

Why get kids involved in the family bushfire plan

Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Presenter: Michelle Roberts



Chair

Welcome Michelle, I'll hand over to you.

Michelle Roberts

Thank you Malcolm. It's lovely to be here tonight and I'm looking forward to having this conversation around how we can include children in our bushfire plans. As was explained I'm based at the Australian National University and I'm the director of the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma Loss and Grief network. I live in the Macedon Ranges.

When we think about involving children in our bushfire plans we often can think of lots of reasons why not to. And over the years in which I've worked in the disaster space specifically working to support infants, children, and young people in their experience of the disaster before, during, and after, I've heard a lot of people say these things – 'they're too young for us to talk to them about this', 'they're too young to be exposed to these negatives of life'. People worry that they might harm children's sense of safety security and do some harm to them psychologically by talking about potentially fearful things like bushfires, floods, and other disasters.

We often talk about children being resilient and we use that term as though they're unaware. Children can be resilient with the right supports, they're very rarely unaware. To think that they're only little and can't really be of help or that they don't actually know what's going on anyway is really not a helpful thing to be doing.

For a lot of adults that makes them themselves quite anxious to think about bushfires and how they'd respond if there was a bushfire in their area or to begin to think about their plan. They assume that because it makes them feel anxious it will also make their children feel anxious. We do know that children can take their measure of safety and what to be fearful from the adults that are around them particularly the adults that they care for deeply. But a lot of people avoid talking about the bushfires and they don't allow their children to have the opportunity to think and plan along with them. I'll talk about that a little bit further on.

A lot of people use the excuse that they don't live in a bushfire area and that it won't happen to them therefore they don't need to be prepared. But increasingly we're seeing urban areas under threat just as we do in the more rural and regional areas. And the final consideration. I hear all the time is that it's too big a responsibility to ask children to be actively involved in the family's bushfire planning and preparedness.

There's some things that we need to consider about this. Humans are hardwired to detect a threat to their safety. And babies, very tiny little babies read faces, read facial expressions, interact with their environment, and can behave in a way that shows us that they actually understand that there's something out of the usual and is concerning. We can't mask what's going on from little babies and they will pick up on the change in behaviour facial expressions and feel anxious and frightened themselves.

The notion that we can be protective of children by keeping secrets is misguided. If the littlest of babies can read your face and there's a YouTube hyperlink on that slide which is linking you into the still face experiment which talks about and then shows how children read facial expressions and look to engage with their carers. It's a lovely video clip that shows us just how attuned children can be to their parents faces.

Keeping secrets from children is really misguided. They will recognize that there's a disconnect between what you're saying and how you're behaving. And so not engaging children in the planning to be safe is a betrayal of trust. We owe it to them to bring them along on the journey, to give them the skills and the knowledge that they need to be able to one, keep themselves safe and two, be part of the family safety responses and planning.

In fact, there's been research and articles that have identified that it's putting children at risk by not letting them participate in the family plan. And it can undermine their safety not only their sense of safety but their actual safety when a disaster strikes. The United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Children also very clearly say that children have a right to be part of the decision making in their own lives and in particular in my view, when there's threat to their wellbeing.

We also have seen over the years of doing this work, and I think in our panel discussion later on in this session you'll hear examples where children's parents have downplayed the situation or told lies about what's actually going on and the seriousness of the event. What we found is that children alter their way of feeling safe and trusted with their parents. And they question whether or not their parents are the right people to be keeping them safe in that circumstance because they've had lived experience of where there's been a significant threat to their wellbeing and parents have said it's okay.

I have an example of a recent conversation that I had where a child was told to get into the car really quickly and he was very distressed about the tone in which his mother used with him in saying 'get in the car', 'get in the car now'. Because the mum could see the flames coming behind their house the mother believed the child didn't know that there was a fire nearby at that point. He didn't understand why the mum was screaming at him and his biggest concern was his mum's behaviour changed so much and he really didn't understand what was going on. He could see there was a threat. If she'd actually said to him this is what's happening we need to move quickly he would have managed much better than he did in the long run. What she said was we've suddenly decided we're going camping, jump in the car now and we're going to a campsite, that boy knew that wasn't right.

What we do know is that psychological and physical preparation are closely linked and they're closely linked to how we perceive the threat and how we respond and recover from the experience. Involving children in your household's physical preparations for the bushfire emergency gives them a greater sense of control.

And one of the factors that can lead to poor outcomes in mental health is that sense of being overwhelmed, everything being out of control and not having agency being able to keep yourself and others safe. It helps you to manage your fears to have practised calming actions, to have packed the things that you want to pack to know what your actions are going to be and know that you're contributing to the family's wellbeing. Telling the truth to children is really important but it has to be matched to their developmental level, their ability to understand what the information is and what the expectations are of them. So, something that you would say to a three year-old would be quite different to what you'd be telling your 12 year-old.

Agency is a really important thing in disasters and in life generally. For individuals to have the capacity and resources to take action means that they feel that it wasn't overwhelming out of control. They were able to contribute. They knew what the plan was. And even if the plan has to change quickly they still have an understanding of having known what the expectations were around them and the practise that will allow them to make some changes if required. That knowledge of what action should be and when to take that action is really important. There are tip sheets and advice sheets at the [hyperlink down the bottom there](#) on how to support your children. How to talk with them about disasters and what to do to seek help should you experience a disaster.

I'm going to give a really brief example of a project that I was involved in with Lara Lakes Primary School where we taught them to do CPR and the kids then demonstrated their knowledge of CPR, trained their parents or their grandparents in the procedure, trained the people at the local Bowls Club and at the senior citizens. And when I asked the kids how they found the experience of participating in doing CPR you can see on the slide some of their comments. They ironically thought that maybe their parents were smart enough for them to teach it to them whereas the

parents were wondering how their kids would cope with the learning. They made comments about not being as scared about what they would do if someone had a heart attack and that they now knew how to assist and how to call for help. One little boy spoke very clearly about he did actually worry because his grandparents were quite elderly and he now felt that he had the agency the knowledge and had practised, if something should happen that was adverse he knew what he needed to do. The parents will identify that they were glad the kids had been taught this life skill. That they now knew how to care for others, and they knew exactly what steps they take as the event unfolded.

What we're talking about is giving children an opportunity to learn by being part of the plan. That they have the knowledge and the understanding they get an opportunity to learn the skills and to apply the skills by practise. All these kids in the Lara Lakes example felt that they had more skills than their parents or grandparents thought they did, and they felt quite affirmed and had a greater sense of agency from participating in this project. It gave them a measure of psychological preparedness because it trained them not to be scared in the emergency. And that they felt again that they wanted adults to know they could do this, they felt proud of themselves for being able to do it and they felt that they were given a level of respect by being able to teach others in the community the skills and knowledge that they had learned. And one little boy, Carlo, said that leaving kids ignorant might result in a death and that wasn't fair to anyone.