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As Haiti recovers, give children special attention

By Irwin Redlener

Given the extraordinary destruction wrought by last month's earthquake in Haiti, few will be surprised if this catastrophe is recorded as one of the deadliest natural disasters in recent history. But what is not well appreciated is that this disaster could disproportionately impact children, not only those who perished in the initial shocks, but also those who will not survive what is likely to be a cruel aftermath.



Photo gallery: As Haiti struggled to pull itself together in the days immediately following the 7.0 earthquake that hit the island nation, one Iowa family was waiting to hear whether the child they had pledged to adopt three years ago was still alive.

Before the quake, [many of the 380,000 children living in shelters](#) were placed there out of economic desperation; families could not afford to care for them. Now, many more children displaced by the earthquake will literally have no surviving family members, further swelling demand on social service agencies throughout the country.

Kids at risk

As the U.S. and other countries make plans to help Haiti get back on its feet, emphasis should be on enhancing that nation's resiliency — and that will mean dealing with the needs of its children. The unusual extent of child casualties will be driven by several factors:

- About [50% of the Haitian population of 9 million is younger than 18](#). Even more striking is the fact that children 14 years of age and less make up more than 38%.
- Everything about a natural disaster puts children at greater risk. A comparatively small chunk of dislodged ceiling would injure an adult, but it might well kill an infant or small child. Water deprivation will lead far more rapidly to dehydration and shock in an infant than it would in an adult.
- Some seriously injured children have survived the initial trauma because they were among the few to get surgical attention provided by international medical teams. But access to follow-up care could be an overwhelming challenge. Compounding concerns, the Ministry of Health at one point [asked physicians not to provide medical care](#) that can't be sustained in Haiti.

Long-term needs

Between 1 million to 2 million Haitians will be "displaced" for the foreseeable future. This means a minimum of 400,000 to 800,000 children will be in temporary shelter for months or years. But the rainy season is coming in May, followed by hurricane season in June. Families in tents or other flimsy shelters will be at grave risk.

- What about the psychological impact? Grieving over loss and trauma carries the potential of long-term consequences for every Haitian, especially the countless children.

Then there are Haiti's chronic problems that must be addressed head-on. For decades, Haitians have experienced a seemingly intractable state of poverty, accompanied by malnutrition and high rates of acute and chronic illness. More than 50% of Haitians live on less than a dollar a day, and more than 60% of its young children have nutritional anemia.

Despite the efforts of international agencies and non-governmental organizations, chronic illness abounds and access to clean water, medical care and sanitation remains a significant challenge for Haitians, particularly children.

This is why the recovery and rebuilding of this fragile nation must begin and end with a central focus on the immediate and long-term needs of children. If there is to be a glimmer of hope for Haiti, it will be because the international community understands that the capacity to rise from the ashes of catastrophe is directly related to the health, well-being and potential of its youngest generation.

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(Getty Images.)