



Why get kids involved in the family bushfire plan

Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Panel members: Michelle Roberts
 Dr Rob Gordon OAM
 Dr Biony Towers
 Jane Haywood OAM, PSM

Chair

Now for our poll question. How confident do you feel in your ability to successfully involve your child or children in your bushfire plan? You've only got one choice. We'll have a look at the results of that a little bit later.

It's terrific there's a number of people watching who don't have children. If you can direct people, neighbours, friends and family who do have children to this webinar that would be terrific.

Jane has extensive experience in bushfire education. Rob has worked with people over the many years working in that disaster area with psychological issues. We have a very impressive panel.

What's important for kids themselves. Jane you've had a lot of experience in this, what have you identified in your work in school?

Jane Haywood

Good evening everybody. As far as what's important to our kids, understanding and knowing where they live. I think we underestimate what it is that they're already aware of. And I think as far as our kids here go they want information, they want knowledge, and they want to be part of planning and discussions. Not just in relation to bushfire preparedness but probably in relation to everything in their families and in their community.

Rob Gordon

I think what Jane said is crucial but I'd like to add to that. We have to remember that the key thing for children from which all of their resilience flows is attachment. And I think the feeling that they're involved with the parents in the thinking and planning and that they can see exactly how parents are thinking about them and their role and where they fit in I think enables them to feel that the family is able to respond to this event as a unit. It's very often the case in very dramatic events that people become terribly focused on their own particular situation and the other people around them feel as though they've been lost, children can get lost. So, I think bringing them into the plan helps keep that all together.

Chair

I think both Michelle and Briony touched on this that young people can make contributions that are significant, it's not just token. Jane I know from experience in your school that students will go home and inform their parents' bushfire plan, they'll actually grow it, by asking questions and so on.

Jane Haywood

We've really noticed over the years that we've run our bushfire program that trickle down factor with what we're covering here at school with what the children are curious about and investigate. They go home and they're doing the teaching on the home front, it's been amazing. I think we've underestimated for a long time just what the children have been capable of and we're constantly surprised by how far they can go with their learning and the questions and the certain problems that they're presenting us with to work through and explore. We did some work again thankfully after lockdown years on the use of fire blankets and extinguishers. We did a household fire topic

and they all seemed to go home and were coming back with messages for Lisal and I about “Well we didn’t have a fire blanket so now we’ve...” And “The fire blanket was in the cupboard but now we’ve got it mounted in a spot where we all know where it is and can access it and it’ll work.” So, children can drive change, planning and decision making.

Chair

Michelle described earlier of the anxiety of parents talking about these issues. Briony has been talking with children too. What is some of the feedback you have about parent’s fear of creating anxiety with their children?

Jane Haywood

I think we too were a bit apprehensive initially about how far we could go and what we could cover without causing distress because there's always ‘do no harm and cause no distress’. But the exact opposite was true. We had just an absolute example of reduction in anxiety and distress in our children in fire season preparation and during the fire season. A reduction in that hyper vigilance I guess when the days were a bit worrying. And that reassured families, and parents and carers that we could manage the fire season, that knowledge was important and planning was important. And understanding a bit of the science of fire and how things worked really mattered.

Briony Towers

Through the research that I've done with children it's really clear that that once they do become aware of the potential for a bushfire ,the impact on their household or community, they do they do experience worry and fear. But I always like to think of that as an adaptive fear because there should be some worry and fear there. It's really important if we're living in a bushfire prone area that the idea of a bushfire impacting on our community is going to make us worry because then that can spur us on to take some proactive steps towards protecting ourselves. So, I think of it as an adaptive fear.

It's almost like the children that have been involved in my research, their immediate response to becoming aware and experiencing those emotions is usually to think about well what can we do to be safe? What steps or what actions can we take? And the bushfire plan is right up there at the top of their list. I think we can't underestimate how the importance of them having access to knowledge and information. It really does have a positive impact, but I think that the important thing is that understanding how those preparedness measures or how those aspects of the plan will actually keep them and the family safe.

Chair

You did provide some tip sheets and some thoughts about how you could deal with this. I guess for a lot of parents one of the worries is, will I do a good enough job? Will I do it the right way? Perhaps Michelle and Rob might want to comment on what's the best way to get your own head straight about how to have these talks.

