BUSHFIRE RECOVERY

The children's voices

Royal Far West
Children's health, country-wide

unicef
AUSTRALIA
for every child

UNICEF Australia (UA) and Royal Far West (RFW) acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country of the land and communities impacted by the fires, and their connection to their lands, waters and communities. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to Elders both past and present.

UA and RFW and this Program were initially funded by voluntary donations from the public, private and corporate sector. We would like to thank and acknowledge the following organisations for their generous support of the Bushfire Recovery Program: Carnival Australia, HP, Little Wings, NSW Rural Doctors Network Health Workforce Scholarships Program, GIVIT Foundation, Charles Sturt University and the Paul Ramsay Foundation. Ongoing funding is being provided by the Federal and NSW Governments.

FOREWORD

Australia faces a future marked by increased natural disasters, associated economic shocks and social dislocation, all of which have significant impacts on children throughout the country.

From bushfires to floods, droughts and health emergencies, there is a lot that is thrown at children, and we must take steps now to prepare them for an uncertain future.

Policymakers across the country have recognised the need to focus on building resilience at a local level, to help communities recover, and prepare for future disasters. However, the experience of children is too often missing from consideration, but the tide is turning.

Over the past 18 months, the Bushfire Recovery Program (the Program), developed by Royal Far West and UNICEF Australia, and supported by the Paul Ramsay Foundation has changed that. More recently the impact of bushfires on children has also been recognised by the Australian and NSW Governments with funding awarded to continue the work of the program across more than thirty NSW communities.

As this report demonstrates, this award-winning program, pioneers an effective, evidenced-backed approach to disaster response and preparation for children in local communities throughout Australia.

Informed by an independent evaluation conducted by Charles Sturt University, this report highlights how this model, which places the voices of the children at its centre, can inform successful interventions across the country if key recommendations are adopted.

We know from research that children are particularly vulnerable to the trauma of events like bushfires.

For children, the trauma as well as the resulting changes can affect the trajectory of their lives, negatively impacting education, employment and psychosocial outcomes immediately and over the longer term. Younger children aged under 12 are particularly at risk. Doing nothing will result in significant costs to governments in the long term.

For children in rural and remote areas – where most of the impacts of natural disasters are felt – the trauma is compounded by existing disadvantage, because of where they live.

The 2019-20 bushfire season which devastated local communities throughout NSW affected children in a number of ways and will continue to impact them into the future. For many children, the event has not been felt in isolation, but has been exacerbated by compounding disasters including drought and flooding.

As one Primary School Principal from Northern NSW put it, "As a low socio-economic community, our families faced the bushfires, then floods, then COVID-19 and the impact on families was devastating."

Unfortunately, natural disasters will become more frequent and intense.

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (2020) reported that climate change had exacerbated the extreme conditions and warned that Australia must prepare for an "alarming" future of simultaneous and worsening natural disasters.

This is the context in which the Program was developed and implemented, and the future in which it can play an integral role in disaster preparation, response and recovery.

If we can work to develop and enhance the resilience of children in rural and remote locations, and subsequently strengthen communities before the next disaster occurs, then we can build on strong foundations for Australia's future.

By following the lead of the Program and listening to the voices of the children, we can ensure children across the nation are better prepared before a disaster and better supported after one.

As one child said about what the program taught them: *"There are people to help me. I am not alone."*

This is what we owe to all children in at-risk communities across Australia.

Tony Stuart
CEO UNICEF Australia

Jacqueline Emery
CEO Royal Far West

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report builds on *After the Disaster, Recovery for Australia's Children*, which described the challenges that many of Australia's children and young people face as a result of where they live and their increasing exposure to natural disasters.

That report made the case for a stronger policy focus on children and young people, more research about what works best to improve their outcomes, and an increased investment in programs and services to support them such as, Royal Far West's Bushfire Recovery Program (the Program).

The purpose of this report is to build on the findings of the first report, reinforcing the primary recommendations through the insights and learnings of the program. The report also outlines the results of Charles Sturt University's independent evaluation, which places the lived experience of bushfire affected children front and centre.

As one child who participated in the Program said:

"At first I really didn't like telling people about my problems and feelings, but now I feel better when I do."

The voices of the children are too often missing from the policy discussions around disaster management, and even parents often underestimate the long-term effects of disasters both in the immediate aftermath and over the longer term.

