Responding to a natural disaster

The impact of a natural disaster is felt in the days, months and years following. Recently, many children, families and educators have been directly affected by the devastation of fire and evacuation of homes. Many more have experienced poor air quality, deeply disturbing images and grief and anxiety associated with a natural disaster of the scale taking place in Australia in recent months.

Read about how one early childhood service responded over time to the impact of severe bushfires. Find relevant resources as well as the latest research about responding in the aftermath of traumatic events.

Kinglake Ranges Children’s Centre: A decade on

In February 2009, the Black Saturday bushfires burnt the Kinglake Ranges to the ground. More than ten years on, the community is still coming to terms with the devastation caused by the fires.

Three years ago, Kinglake Ranges Children’s Centre (KRCC) established a bush kinder program following some critical reflection as to why they were seeing extreme behaviours from children at all levels across the centre. Anxiety and stressed children were common, and centre educators believed this was linked to ongoing trauma from witnessing the devastation caused by the bushfires. Children in the Kinglake Ranges were also significantly behind in terms of school readiness compared to national averages. Sue Bullock, director of the service, and her colleague Linda Price joined the service some years after the initial bushfires. Linda offers some of their experiences here.

If you are new to the concept of bush kinders – here’s a good starting point.

Some people would see a bush kinder program as counter-intuitive in terms of the trauma experienced by this community - what benefits have children derived from the introduction of this program?

I can appreciate how this may appear to be counter intuitive and indeed moving ahead with a bush kinder program in bushfire affected areas without direct consultation and consideration of the children, families and broader community could potentially result in a negative effect. The key here is to ensure the timing is right and the families and community have the chance to build these programs alongside the service. We began our program 8 years after the fires.

We have been absolutely astounded by the growth in the children who attend the bush kinder program over the past three years. We have watched the children grow in resilience, their play becomes more complex and this in turn transfers into more detailed drawing,
higher general levels of literacy and general knowledge. Prior to 2017 the AEDC (Australian Early Development Census) data indicated children from our community were behind the state and national average across all developmental domains measured. In 2018, this same census placed children from our community above state and national averages and in some instances, significantly above these averages.

The children’s love and connection for the land is very strong and their hands-on learning about First Peoples cultures is a joy to witness. This has been a real learning journey for children, families and Educators alike. Via the Taungurung language app and language resources we are actively learning the Taungurung language and this is now being embedded into all levels of our service. Families are mentioning how children are coming home from bush kinder and teaching their families what they have learnt including Taungurung and Wurundjeri language. The ripple effect into our community is notable and we feel that we are achieving the cultural inclusion and respect for diversity that we were hoping for.

The general level of mental health in our kinder children has significantly improved since developing the bush kinder program. It is important to note that we as a team have also undertaken a significant amount of professional learning to gain a better understanding of neuroscience, self regulation, co regulation and adopting a guidance approach to behaviour rather than ‘behaviour management’. In turn, we believe this has a knock-on effect for all the children at our centre as our older children are setting the example and teaching the younger ones how to use loose parts, how to try again, how to use creative thinking to solve problems etc.

What we didn’t expect was the positive health benefits for ourselves as teachers. The team who are regularly involved with bush kinder have commented on how our resilience has improved, our mood has lifted, our ability to deal with the unexpected has improved, and how our improved mental health has enabled us to be more present and supportive for children undergoing strong emotions.

Read about how the community reacted to the program and advice about working with traumatised children and families in this longer article.
Research

Educators: The “next best” links
Emeritus Professor Marjory Ebbeck from the University of South Australia has been part of a research team exploring ways in which educators might best respond to the impact of a natural disaster. Interviewed in early January as the bushfires continue to ravage communities, she emphasised the importance of using and strengthening the existing bonds between children and educators.

After family, educators are likely to be the next best links in terms of being able to offer effective support to children who are traumatised by the loss of their home, or by needing to leave home abruptly, by what has happened to animals, even the loss of favourite toys. Children need to feel emotionally and physically safe – and educators can play a significant role here. Building a trusting relationship will help here. Offering consistency and predictability is important following trauma. Offering predictable routines can be helpful. They build a sense of security and normality. There may be no quick fix; the trauma might last for months or years depending on the individual child and their levels of resilience and support.

When asked about how proactive educators should be in discussing the bushfires, Professor Ebbeck spoke about the need to encourage the expression of feelings by interacting with individual children.