Michelle Roberts

In my clinical work it's really quite common for children to mask their own anxieties in the belief that they're protecting their parents. And they've picked up on their parents’ worries and fears, they don't want to aggravate that anymore and so sublimates or push down how they're feeling. And the opportunity to face worries and fears together really empowers everyone and the plan is part of that. But also, the conversation in an accepting way within the family about what you can do when you do have worries and fears is a really important part of dealing with the anxiety of either the parent or the child or both. Parents in having that conversation are able to model ways in which we cope with challenges and try out different ideas to help each other work out how they can go forward with what they're worried about and how they can work around it.

Rob Gordon

I was just going to add that if we go back to the really fundamental psychology of anxiety that applies across all ages. It's a great rush of energy basically and it's activated for enhancing our survival. If you can harness that energy to anything that gives you a sense of control, knowledge, behaviours, practises, reaching out, communication all the things that will be put in the plan then that energy activates survival behaviour. If you can't activate it then it spirals into a motion and that's when the emotional disorganization occurs. And so just putting kids through this talking even mentally rehearsing, just getting them to picture what would happen will reduce their anxiety and I'd also say some children are very anxious anyway. Children are very different and there may be a child who gets upset and cries even at the talk. Well, I think it's so important that parents find that out and realize that they've got a very vulnerable child here and actually start thinking about how to, as Briony said, ask questions of this child. Find out what they're thinking, help them understand and then feed the advice and the planning into supporting that child.

Chair

I guess the other thing that came out of those presentations was the importance of practise or learning things by actually doing them. And we've talked in other webinars about how important it is for the adults to do that too. Would anyone care to comment on how you can do that well? It's easy to say "Well you should practise" but are there other ways that you should do it that are going to be more effective?

Jane Haywood

Well just here in a school setting we of course have an emergency management plan and we work through that with our children from prep to six, particularly though with my senior kids and we have regular drills. We allow with each drill that we do whether it's a lockdown or an evacuation we allow a question time at the end. And we've found over the last however many years that that's an essential part of our plan that we can talk through the questions the what ifs. taking the thinking a bit further. And we allow that because that's how you get to know and be really familiar with a plan. The kids have come up with amazing questions and scenarios and things that we wouldn't have tackled but I find with each drill that we do, and we do them regularly of course being where we are. The kids have really developed that muscle memory of understanding the plan.

We recently had a real lockdown that we had to enact. It was actually just a dog that we didn't know that was looking a bit crazy out in the yard and we had to do a lockdown to inside. So, it was the first one that hadn't been a drill and it was amazing. We were blown away by how well the kids handled the whole thing. And they just basically said "Well we knew what to do. We knew what it meant." The older children supported the younger ones, and it was seamless because they had learned the plan, they understood it, they knew what was behind it. They talked through all sorts of related scenarios and just knew not to question, they acted and then we talked. I just think that knowing a plan and living a plan so that it's real is just so important.

Rob Gordon

I think something to remember about the creation of muscle memory is that it's very likely if there is a fire and you have to enact the plan that the sensory environment will be completely different from the way in which the plan was conceived. The sight, sound, smell, the feeling of suffocation, and roaring noises that can prevent you from thinking clearly, disorientation because it's very dark in the middle of the day and so on. I see with children there is an opportunity to play games around the elements of the plan. Don't make it just drudgery. But see if you can have a bit of a competition about how quickly people can pack their bags or something, there are lots of different ways of enacting it.

Briony Towers

With children involved one of the benefits of practicing is you can actually get a sense of how long it's going to take. Because I think people often underestimate how long it actually takes to get everyone in the car and on the road especially if you're having to organize pets and younger children and the rest of that. So, when doing that practise to time and just to get a sense of how long it will take and then if you really can turn that into a game and start trying to beat your time, I

know that Harkaway Primary School every time they had to get on the bus for an excursion they would time how long it took for everyone to get on the bus for their practicing for their bushfire plan.