But evidenced-based interventions, which put children's voices at the centre, and working with the key adults around children, can lead to improved outcomes for whole of community.

The Program provides a model that can be adopted in local communities throughout Australia, not just after disasters hit, but before any future disaster: with the aim of preparing the children of Australia and their families for the short and long-term impacts of these events.

This will become more important as the frequency and intensity of natural disasters increases.

As a result of the summer of 2019/2020

2 in 5 children

and young people were personally impacted by bushfires (either being directly affected or knowing someone who was directly affected)

3 in 10

were personally impacted by drought (either being directly affected or knowing someone who was directly affected)

almost 25%

were personally impacted by floods (either being directly affected or knowing someone who was directly affected)

Of those who had been directly affected by a disaster or emergency event, **7% had experienced two of the three disaster types**, and 2% had experienced all three.[36]

As described by a School Principal in the Clarence Valley, *"This program is making a significant difference to the lives of so many families and schools, and has been a shining light during a dark and difficult time for our school community. As a low socio-economic community, our families faced the bushfires, then floods, then COVID-19 and the impact on families was devastating. The Bushfire Recovery Program has, and still is, helping me as a Principal to care for our most vulnerable students and provide them with ongoing support and strategies to develop their physical, social and emotional wellbeing.*

The Bushfire Recovery Program is an investment in the future of our children".

This report outlines how this investment works and what needs to be done to continue to strengthen the government's response to children's needs in the wake of a disaster.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Children's voices are important and must play an essential role in helping shape policies, frameworks and programs which affect them.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Children's voices, priorities and experiences must be elevated in our disaster frameworks

Strengthen and harmonise disaster resilience policy at all levels of government and response to focus on the specific and unique needs of children and young people, taking into account contextual factors that surround disasters and emergency events – in particular the geographic location in which they occur, with most natural disasters occurring in regional and rural areas of Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish a directory of agencies and expert providers to ensure a skilled and community led rapid response in local communities

Establish a directory of agencies and expert providers that is fit for purpose and has the skills, relationships and geographic reach to respond efficiently and effectively before, during and after disasters and emergency events.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Long-term investment in proven programs and transparent funding pathways across the sector

Fund practical and proven multifaceted programs and approaches that support children and young people affected by disasters (and those that care for them), and also for preventative measures to build resilience and wellbeing.

THE BUSHFIRE RECOVERY PROGRAM

Following consultation with impacted communities and experts in disaster recovery, Royal Far West in partnership with UNICEF Australia, developed the Program to support the wellbeing and resilience of children impacted by the bushfires and reduce the likelihood of long-term adverse effects.

The Program is a multidisciplinary community-based model that involves working with both children (aged 0-12 years) and those key adults supporting children (parents, carers, educators, and service providers).

The Program team includes social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists and speech pathologists. Each discipline brings unique skills to meet the varied needs of the community and their combined wisdom enhances the delivery of the whole program.

Based on the philosophy that communities are the experts of their own needs, communities are provided with a 'menu' of effective support options to choose from. In doing so, the Program achieved the following outcomes:

Children are helped to understand and manage the changes they have experienced because of the bushfires, understand that their reactions are normal, develop skills for coping, problem-solving and decision-making, build peer support networks and have restored self-confidence and self-esteem.

Parents and carers. The Program includes information and strategies through which parents can support their children, including building their knowledge of emotional and behavioural signs or red flags that may indicate that additional support is needed. Parents and carers will also feel more confident that they have the knowledge to access support for themselves and their families.

Educators have expertise in connecting with and educating children, and they play a key role in re-establishing routines and supporting recovery. Through the Program they will have the knowledge and skills to be confident to support the children in their care in relation to the impact of natural disasters.

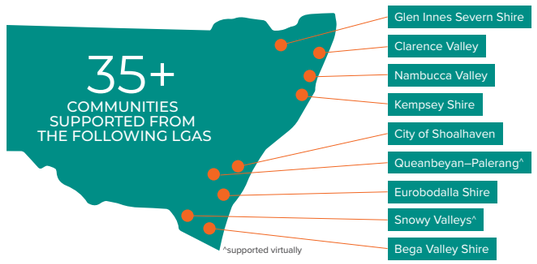
Health and Social service practitioners. Through the Program they have the knowledge and skills to be confident to support children and their families in their care in relation to the impact of bushfires and natural disasters.

