how to help children feel safe, create a family disaster plan, pack an emergency kit and manage their own stress.

Beyond Hurricane Katrina, children of the Gulf Coast struggle with more deeply rooted problems stemming from the persistent poverty of the region. Literacy skills are far below the national average: Nearly one-third of school-age children in Louisiana and Mississippi cannot read at grade level. Save the Children's supplemental literacy programs, which target key reading skills, are fundamental to the transition from recovery activities to long-term programs.

Beginning in September 2006, Save the Children will introduce literacy and nutrition programs to schools in hurricane-affected communities in Louisiana and Mississippi. Over a three-year period, the agency will support schools in implementing in-school, after-school and summer literacy programs, as well as nutrition and obesity prevention services for low-income children in grades K-8. These programs will supply children with access to trained literacy staff, age-appropriate books and libraries, software and technology for reading assessment, structured program content, safe equipment and healthy snacks.

Save the Children also will launch its Early Steps to School program in Mississippi to provide early childhood education services to children from birth to age 5.

Children are among the most vulnerable members of any population, and displaced children even more so. To prepare for another disaster, Save the Children is working with policy makers to ensure that the unique needs of children are integral to national emergency response plans—and that they are cared for before, during and after a crisis.



Day care teacher Kathleen Jefferson reads to a group of 3-4-year-olds at the Imagination Station, a 24-hour child care center that Save the Children helped rebuild in Long Beach, Mississippi.

# About Save the Children

Save the Children is the leading independent organization creating lasting change for children in need in the United States and around the world. For nearly 75 years, Save the Children has been helping children survive and thrive by improving their health, education and economic opportunities and, in times of acute crisis, mobilizing rapid life-saving assistance to help children recover from the effects of war, conflict and natural disasters. For more information, visit [savethechildren.org](http://savethechildren.org).

Save the Children USA is a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, a global network of 29 independent Save the Children organizations working to ensure the well-being and protection of children in more than 110 countries.

For more information, contact:

Save the Children  
54 Wilton Road  
Westport, Connecticut 06880  
1.800.728.3843

[www.savethechildren.org](http://www.savethechildren.org)



## CREDITS

### *Photo:*

Susan Warner, Cover and pp. 5, 7;  
Jody Sims, pp. 2, 4, 6.

### *Report Contributors:*

Robin Bell, Kate Conradt,  
Jeanne-Aimee De Marrais,  
Kathy Doherty, George Haddow,  
Mike Kiernan and  
Allyson Stollenwerck.