I remember during the Black Summer fires I've heard a father on the radio talking about how they got a warning at 3 o'clock in the morning to evacuate. And he said it was horrendous because it takes 25 minutes to get the kids in the car even on a good day when they're not stressed, when it's not dark, when they're not still half asleep I think practicing just means that first of all you've got a sense of how long it's actually going to take but also so that you can try to find where you might be able to save some time, because you may not have a lot of time to respond.

Michelle Roberts

At ANU we're in the process of developing a podcast for educators where they have an opportunity to hear from other educators about their disaster experiences and what they've learned and what they want to share with their colleagues. And as part of that we've had young people speaking about their experience of being involved in a disaster. There was one lovely young woman who spoke about her family on a farm. Every year they were getting ready for the fire season. They had their routines of cleaning up around the house, making sure their equipment was ready, going back through the plan, and when they did actually have a fire at their doorstep they swung into motion. And they'd been doing it for the last 10 years of her life from the time she was a little dot out with the others doing things. And it was that muscle memory and the rehearsal. But she also was a bit older and was able to be much more adaptive when she needed to. When the circumstances were as Rob said with the sensory overload of the actual experience in real time. So, the opportunity to do it time and time again makes such a significant difference I think.

Chair

When we talk about a plan as an adult we may think of a really complex series of items and steps. And when we're talking about a family plan how complex might it actually be for children to get the most from it? Can it be a synthesized plan? And allied with that is the idea that there's different sorts of fires. There are those big fires that we see on television and then there's the fire that happens down the road and you need to do certain things in case it comes up the hill towards you. How do you balance those ideas of different sorts of fires and different sorts of plans?

Briony Towers

Jane will have really good responses to this because they do a lot of bushfire behaviour work with the students at Strathewen. And so, the students get a really good sense of how fire behaves in the landscape under certain conditions under certain weather conditions.

Jane Haywood

We do a lot of work on understanding what days of risk look like and what contributes to it being a risky day. I guess living where we do it would be a bushfire. I mean there are people who have grassfire would be the most likely issue in their area. But I think still having a plan for your home or family has to fit with where you are, what your risks look like, and be as detailed as that family needs. As Briony said that Plan A would I think in most families be to leave the area when risk looks difficult to manage. And fire control becomes a problem with those conditions. But there has to be that Plan B however, because you can still be caught out, and things go wrong.

But I think a plan needs to be written with your family and simple enough that everybody can understand and follow it. So, it has to be stepped out and lived and understood and simple enough. We did some work again this year as I mentioned on house fires. Living where we do nearly everyone here has a wood fire in their homes. And house fires in winter are a risk as well. So, we talked about having a plan to manage the house fire and what would your household do. What's the plan? What's the discussion been? And that had been I think overshadowed by bushfire season planning for quite some time. So that needs to be a consideration as well.

A plan needs to be as specific and as detailed as a family needs. It's got to be workable. It's got to be a living plan too, that changes with need, with getting pets, with having elderly people living in your home and so on. I think it certainly needs to change and adapt.

Rob Gordon

Malcolm I've got a couple of thoughts about that. And the thoughts are stimulated by work I've been doing in the last year or so with people that were involved in the storms in the Dandenongs and up around Trentham. This is to my experience a unique event. We've never had huge trees falling on people's houses before. But it makes me think there's no reason why that might not happen in the midst of a bushfire if the wind was strong enough. And therefore I think it's very important to the parents to consider the totally unexpected.

We know the flawed assumptions that people make that the fire will always come from the north. And actually, it burns past the house and then the wind changes and it actually comes from the south, that sort of thing.

So, I think building in things that don't appear very likely but we know they happen. And then I'd be trying to suggest that people boil down to the absolute core things. Stay together. And I'm thinking of parents who told me that huge trees fell on their house in the middle of the night and their kids were trapped in their room in the bed and it took three hours to extricate the kid from the bedroom or from their bed in fact. So just to have advice about just if you're separated and things happen just stay where you are and keep telling us where you are. If you can't move just be confident, we'll be looking for you. Just very simple rules like that. The sort of things you might say to a child about what to do with themselves if they get lost in a shopping centre or something.

