

Remarks of Konstantine Buhler  
Founder, Always Ready Kids  
To the Disasters Roundtable Workshop #25 of  
The National Academies Disasters Roundtable in conjunction with The National  
Commission on Children and Disasters  
June 25, 2009

Five years ago I founded Always Ready Kids, “ARK” to raise awareness and empower youth with disaster preparedness. In addition, we provide relief to victims of disasters. ARK has helped 14,000 people prepare for disasters and its projects have assisted youth in four continents. We work with schools, NGOs, government officials, community groups, corporations and individuals. Our ultimate goal is to catalyze a cultural shift that prepares individuals for disasters.

Disasters seem to be on the rise, and they are certainly on the minds of today’s youth. On the news or on the Internet, one regularly views floods, fires, or shootings. The frequency and intensity of major disasters have shot through the roof. The young generation has grown up with bombings, hurricanes, and terrorist attacks. Accounts of a society 40 years ago in which school children weren’t aware of terrorist attacks or school shootings, is unfathomable amongst our youth today. Disasters have become part of everyday life.

Often adults merely shelter youth, as a vulnerable and high-risk category, whose eyes should be closed to disasters. My message is that we, the youth of this country, are aware of the occurring disasters. Youth are interested in being part of the solution. And we want to be equipped

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to handle disasters. Make youth not a problem in disasters, but a solution.

How do we do this? Through preparedness: By empowering youth to be prepared for disasters and giving them a leading role in disaster preparedness. Please allow me to share with you some of my observations about today's young generation and disasters:

1. Youth feel a responsibility in disaster preparedness.
2. There may be a disconnect between youth and their parents when it comes to disasters
3. Youth *will* prepare their parents if youth are equipped to do so
4. Youth are an ideal demographic for disaster preparedness and management
5. With youth we can catalyze a cultural shift that embraces disaster management

(1) The responsibility that today's youth feel toward disaster preparedness can be likened to that with global climate change. Youth champion the climate change initiative because they feel a responsibility to their environment. Similarly, youth feel responsible for their family,

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friends and community. This sense of responsibility can thrust youth into action in disaster preparedness.

When youth's family, friends or community are threatened they feel the responsibility to protect them. Youth champion climate change and disaster preparedness because they know that one day they will inherit the earth. I have seen youth throughout the country show interest in preparedness, with projects I have led for Always Ready Kids. For example, ARK is based in Illinois with a chapter in Arizona and we receive lots of interest for new chapters. Also, in January we won a national contest where young people voted for their favorite youth-led initiatives. This is because youth understand the importance of preparedness. In conversations, youth volunteers and those who participate in our presentations are excited by disaster preparedness.

When ARK distributed preparedness literature from dawn to dusk at the Chicago Marathon young people and their families folded the paper and placed it in their pockets. I heard them make comments like, "This is really useful" and "Finally the government is giving us something we need." Additionally, Teen CERT is a successful government program that teens embrace. I was the first youth in IL to receive the adult CERT training thanks to a special assignment from FEMA. Other youth

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expressed a genuine interest in such training and will to participate. This month Ready Camps are being offered in Wisconsin. Kids will travel all the way from Canada because there is a thirst for such knowledge.

(2) There seems to be a disconnect between youth and their parents when it comes to disasters. To be frank, when it comes to disaster preparedness, parents *think* they are ready and their kids *know* they are not. Last summer ARK carried out a project in Boulder, Colorado where we conducted an unscientific survey of parents and their youth, asking them if they are prepared. The parents repeatedly answered that the family is ready for disasters: They say that they do have disaster preparedness kits and their family regularly participates in preparedness drills. Their children responded differently: They repeatedly answered that they do not have disaster preparedness kits and that the family does not regularly participate in preparedness drills. Clearly, we saw a disconnect between parents and their children when it comes to disaster preparedness. Youth are open-minded and interested. They are the ones who want to bring disaster preparation into the household. This brings me to my third point.

(3) Youth *will* prepare their parents if they are equipped to do so. When youth train and prepare, they feel empowered. This can be likened

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to the “buckle-up” campaign and recycling campaign. In both campaigns the youth are targeted, and they take the lead. The children repeatedly ask “Mom and Dad,...Buckle up” or “Mom, Dad,...Recycle that plastic bottle.” And after repetition, the parents comply with their children’s requests. Much like “Buckle up” the motto, “Be Aware... Prepare.” can create a mindset to save lives. Youth learn to be aware of their surroundings and of the potential disasters in their communities, and to prepare for them. Thus parents who love their kids, are willing to take precautions that the kids recommend; to protect their young.

