

## SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION: Independent Study

# Special Topic: Special Populations



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A number of groups within society have special needs when it comes to disasters. Special populations are defined as groups of people whose needs may require additional, customized, or specialized approaches in preparedness for, response to, and recovery from extreme events. Many of these populations are recognized as groups with special needs prior to disaster and others become at-risk groups when disaster strikes.

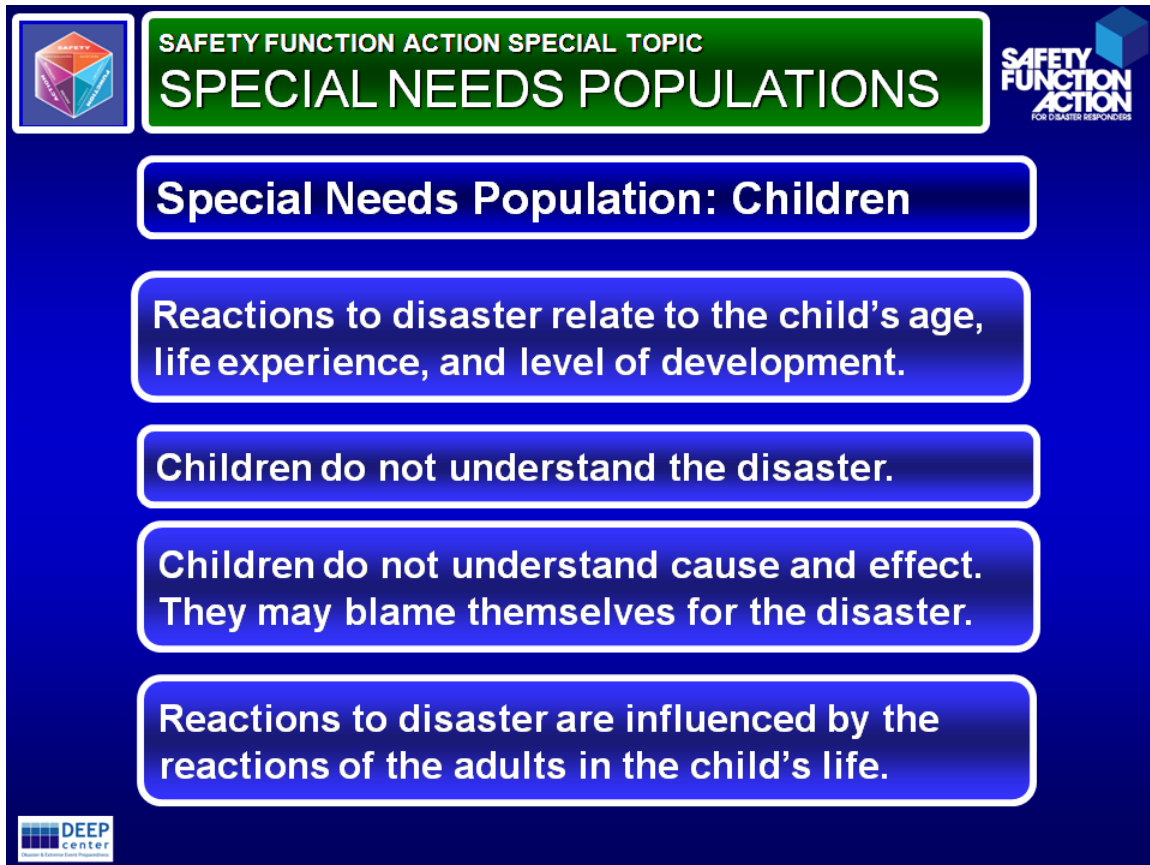
Some populations considered at-risk prior to disaster include: people with physical disabilities, people who are sick/injured/have chronic illnesses, individuals with learning disabilities, those who have limited language skills, people with mental illness, and individuals who are electrically-dependent.

Populations that become at-risk groups during a disaster situation include: children, older adults, women, individuals with minimal education, people with low socioeconomic status, single parents, undocumented immigrants, and individuals with previous trauma or substance abuse/dependence.