Community leaders are in the position to bring the community together and provide information and support following a traumatic event. Through the Program they will have the knowledge and skills to be confident to support children and their families as part of community recovery.

To date the Program has supported some 3,000 children in more than 30 bushfire-impacted communities. Designed to support the wellbeing and resilience of children affected by the bushfires of 2019/20, it is helping to give these children a "voice", making sure their needs are both seen and met, and ensuring they are supported during the recovery process.

The model continues to be delivered across seven Local Government Areas (LGAs) including Bega Valley Shire, Eurobodalla Shire, City of Shoalhaven, Glen Innes Severn Shire, Clarence Valley, Nambucca Valley and Kempsey Shire.

The LGA's were identified following information gathered through a needs assessment, which includes information about the scale of the bushfires, the socio-economic disadvantage score of each LGA, the percentage of vulnerable children (0-5 years old) in each LGA, and the percentage of children (0-15 years) affected by mental illness in each LGA. The 25 schools and 12 preschools were prioritised through consultation with leaders in education and key local services and other NGOs, with the schools ranging in size from 8 students to more than 500, highlighting the versatility of the Program.



The Program included four broad components:

Children's groups

Based on disaster support programs, Stormbirds & Birdie's Tree, multi-disciplinary input

Co-facilitated with teachers & local service providers

Addressing preparedness, response & recovery

968
children supported, 20% identify as First Nations

Educator support

Workshops on topics such as supporting the school community following community trauma

442
educators have benefited from upskilling

Parent / carer support

Practical support

Group & individual sessions focusing on parental wellbeing and supporting their children

1104
parents / carers reached

Telecare therapy

99
children have benefitted from therapy in their area of greatest need

An overview of the four components of the RFW Bushfire Recovery Program (numbers of beneficiaries reached to June 2021)

Importantly, the Program can easily be modified to assist with trauma resulting from other disasters or large-scale emergencies such as flood, cyclones, storms and drought.

The model has been evaluated and refined in response to community needs throughout the delivery period.

The Program won the Suncorp Resilient Australia National Community Award at the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience Awards which recognise collaboration and innovative thinking and celebrate initiatives that build whole of community resilience.

The team have been invited to share practical learnings and evaluation outcomes at several key conferences including the National Recovery Forum, the Australian Public Health conference, and the Rural and Remote Health Scientific Symposium

CHILDREN'S VOICES AND EXPERIENCES

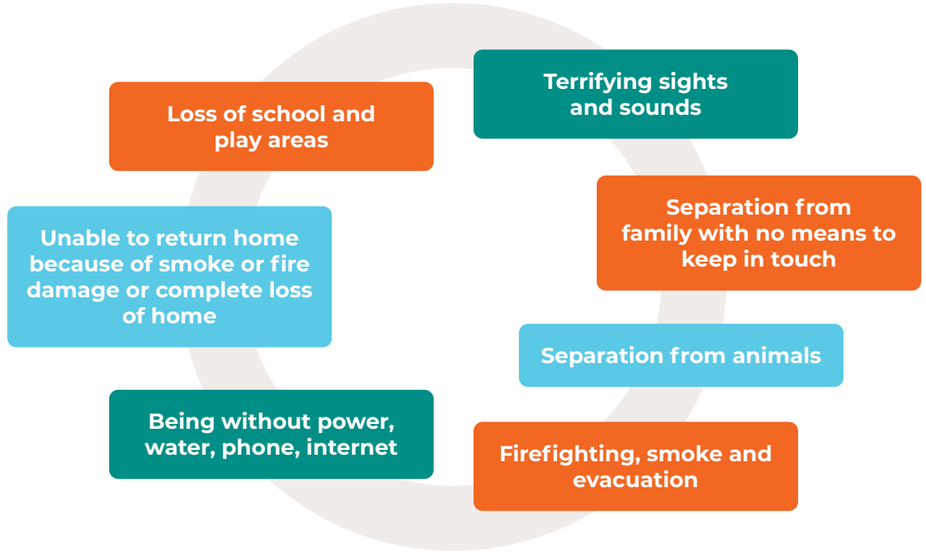
Children's voices are important and should play an essential role in helping shape policies, frameworks and programs which affect them. From listening to children's stories, the Program team found that much of the impact of the bushfires was internal or "hidden" with families and schools not always aware of the extent of the difficulties children were experiencing. Children themselves were struggling to make sense of how they were feeling, and putting this into words to share with the important people in their life seemed even harder.

