

Disasters Aren't Fun

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

I AM BY NO MEANS A PARENTING EXPERT, BUT MY advice to all you moms and dads out there is that if you care about your little ones' sanity, you'll keep them far — and I'm talking Star Wars galaxy far — away from the people at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

It's not that FEMA has any particular ill will toward children or, as far as I can tell, any ill intent. It's just that they appear to believe that all children are complete and utter morons.

Now, I know what you're thinking: Children *are* complete and utter morons. They slobber on things, they try to eat their appendages, they worship a purple dinosaur, and they think they're invisible any time they've got their eyes closed.

But none of that really constitutes being moronic. It's just being kid-like. And it doesn't mean that kids don't have their own brand of good sense and intelligence. Like, the good sense and intelligence to know that a story called *Julia and Robbie: The Disaster Twins*, which features a boy who "loves spelling" and a girl who goes around saying things like "You need to clear snow away from the car's exhaust so when you turn on the engine to stay warm, you don't get carbon monoxide poisoning," is not likely to become a bedtime favorite.

This is the kind of good sense and intelligence the adults at FEMA, which put out the aforementioned Disaster Twins story, apparently lack. Indeed, most of the agency's attempts to teach kids disaster preparedness are similarly clumsy efforts that make Sesame Street's Elmo look like a sophisticated intellectual and the Teletubbies appear the picture of subtlety.

Lest you think I exaggerate, consider FEMA's advice to kids when there's been a lot of rain: "If you come upon flood waters, stop." Which leaves one wondering, "stop" as opposed to what? Go? Go forth into the waters while carrying a plugged-in hairdryer and before waiting a half-hour for your supper to settle? Kids may be silly, but the mere sight of a flooded area, or any other natural disaster, is not going to automatically send them throwing themselves in harm's way.

Nor does it seem likely that most kids require FEMA's sage counsel to know that "terrorism is a scary thing" or that "dis-

asters aren't fun." Or even that "if you feel your hair stand on end," you should probably hightail it out of the area because things aren't looking so good.

And as for FEMA's one-sided conversation with itself about equine salvation ("How do you rescue a horse? That's a good question"), my guess is that any children who have made it that far on the FEMA kids' site will quickly grab the mouse and seek refuge in some part of cyberspace that treats them with a bit more respect.

No need to worry that the people at FEMA are adult chauvinists, though. They seem to think grown-ups are stupid too. Hence this adult-oriented observation about how young kids cope with

a disaster: "When children are pre-verbal and experience a trauma, they don't have the words to describe the events or feelings." You'd think that wouldn't be news to most grown-ups, who tend to realize that one of the downsides of being pre-verbal is the inability to talk. But I guess you never know. The question remains, of course, why we should care about FEMA's inanity. Sure it wastes obscene amounts of taxpayer money, but government agencies blowing

wads of cash to tell us things we already know is nothing new. And the kids will no doubt get over the condescension.

The more objectionable and insidious aspect of FEMA's child education campaign is the arrogant assumption on which it is based: that government can somehow control and solve every problem, including naturally occurring disasters. It's as though we'll all be magically saved from the next typhoon or tsunami so long as we take to heart FEMA's counsel about creating family disaster kits. And as though our kids, to the extent they're frightened in the face of a disaster, will be more soothed and reassured by the words of a government Web site than by those of their parents or friends or teachers.

There are some ills that all the government planning and direction in the world will never rectify. That's a truth that kids should understand from the get-go, even if the folks at certain government agencies don't.

One of the things FEMA recommends adults do is quiz children every few months by asking them questions such as, "If the earth starts to shake, what will you do?" and "What will you do if your clothes catch on fire?"

It's my fondest hope that not a single child will respond by saying, "Check the FEMA Web site." **R**