There is also the possibility of the disaster event itself causing individuals to become special needs populations. Intense exposure to the disaster event, sustaining an injury or disease, experiencing an

extreme and real fear of death and/or witnessing grotesque scenes can cause psychological trauma and physical harm to survivors. Disaster impacts on loved ones can also place individuals at higher risk of sustaining psychological trauma. Separation from loved ones and/or the death or injury of a loved one can lead to negative reactions and trauma in an individual. All of these factors during a disaster experience can lead to an increased need for support and services, therefore making individuals who have sustained these experiences special needs populations.

Ongoing stressors following a disaster may create individual and collective needs for individualized support. Several factors in the post-disaster environment appear to exacerbate psychosocial impact and impede recovery. Special populations that may come from the post-disaster setting include: those who have sustained severe losses/extreme damage to property and interpersonal support, and those who have sustained damage to their community's functioning. Severe loss, as could be expected, can exacerbate stress and trauma sustained by a disaster. Reliance on social support networks are tremendously important following a disaster, therefore loss may not only be physical but social losses can negatively impact individuals as well. Loss of loved ones, loss of social support, and loss of community can all lower a survivor's ability to cope with the disaster.



**SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION SPECIAL TOPIC**  
**SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATIONS**

**Special Needs Population: Children**

- Reactions to disaster relate to the child's age, life experience, and level of development.
- Children do not understand the disaster.
- Children do not understand cause and effect. They may blame themselves for the disaster.
- Reactions to disaster are influenced by the reactions of the adults in the child's life.


DEEP center logo in bottom left corner.

The age of an individual can greatly reduce their ability to function in a disaster situation, therefore making children, and older adult populations two of the most evident high-risk populations. Children face a unique set of factors due to their age. Children's level of development limits their ability to understand what is happening, the cause and effect of a disaster, and the reactions they and their loved ones are experiencing. Based on their level of development, children may not understand the reasons for relocation, loss of property, and change in their schedule. They may question their guardians and have difficulty adjusting to change due to this lack of understanding. The same can be said for children's understanding of the cause and effect of disasters.

Many children do not understand how or why disasters occur. They may even blame themselves for the disaster based on their stage of development (i.e. egocentrism). For example, a child in New Orleans, Louisiana may have been reprimanded by their parents to not flush the toilet so much or it will overflow and they will flood the house. Then hurricane Katrina hits New Orleans, LA in 2005 and the child's home is flooded and their possessions are lost. They may make the connection that it was their fault because they flushed the toilet too many times. It is important to address these

concerns and explain the situation and cause-effect of disasters in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Children can also have trouble knowing how to respond to loss and trauma; they also rely on observing others' reactions to know what is expected. They may observe their adult loved ones to know how they should behave and react to the situation. Therefore, if adults are severely affected by the disaster, children have a higher likelihood of responding in an extreme way as well. In order to encourage healthy coping following a disaster, both child and guardian should be informed of common reactions and healthy ways to cope with the stress.



The graphic features a dark blue background with a green header bar at the top. The header bar contains the text "SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION SPECIAL TOPIC" in white, followed by "SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATIONS" in large white letters. To the left of the header is a small icon of a cube with "SAFETY" written on it. To the right is the "SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS" logo. Below the header, there are three white rounded rectangular boxes containing text. The first box says "Special Needs Population: Children". The second box says "Excessive media exposure may increase distress for children." The third box says "The most common indicators of distress in children are changes in behavior." The fourth box says "Children reenact trauma in play activities." At the bottom left of the graphic is the DEEP center logo.

SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION SPECIAL TOPIC  
**SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATIONS**

SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION  
FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS

**Special Needs Population: Children**

Excessive media exposure may increase distress for children.

The most common indicators of distress in children are changes in behavior.

Children reenact trauma in play activities.

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Disaster & Extreme Event Preparedness

Children's functioning may also be impacted by observing traumatizing events, even after they have occurred. After a disaster the media often focuses exclusively on the loss and devastation of a disaster. If children are exposed to excessive amounts of media displaying the disaster, they may experience increased distress. Their level of comprehension may impede their ability to fully understand the information presented by the media. For example, after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, New York, there was massive media attention. The falling World Trade Center towers could be seen on every television station multiple times a day for weeks. A child may not understand that it is the same video footage being replayed. Instead, to them, it may seem that a new set of towers were falling each time, causing a traumatic experience every time they saw a news report.