For many children, sharing their stories in the children's groups was the first time they had spoken about their experience and the ongoing impact. Their well-being had been affected in many ways and this reflected the findings of the rapid review of literature co-authored by Royal Far West and Charles Sturt University^. Some of the impacts were not immediately obvious but were showing 6-12 months after the fires. Often the impact was "hidden" from the adults closest to the child with few external signs.

The children in the groups spoke of a range of difficulties: disturbed sleep, nightmares, intrusive memories, low mood, anxiety, loss of interest in activities, poor concentration, stomach pains, headaches, increased irritability, friendship difficulties, struggling with schoolwork, and increased family conflict.

Without support these symptoms can continue and have long-term effects. The most severe of these reactions and the most common include diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), other anxiety disorders such as separation anxiety disorder and panic attacks, and depression. Behaviour problems may be severe, and expressed as increased aggression, interpersonal problems, substance use or risk-taking behaviours. Some children may have increased sensitivity to issues such as bullying. The Program was designed to reduce the likelihood of these long-term adverse effects and to improve resilience and wellbeing.

What factors impacted children the most?



^ Literature Review: Curtin, M; Brooks, R; Crockett, J; Verdon, S; Hodgins, G; Crooks, P "The Impact of Bushfire on the Wellbeing of Children living in Rural and Remote Australia; A rapid review". Commissioned by the Spinifex Network and coauthored by Charles Sturt University and Royal Far West (2020)

What did the children learn?

"Everyone is different, and changes and feelings are ok."

"I liked talking and having fun in the group with friends."

"That I am not alone."

"That there are people to help me, to tell someone if something bad is happening."

"To let it out, don't keep it in."

"It's alright to be mad or sad and ways to cope with feelings."

"People can help me when things are hard."

Teacher observations

One school teacher observed that through sharing feelings and experiences, the children learnt how to identify their emotions, and perhaps more importantly to understand that something "happened to them [that was] out of their control."

What children learnt is:

"that they can control what's happening now and how they react to that." She felt that this learning was important for the children, not just in relation to the impact of the bushfires but also for the "other ongoing traumas that happen [...] in their family around divorces and domestic violence and all sorts of things that are happening in the community."

A school representative stated that the children learnt

"coping strategies, problem solving, decision making skills [...] techniques to help [them] with what [they] have been through."

One school teacher shared prior to the program, settling children back into school after events like flood had been tough. Now, children were settling back into school with much more ease and was an indication of the coping skills they have developed as part of the program.

"since they've been back and I haven't we haven't really seen [ill behaviour], they've all been fantastic very supportive of each other. [...] Managing it very differently, which is good."

Another school teacher observed the life skills they learnt as part of the program could be applied to everyday life.

"as opposed to necessarily around some sort of disaster or extraordinary event." He felt that if the children can apply these skills in everyday life, then it would give them the skills when "exposed to some traumatic event [... to be] more capable of coping in a positive way."

Story of Jack* – Part 2

Jack is 10 years old and lives with his family in a small town on the South Coast of NSW. During the summer of 2020, bushfires burnt around Jack's home and the children were evacuated to their grandmother's house further up the coast. After the disaster, Jack became quiet and withdrawn and would startle easily.

As canvassed in *After the Disaster*, Jack has been involved in the Program for some time and benefited initially from seeing a care team – this included sessions with a psychiatrist, paediatrician, dietitian, occupational therapist, and social worker. Jack's changing needs and progress highlights the longer-term impact of these disasters on children and the ability of the Program to respond to those changing needs.

Jack's school received support from clinicians from the Bushfire Recovery team during their outreach visit to his area, and Jack was able to receive ongoing telepsychology services for close to a year to support his mental health.

Jack's Psychologist spoke with Jack about some of the traumas he had experienced, including the bushfires, and provided other emotional supports including:

- Information about emotions and the brain.
- Emotional regulation and grounding skills, and experiential grounding activities in sessions.
- Normalising emotions and discussing helpful and unhelpful ways of coping with them.
- Narrative therapy activities encouraging Jack to establish a stronger sense of identity, and connection to family and community.
- Supporting a move to a new school.
- Consulting with Jack's mother to monitor his progress and provide recommendations.