This might come about by listening to what children are talking about and honestly responding to their questions and conversation. Making time for children to talk. Validating their feelings and giving names to their emotions – letting them known that it’s OK to be sad/angry/frightened. Educators can also provide opportunities for dramatic play that helps children process what they are feeling. Setting up spaces with some props, facilitating play where children take on roles, interacting with each other – research indicates that this helps children neutralise their fears and develop a sense of agency.

Other activities which provide children with opportunities to express their emotions include art activities. If children wish to discuss their artwork then the educator should be available to listen, but this will depend on the child’s emotional state of mind. Stories can also be a powerful means of facilitating a conversation about feelings and about empathy for those undergoing a traumatic experience.

Beyond strategies that deal with immediate emotions and experiences, Professor Ebbeck reinforced the work of educators in encouraging resilience and problem-solving skills in children.

Educators are in a good position to know the type of activities that simultaneously will help children feel less anxious as well as challenging them to problem solve, to develop their sense of what they can do in a difficult situation. Talking about how the environment regenerates, looking at what animals do to protect themselves, focussing on some of...
the sustainability practices in your service – these activities will reassure children that they can make a difference in an uncertain and unpredictable world.

On a practical level, practicing emergency routines is important as environmental disasters are increasing in numbers and scale in Australia and other parts of the world.

Professor Ebbeck stresses that the strategies outlined above are relevant to children who might live many hundreds of kilometres from the nearest bushfire.

As educators, we need to develop an enduring approach – not to scare children but to help them in growing up, to deal with an uncertain and unpredictable world.

In this current situation where bushfires have been devastating and indeed are still raging, families and educators will be very stressed and have many pressing problems to deal with, however, the voices and needs of children must be heard in times of disasters.

In addition to managing the reactions of children, many educators will come to work with their own heightened levels of anxiety or sadness in the aftermath of the bushfires. Here Professor Ebbeck stresses the importance of staff team discussions focussing on how to be better prepared for natural disasters, and of professional learning opportunities that support educators to more effectively manage trauma, a topic that may not have featured in initial training for many.

- Link to Professor Marjory Ebbeck’s research: [Preparing children for an uncertain future: the role of the early childhood teacher](#)
- Learn more about the impact of trauma through this online course [Trauma and the child](#)
- [Red Cross: Resources](#) for parents and teachers include learning materials and ideas for activities that are designed to prepare young children for emergencies.
- [Trauma: supporting your child in the days and weeks after](#) is an article that addresses the needs of children at different age levels.
- [Books dealing with emotions](#), as recommended by Professor Ebbeck
- A list of bushfire-related books suitable for young children can be found [here](#).

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Strathewen primary school students created a video to encourage viewers to be proactive about the dangers of fire.

what's actually happening. They should have enough information about what's happening without being overloaded. Having a role can be helpful – if families are evacuating on a regular basis, then it might be about filling drink bottles or identifying a toy to take. Having a genuine role will help them to remain calm.

A long-term, staged approach is necessary. In the immediate days and weeks, it's important for children to feel calm and safe – so providing consistent routines is important. But we know that many will require long-term strategies that assist them to process their emotions. Educators may see increased rates of behavioural issues, setbacks like speech delay and toileting mishaps. And children subsequently born into families and communities directly affected by the bushfires may be impacted by ongoing recovery challenges in those communities.

Another finding of the research confirmed the positive impact of community groups as a protective factor in terms of resilience. They play a role in sharing resources and providing access to information and mutual support. Early childhood services have a significant place in sustaining support and stability for families.

We found that the experience of parenting can change in communities directly affected by a disaster such as the bushfires. Parents are exhausted, children are behaving differently and the family context is disrupted. Our research indicated that one thing that can help is to try and re-implement routines that strengthen connectedness and familiarity – such as reading a picture storybook together.

Professor Gibbs stresses that we have learnt much from the experiences and aftermath of the 2009 bushfires that will support individuals and organisations in the coming months and years. We know that this type of experience has a 'long tail'. Staff in early years services need to be looking out for each other, working through issues as a group, and talking about what is happening for themselves and the children in their care.

- Access the research: Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery
- Summary of research: Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery
- Research: Where do we start? A proposed post-disaster intervention framework for children and young people
- Children as Bushfire Educators - Just be Calm, and Stuff Like That
- CFA Survive and Thrive Program
- Summary: Survive and Thrive evaluation
- Infographic about the ELVA program

Early childhood services and schools trialled some new programs following the bushfires in 2009. Children and adults were wary of the environments where they were living. Professor Gibbs said that programs such as the CFA's Survive and Thrive (for primary schools) helped children to understand how to 'read' the environment, and how to recognise risk – and also to recognise when there was minimal danger and they were safe.