Recognizing distress in children can be more difficult than recognizing stress responses in adults. This difficulty may result from the fact that children have difficulty understanding, communicating, and expressing their feelings due to their level of development. Therefore, to serve this special population, it may be helpful to know that children commonly express their distress behaviorally. Children often become clingy, have difficulty sleeping, may change their eating habits, or become

exceptionally quiet if they are distressed. They may also display their distress by acting out, becoming verbally or physically aggressive, and having trouble concentrating. Recognizing these signs of distress in children may make working with this population more manageable and may be helpful when working with worried guardians.



**SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION SPECIAL TOPIC**  
**SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATIONS**

**Special Needs Population: Older Adults**

- More likely to die or be injured
- Less likely to respond to warnings
- Less likely to evacuate
- Less likely to seek care
- Less likely to stand in line or use resources
- Likely to experience the “multiple loss” effect

Age-related issues can also place older adults in the category of a special needs population. Due to certain concerns related to age, older adults are often more likely to die or be injured in a disaster. They are also at higher risk of not responding to warnings, evacuating, seeking care, or standing in line for resources. Much of this higher risk is related to health and mobility issues, which may limit their ability to utilize disaster services and hinder their ability to recover quickly from a disaster. However, many services prioritize older adults’ needs to ensure their health and safety prior to, during, and following a disaster. For all other services, their accessibility may also need to be reviewed to ensure older adults can access disaster information and support to aid their recovery.

Psychologically, older adults may also be at higher risk of experiencing negative reactions following a disaster. In the later years of life individuals begin to experience a variety of losses. The death of loved ones, restricted mobility, and potential health concerns may be losses facing many older adults. Disaster losses add to this age-related experience of loss, creating a multiple loss effect. With the multiple loss effect it may be difficult for some older adults to cope. Providing positive support for these individuals is essential.



The infographic features a dark blue background with a green header bar. The header bar contains the text 'SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION SPECIAL TOPIC' and 'SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATIONS'. Below the header, a white rounded rectangle contains the title 'Special Needs Population: Older Adults'. Underneath, six blue rounded rectangles list the following reactions: 'Disorientation', 'Fear loss of control', 'Fear loss of independence', 'Apathy and withdrawal', 'Impatience and irritability', and 'Feeling too old to start over'. Logos for DEEP center and SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS are also present.

SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION SPECIAL TOPIC  
**SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATIONS**

**Special Needs Population: Older Adults**

- Disorientation
- Fear loss of control
- Fear loss of independence
- Apathy and withdrawal
- Impatience and irritability
- Feeling too old to start over

Older adults also react differently to disasters compared to younger persons. Reactions that are more common in older adults include disorientation, apathy and withdrawal, impatience, and irritability. These group specific reactions may stem from a variety of personal and group reasons. Attempting to be sensitive and supportive of older adults, just as with all survivors, may lower stress and help limit some of these reactions. Also common reactions include a number of fears. Older adults may be scared of losing control, scared of losing their independence, and worried that they are too old to start over. This vulnerable population has lived through many changes and may have difficulty adapting to more changes in this stage of their lives. Responders should be aware of these fears since negative reactions often stem from fear and concern. Working with the survivor to try and lower some of this fear may help limit some potential negative reactions.

While older adults demonstrate special needs and vulnerabilities, equally important is the realization that older adults represent a rich and remarkable resource of skills, experience, and available time that can be tapped for disaster response. Older adults should not be viewed only as a population with special needs but also as a resource in disasters. Older adults have lived through multiple disasters and have both survived and gained valuable perspective and wisdom. Since one

does not get old without surviving trauma, they represent “proven products” demonstrating that life goes on after trauma and loss. Utilizing the experience, skills, knowledge, and time that older adults have to offer can make them invaluable to disaster response or recovery.