Jack said he enjoyed the sessions and he became able to share his thoughts and feelings to work through difficult situations. When Jack no longer needed the support from the Program the team ensured that his family was linked in with a local service that could provide ongoing care.

** To respect the privacy of our program beneficiaries, we have changed the names of the individuals in this story. We have also not included images of the children and family due to child protection policies.*

EVALUATION

Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt University (CSU) conducted an independent evaluation of the first 12 months of the Bushfire Recovery Program to determine whether it had a demonstrable impact and for whom, in what ways, and in what circumstances the outcomes were achieved. It's findings of positive impacts for children, parents, carers, educators, and community leaders further informs our recommendations to Government.

View the evaluation report

What was the evaluation process?

Conducted by the School of Allied Health, Exercise and Sports Sciences and School of Psychology at CSU, the evaluation used a mixed-methods approach which included survey, group discussions and interviews with children, parents, and teachers.

Who participated in the evaluation?

- 265 children provided feedback from attending RFW 'Stormbirds' groups
- 66 educator views who attended development workshops
- 37 parents & carers provided feedback
- 45 responses by parents/caregivers or teachers to a post-program survey on the medium-term impacts of the program
- Interviews with a small number of parents and children
- Royal Far West (RFW) clinicians measured changes in clinical status of children receiving Telecare services

Evaluation findings

Children

Children provided high levels of endorsement for learning key messages and skills from the groups, including that they were safe, and things were getting better.

The children who received telecare services were positive about their experiences. They felt heard, enjoyed the sessions, and liked spending time with the RFW clinicians. The children indicated that they learnt strategies they could use to help them feel better.

Children

- Understood and were able to better manage changes they had experienced following the bushfires.
- Were more aware of their emotional reactions to the bushfires and acknowledged that other children and adults had gone through similar experiences.
- Learnt and used a range of strategies related to their ability to cope and participate in everyday activities at home and school.
- Talked more openly and shared their experiences about the bushfires with a range of people.
- Had improved in their self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Were able to achieve therapy goals through telecare sessions.

The children's feedback linked to the Program's intended outcomes, including:

- Children are better able to understand and manage the changes they experienced from the bushfires:

  "Being upset is ok"

  Jenny*

- Children are developing skills for coping, problem solving, and building stronger support networks:

  "I now know what I can do when I am feeling worried."

  Oliver*

* To ensure privacy and confidentiality for our client families, our stories are representative in nature and real names and images are not used.

Parents/carers and educators

Parents, carers and educators were satisfied with the children's groups, valued the support provided, and felt the groups were beneficial for the children.

Parents, carers and educators felt the access to allied health and psychology services via telecare was a very positive element of the Program due in part to the difficulty to access allied health and psychology services locally. The telecare services provided by RFW were accessible and reduced barriers that impacted on children receiving therapy and counselling support. They also felt the telecare sessions were beneficial as they resulted in improvements to children's participation and functioning at school, home, and socially.

Parents/carers and professionals highly valued the psychoeducation sessions, workshops, and one-on-one support they received (in person or via telecare) from RFW and felt their knowledge and confidence to identify their children's needs and support their children following trauma was enhanced. They also developed their understanding of the impact of their own wellbeing on their ability to support children effectively.

Parents/carers

- Their knowledge of trauma had been enhanced and they were more confident in identifying signs and symptoms of psychological distress in children.
- They felt more confident in being able to support their children following exposure to bushfire or another natural disaster event.
- They understood the importance of looking after their own wellbeing so that they had the capacity to support their children.

Educators and community leaders

- Their existing knowledge of the impact of trauma was reinforced, and for some enhanced.
- They were more confident in identifying signs and symptoms of psychological distress in children.
- They were more confident supporting children following exposure to bushfire or other natural disaster events.
- They understood the importance of looking after their own wellbeing so that they had the capacity to support children.

Community benefits

Importantly, the Program incorporated a whole of community approach, which tapped into key local services to aid long-term recovery and sustainability.

Wherever possible partnerships were formed with local professionals to jointly facilitate the children's groups – family support workers, Teachers, Be You / Headspace and the Red Cross.

Through these partnerships, schools and local services have started facilitating groups of their own, demonstrating the ongoing benefits of the Program at a local level.