Always Ready Kids has applied this principle in a campaign that we developed called the “ARK Preparedness Promise.” In the ARK Preparedness Promise we give youth a Checklist like this one. The list describes basic disaster preparedness supplies to include in a disaster preparedness kit. We encourage the youth to go home and based on the supply list, to make a kit with their parents for the ”HOST,” the Home, Office, School and Travel. If they promise to do so they get a bracelet like this. This raises awareness, kids feel rewarded for their efforts, and it’s a badge of honor that they wear once they prepare.

(4) Youth are an ideal demographic for disaster preparedness.

When I say youth are an ideal demographic it is important that youth of

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all ages are taken into account. Too often, teenagers, tweens, and adolescents are overlooked. And teens, tweens and adolescents can play a key role when it comes to disasters. These young people are physically capable.

Young people are willing to do hands on disaster management work like the sand-bagging of flooded rivers. In addition, young people are technology-savvy. Technology is important in all aspects of disasters. The way youth access, interpret, and convey information is faster than ever before. We live in a time of “instant communications” where people social network on Facebook, tweet on Twitter, get news online, and text on our phones; all in the blink of an eye. Youth can use technology to disseminate information more quickly and with more agility than our parents and grandparents. Use of certain technologies can be beneficial in disasters. For instance, youth are proficient at texting. Texting can be useful in disasters when cell phone use is limited and kids are in trouble.

The technical skills youth possess are also useful for disaster recovery. Youth often have flash drives in their pockets. These are important tools in disaster recovery, as they can easily hold copies of the family’s passports, drivers’ licenses, birth certificates, insurance policies, and medical information. All that information can be kept between the

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index finger and the thumb. Such technologies are instrumental in the preservation of materials

(5) My final observation is perhaps my most important: With youth we can catalyze a cultural shift that embraces disaster management. If we integrate preparedness into everyday life for youth then we can create a society that prepares. This week I was the only youth to attend the World Conference on Disaster Management in Toronto, Canada. I learned that Canada is seriously working on this cultural shift. I had discussions with the president and members of the board of the Canadian Center for Emergency Preparedness. They told me about their initiative to get youth to prepare. In fact, I learned of youth activities created such as a board game that promotes thinking of preparedness. For the younger kids a matching game has been developed.

In addition, I had an extended discussion with the Chairman of the Conference, about how Canada is getting preparedness into the educational system. A curriculum on disaster preparedness is being prepared for 3rd and 4<sup>th</sup> graders which is expected to be rolled out in 2011. Interestingly, it is based on a book developed by the National Fire Protection Assn., a U.S. organization. Forty countries and 1700 delegates were present at the Conference, and there was such an

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interest in youth preparedness, that I was added to the program to address the entire Conference.

The world is interested in a cultural shift toward preparedness. They know youth are integral to this shift. ARK has received support because of such interest. Our seed funding came from Ashoka's Youth Venture, a Virginia based organization; Best Buy recently gave us a \$10,000 grant to promote preparedness; Nestle USA has matched funds raised by youth for victims of Katrina; our Congressman provided a truck to deliver supplies, and books collected by ARK to a shelter for victims of Gustav;. at FEMA, the Regional V Director is incredible, being a mentor and giving great advice and support; and your invitation here epitomizes the support that youth with interest in disaster management are receiving. However, there is a lot of work to be done.

When I bring an Emergency Management Specialist to a school, and she is asked by a student, "What do we do in a shooting," how should she respond? There are no set protocols.

We know that disasters will strike; shouldn't we have preparedness curricula in our schools?

Adolescents, teens and tweens are willing to train for disasters. However, this resource is untapped. Too often these groups are

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overlooked. Internet programs are geared toward little kids and adults.

Another difficult need to address arises when students don't know what to do with information that could save lives. For instance, they don't know what to do when they hear a friend talking about a plan to do something that would endanger lives. They don't want to be a rat and tell. No system is in place for anonymous tips.

Wouldn't it be great to live in a world where kids wake up every day feeling secure because they feel prepared for the unexpected?

To conclude, I urge us today and always to prepare and empower youth. The actions we take today will affect our children and grandchildren. If we incorporate preparedness into the youth mentality we can have a society in which preparedness is common. So let's sow the seeds and empower youth. Let us integrate youth in disaster preparedness and management. I humbly request we work together to prepare and protect our nation's youth.

Thank You.