And then that way even if something very unexpected they can go back to some really fundamental principle like I'll just stay where I am, and I'll keep calling out just quietly. "I'm here. I'm here. I'm here." A child might be going to the bathroom in the middle of the night mightn't they? Then something happens. And what will we do if we can't get out the front door or the back door? They are I think important things. People disorganize when something happens that they're totally unprepared for, just reducing that by these fundamental rules.

Chair

I guess those sorts of discussions for me always raise that idea of well whether you're trapped in your bed or whether you're separated from the rest of the family how do you stay calm? How does the rest of the family stay calm? How can you practise those sorts of things? any ideas on what people can do to talk about that with their children and what they can do for themselves in those situations?

Michelle Roberts

Maybe building on what Rob was saying, that simple self-talk. Short sentences. Simple language to get your head around almost little mantras was what Rob was talking about with the kids having an opportunity to practise what they would say. And we can do that with self-soothing and calming activities as well. A lot of schools and Jane you probably do it I'm sure still, the social emotional literacy. The opportunity to talk about feelings and to talk about how you manage big feelings.

There are some lovely books. I don't know if people know the Birdie's Tree books, written for pre-school aged children. And it has that simple messaging. And every one of Birdie's adventures whether it's storms fires floods the big sick pandemic. Talks about coping mechanisms. They are age appropriate for the little people and the way that they can calm. And parents can read these books with their children and talk about what works for you. Does saying this to yourself help? Does calming your heartbeat down by taking some breaths - some of those things that we do when our heart's racing a bit. And we know some deep breathing some calm breathing can be helpful.

The Birdie's Tree books are available to be downloaded for free or you can buy the hard copies. They are amazing. And the work that Andrea Baldwin who's done most of the writing of these does with pre-school age children in getting them to start to think about what might happen, how they might respond, what actions they can take, how they can seek help, and what they can look to their parents for, starts that narrative and that storytelling. Then they can apply it to real life situations.

Rob Gordon

We signal emotion with our expressions and tone of voice and so on. And there's a very great tendency and I've heard it for when things are worrying parents start speaking like this or yelling at each other. And when they don't hear they'll start swearing and so on. All of this we need to understand is emotional communication. And I think once there's a lot of emotion around we've got a choice of either containment which is the sort of thing that Michelle is talking about. Containment, keep bringing it down, controlling it, or contagion. And if you run around with your eyes out on sticks screaming at everybody and everybody's going to escalate. Well actually sometimes the kids will say calm down if they've been to a Jane's school they'll probably be saying "calm down".

But I think just simple rules like keep your manners, speak calmly and quietly, you're not going to get it done any faster by screaming. Be nice and just be polite with each other, these things will keep the emotional tone under control.

Chair

Thanks Rob. That's good advice. And we certainly heard that in some of our previous webinars with just how you should calm yourself in any of those circumstances and talking with one another. You can do an awful lot of damage as well by behaving in the way that you were describing there. Are there any things that anyone would want to raise that we haven't discussed?

Michelle Roberts

We know that people with really high levels of arousal and fear often don't do as well in terms of being able to think and take planned action and the right action in the situation. But also, it's often a risk indicator for worse outcomes for their own mental health after the event. And I see in the Q&A questions is a lovely one about teenagers often end up minding younger siblings in a disaster. Parents might be at work, and they've got the responsibility for their younger siblings. Or they might be told "Look after the little kids, we're out fighting the fire." And the opportunity to practise, and think about that in terms of your plan that this might be the plan. You stay with the little kids, and we go out. And then a chance to test that and to say, "Well actually I want to be out there helping and why can't we have the little kids doing this?"

We worry about giving our children unreasonable burdens in disaster situations that will have adverse outcomes but not having an opportunity to be prepared and to talk about it is an adverse outcome often in and of itself. So, if you think your older kids are going to be at home looking after the younger ones in a tricky situation like a fire you need to have those conversations and they need to know what your expectations of action are and how you can help them to know what they need to do in that circumstance.

Rob Gordon

And I'd say coming back to the attachment make sure you keep bringing into them and for them to know you're not very far away at least in terms of mobile phones or walkie talkies or something of that sort. So they don't have to feel alone. They can be by themselves but not feel alone if they know that they're in your mind as an adult, That's the thing we need to convey to them.