In addition, benefits experienced by the child, filtered through to adults and into the wider community. For example, a community member indicated that because of the Program the children would have conversations with their parents and the parents felt "supported, and a bit more resourced."

They indicated that the behaviour of some children changed, and this had a positive impact at home. They said:

"So kids are happy, mum's happy, families are happy, and they can share that with their colleagues and their friends, so I think you know it does ripple out to the community"

The evaluation found:

77%
of respondents to a post-program survey felt the Program had a positive impact on the child

68%
said their child's problems were better since attending, with 24% saying their problems were much better

96%
or parents/teachers said the program had helped in other ways, (e.g., providing information or making the problems more bearable)

The author's state:

"This Evaluation demonstrated that the multifaceted, strength-based, community-based RFW Bushfire Recovery Program effectively enabled children to develop their self-awareness and sense of self-efficacy, resilience, and confidence.

"Effective programs, like the RFW Bushfire Recovery Program, will play an important role in improving the resilience and wellbeing, and decreasing the likelihood of long-term adverse reactions, of children impacted by natural disasters."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Program has demonstrated the importance of ensuring an evidenced-based, community-led response is available to support children after natural disasters strike local communities.

It also highlights the importance of building resilience and preparing children and young people before natural disasters hit.

The independent evaluation into the Program showed that this is an effective intervention program, suitable for use in both responding to natural disasters and also for preventative measures, to help build resilience and well-being in children.

But the future of the Program and these types of responses are not guaranteed.

To ensure Australian children are supported after natural disasters and prepared before them, we call on the Australian Government to implement the following recommendations which have been informed by the design, implementation, and evaluation of the Program.

These recommendations will work to support younger Australians affected by natural disasters and better prepare them for future disasters.

This will deliver a social and economic dividend for local communities throughout Australia, particularly in rural, regional and remote locations, by helping build more resilient individuals and local communities.

Recommendation 1:
Children's voices, priorities and experiences must be elevated in our disaster frameworks

We recommend the active involvement of children in the design of child and youth focused policies and frameworks to address all phases of disasters, taking all stages of a child's development and the multiple determinants of disadvantage into consideration. . We also **recommend greater consultation and engagement with children and young people in the design of services** and for **children to be included in decision-making at all stages of the emergency management cycle** (planning, preparation, response, relief and recovery).

- Children are often invisible in the urgent context of disasters and we know from research that children aged 0-12 are particularly at risk of adverse outcomes following bushfires and natural disasters, especially if left untreated or unresolved.
- The Bushfire Recovery Program has demonstrated, children experience disaster events differently to adults and the impacts on them can be internal or "hidden" with families and schools unaware of the extent of the difficulties children were experiencing.
- Contextual factors that surround disasters and emergency events must also be considered. With most natural disasters occurring in regional and rural areas of Australia, the geographic location and the unique challenges faced by each community need to be taken into account.
- Many children, families and communities in regional and rural regions face multiple layers of disadvantage such as an over-representation of pre-existing exposure to trauma and/or mental health challenges coupled with greater issues in accessing services – this 'double disadvantage' is then amplified by natural disasters.
- Given children's unique needs, vulnerabilities, and perspectives there is a need for child focused policies, frameworks, programs, and resources to reflect children and young people's experience of disasters and their negative impacts, and to support stronger outcomes for children and young people.
- Australian children and young people are often resilient and demonstrate leadership, with strong thoughts and feelings about how they can support and guide society in relation to disasters. They are seeking opportunities to share their experiences and to participate in enhancing their own resilience and that of their community.

Recommendation 2:

Establish a directory of agencies and expert providers to ensure a skilled and community-led rapid response in local communities.

We **recommend the identification and establishment of a directory of agencies and expert providers** that is **fit for purpose** and has the **skills, relationships, and geographic reach** to **respond to the range of disasters and emergency events**. This includes providing **support to children and young people, their parents and caregivers, and communities** before, during and after disasters and emergency events.