Other programs that provided opportunities to process trauma include art-focused programs. The Emotional Literacy through Visual Arts (ELVA) approach was piloted in schools and one preschool, following Black Saturday in Victoria. An evaluation of this program found that providing these children with opportunities to express their feelings was linked with 'positive trends in terms of reduced emotional difficulties'.

Strathewen primary school students created a video to encourage viewers to be proactive about the dangers of fire.
Support

Emergency and Natural Disaster Assistance – Local emergencies and child care support
This Australian Government Department of Education webpage provides information on assistance available when a local emergency or natural disaster occurs. There are useful FAQs for child care services, details of special assistance funding available and information for families including financial assistance and what to do in the case of service closures. It also provides links to state or territory specific information.

Resources

Emergency and Natural Disaster Assistance
This Australian Government webpage provides sources of support, including links to State and Territory based programs and to planning ahead through a REDiPlan.

Business links
The Australian Government Business webpage provides information on what services can do in an emergency, including business and insurance advice and other Australian Government assistance available.

Talking to children about bushfire risk
Adults may find talking to their children about bushfires difficult because they are not sure what to say. Typical questions include:

- Should we acknowledge the dangers of bushfires?
- Should we talk about the possibility of losing our home or pets?
- My child heard that some people were hurt or died in a bushfire. Should I explain that this can happen?
- We drive past the fire danger rating sign each day on the way to and from school and sometimes my children ask ‘what colour is it today?’ How do I explain this without scaring them?

Find suggestions about how to talk to children about bushfire risk.

Working with children with autism
Early Connections Alliance has developed a set of Social Stories titled Birdie’s Tree that support the safe and meaningful communication between parents, educators, and children with autism. The themes of the Social Stories include the experience of bushfires, of cyclones, of extreme heat, of illness, of floods, of drought and of earthquakes.

Teacher resources: pre-school age children
This resource has been developed
It is part of a suite of evidence-informed resources that were developed in response to the 2009 bushfires in Victoria. Resources include includes tips about self care, information about trauma and templates for monitoring the responses of children.

Birdie and the fire is one of the free online flip books in this series.
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Children on the autism spectrum can sense that adults around them are anxious, fearful and overwhelmed. Their anxiety increases as their routines, schedules and living situations are disrupted during the fires. Autism Tasmania provides advice and a relevant Social Story.

The Early Connections Bushfire Social Story provides a social story that explains bushfires along with some other useful links.
Bushfire education: Early Years
This Early Years bushfire education module is intended to support early childhood educators to introduce bushfires and related concepts to children between 3 and 5 years of age. The module is structured around the four themes of ‘Learning about bushfires’, ‘Preparing for bushfires’, ‘Responding to bushfires’ and ‘Recovering from bushfires’.

Under each theme is a series of downloadable lessons that explore key concepts through age-appropriate, sequenced, learning activities.

Disaster resilience education
This site hosts learning materials, links to networks, a bi-monthly newsletter and illustrations of practice in school communities. Find examples of projects that provide children with opportunities to learn – such as the Firestick project at Dixon’s Creek. In this project, primary school children learn about fire management from Aboriginal Elders. The project helps children establish a positive relationship with the concept of fire.

The site also hosts Childhood trauma reactions: A guide for teachers from preschool to year 12 which outlines some of the signs of trauma for various age-groups, risk factors and the role of educators/teachers in helping children affected by disasters.

Support for parents

How parents can help kids feel safe during bushfires
In this video Maggie Dent, author, educator and resilience consultant, speaks directly to parents about how they can talk with their kids when tragic bushfires occur. She gives practical tips and guidance to parents to ensure kids are supported as best they can be to reduce anxiety for everyone.

Protect your mob
The Indigenous portal of NSW Fire and Rescue hosts some good resources.
Resources (cont’d)

Resources related to fire-fighting/ fire-readiness

Fire: Are you ready?
This blog post was adapted from a Community Connections Solutions Australia CCSA Facebook notification. It is not a comprehensive list but it aims to encourage you to think about the immediate threat to your staff, families and children and to make early decisions about what needs to be done.

Learning materials
Build understandings of how communities manage risk through learning materials related to fire-fighting and fire safety in the home. Some State and Territory based fire-fighting organisations have produced specific materials for early years contexts including:

- NSW Fire and Rescue: Pre Ed
- MFB Early Childhood

Note that some websites (such as Melbourne Fire Brigade) include helpful advice about how best to work with different age groups given the interest of some children in fire play and risky behaviour.

Victoria’s MFB has produced a poster kit with images of fire trucks, firefighters in action and an MFB alphabet poster.