- The first *After the Disaster* report demonstrated, after a crisis event, many communities feel overwhelmed by offers of support and a lack of coordination. This places pressure on a small number of community-based services and leaders to carry out that coordination locally and is exhausting and unsustainable over the medium to long term.
- When disasters hit it is widely known that emergency services are best equipped to respond in the moment of crisis, however there are no 'lead agencies' who are widely recognised as responding to the psychosocial needs.
- A directory of agencies and expert partners who are equipped to respond to these needs would provide a specific, rapid response in communities, that would link into Primary Health Networks, to ensure existing relationships and knowledge across geographical locations is fully utilised.
- Selected service providers that work with communities (including rural and remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and others) must be required to have knowledge and experience of working with those local communities and a strong understanding of the complexities they face to respond most effectively and appropriately.
- The establishment of a directory of evidence based, specialist trained, and 'disaster ready' organisations and multi-discipline partnerships will ensure the deployment of support to children, young people, their parents, carers, and community during or after a disaster or emergency is timely, efficient, effective, and sustainable.

Recommendation 3:

Long-term investment in proven programs and transparent funding pathways across the sector.

We recommend **investment in practical and proven multifaceted programs and approaches** that **support disaster affected children, young people and those that care for them** as well as the **building of resilience and wellbeing in preparedness for future events**.

- The long-term impacts of disaster events and need for long-term funding for programs to respond to them has been highlighted by research into the 2009 bushfires in Victoria, as the *10 Years Beyond Bushfires* report found:

  "Ten years after the fires, the likelihood of having one or more of these conditions (posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and psychological distress) was still more than twice as high for people from high impact communities compared to those from low/no impact communities." [1]

- The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy outlined it is crucial to fund effective intervention programs, which can be used as preventative programs, to build resilience in families and communities. These programs should be directed at areas in rural and remote Australia which are identified as having the greatest need – having a higher percentage of children who are vulnerable in two or more developmental domains. Save the Children finds: "Today's one year-olds will live through up to 24 times as many climate-induced extreme weather events.[2]
- Programs similar to the Bushfire Recovery Program provide a community led, multi-disciplinary wrap-around model of supporting children, parents, care givers and communities that could be replicated across the country. The model could be a key tool in building resilience and preparedness in communities before a crisis. CSU's independent evaluation stated *"This Evaluation demonstrated that the multifaceted, strength-based, community-based RFW Bushfire Recovery Program effectively enabled children to develop their self-awareness and sense of self-efficacy, resilience, and confidence"*
- School based, child centred disaster resilience programs are important as they are accessible to where people live, focus on social, emotional learnings and vocational support for children to mitigate disaster related mental health impacts and poor educational outcomes. Multidisciplinary approaches, delivered by a skilled workforce and supported by technology bring together health, education, and physical/social development and can be ramped up or down as needs change or disasters and emergencies occur.
- Children who were 2 to 4 years old at the time of the bushfires, will be 6 to 8 years old when the current funding is due to end. These children will be reaching a developmental age where they can engage in a therapeutic program with peers to reflect and share their experiences.
- Any future funding (5-10yrs) needs to provide the resources to focus on the health and wellbeing of children, young people and care givers. Focus must also be on the coordination of local services and supports to strengthen the local service system to address pre-existing vulnerabilities and reduce the impact of disadvantage - providing the best chance of building resilience and overcoming future disasters.

References

1 Gibbs L, Molyneaux R, Harms L, Gallagher H C, Block K, Richardson J, Brandenburg V, O'Donnell M, Kellett C, Quinn P, Kosta L, Brady K, Ireton G, MacDougall C, Bryant R. 10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report 2020. University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

2 Save the Children, https://www.savethechildren.org.au/media/media-releases/todays-one-year-olds-will-live-through-up-to-24

ABOUT

UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West share a common goal to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people wherever they live. We work to ensure that all children have the opportunity to survive and thrive, developing to achieve their full potential. Our work is built from a foundational commitment to children's rights, and we work to secure these fundamental rights for every child regardless of gender, race, religious beliefs, income, physical attributes, geographical location or other status.

We seek to understand and address the root causes of inequity so that all children, particularly those who experience disadvantage or deprivation in society, have access to education, health care, sanitation, clean water, protection and other services necessary for their survival, growth and development.

Royal Far West works to support children who live in rural and remote communities, because where you live should not be a barrier to services or a cause for disadvantage. Getting the right support can make the difference between children thriving or falling behind, not just in childhood, but over their lifetime.

Royal Far West
Children's health, country-wide

unicef
AUSTRALIA
for every child

Independent evaluation conducted by:

Charles Sturt University