

Why get kids involved in the family bushfire plan

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Chair

Welcome Briony, we'll hand over to you now.

Briony Towers

Thanks Malcolm.

For the last 15 years or so I've been collaborating on research with children's schools families and fire agencies to develop evidence-based approaches to involving children in bushfire planning and preparedness at home, at school, and in the wider community. Tonight, I'm going to start by talking about the benefits of involving children in household bushfire plans. And then I'm going to share some suggestions for how you can involve your children.

I want to preface all of this by saying that every child is different, every family is different and every household bushfire plan is different. You know your child better than anybody and you will always be the best judge of what they are capable of intellectually, emotionally, and physically. That said I hope that what we've learned from the parents and the children who have been involved in our research over the last few years will give you some ideas for how you might approach things with your own children.

Michelle's provided some really good reasons for why children should be involved in things like household bushfire plans. Our research has provided four key reasons that I see as being really important. First of all being involved in the household bushfire plan actually provides children with a strong sense of safety and security. When children become aware they're living in a bushfire prone area they do think about the possible impacts on their household and their community and this can trigger varying degrees of worry and fear.

Through the research it's become really clear that one of the best ways to address that worry and fear is by involving them in the household bushfire plan. In my discussions with children, they will often say things like I do worry about bushfires sometimes but we have a bushfire plan for our family so I don't worry about it too much.

Secondly, involving children helps to ensure that their needs and priorities are accommodated in the plan. Children don't always articulate what's important to them or they might assume that what's important to them is important to you as well.

I once interviewed a 10-year-old boy in Huonville, he was really worried about what would happen to his goats if there was a bushfire. When I asked him what his goats meant to him he told me they were like his brothers and his voice actually cracked a bit when he told me that. About a week later I interviewed his father who told me that their plan was to evacuate, I asked about the goats. He hadn't thought about the goats.

Thirdly children often identify problems or issues that adults overlook. I once interviewed a mother in Anglesea whose son had been involved in the really great school program the local CFA brigade run for the grade five and six kids. Her son came home, and he started asking questions about their household bushfire plan. He asked what his grandparents who lived just down the road were planning to do. His mother realized that she hadn't synced their plan, and this was a huge oversight. So, she got on to that straightaway and had a conversation with them.

Finally involving children can increase household capacity for responding to a bushfire threat. As the children at Harkaway Primary School say in their bushfire safety manifesto if a bushfire is happening kids need to know what they can do so they can stay calm and help their parents

instead of the parents doing everything and the kids just going arrghhh. When kids know what to do there will be more hands-on deck and everyone will be safer. We really need more research in this area but based on what we know so far when the kids know the plan everything goes a lot more smoothly.

So how do we go about this? I like to start with a curious conversation. So, before we start involving children in bushfire plans it's really helpful to get a sense of where they're at. We can start with this curious conversation. Even if you haven't discussed bushfires or bushfire plans with your child before even if they haven't studied the topic of bushfire at school they will very likely have answers to all of these questions. I've been asking children as young as six these questions for over 10 years and their responses provide really important insight into their existing knowledge, their misconceptions and their concerns. When I have these conversations with children I don't correct them or give them new information, I just listen carefully and try to understand things from their perspective. The information that you get from this conversation is incredibly useful when you start talking to them about your plan. It will help you to tailor information to their needs address their misconceptions and also address any specific worries or fears they might have.

Once you've had that curious conversation you can start talking through your Plan A. The Plan A I have here is leaving early. Your family's Plan A might be different, it might be to stay and defend. Whatever it is talk through your Plan A first. We don't want to overload children with Plan A B and C all at once, it gets confusing and overwhelming. Focus on Plan A. Give them some time to get their heads around that and when they're ready then you can talk about any backup plans you might have. So, if your Plan A is leaving early you can talk through when you will leave, where you will go. what you will take. and what you will do before you leave. I also recommend explaining the why for each of these aspects because when we don't explain the why children often come up with their own explanations which can be off the mark.

For example, if you plan to leave on a catastrophic day make sure they understand this is a precaution. I once interviewed a family whose child would become very distressed when they would pack up and leave on days of elevated fire danger. This made the whole process really stressful for everybody. It turned out that the child thought that they were leaving because there was a huge fire coming and it was going to destroy everything. Once she understood that it was just a precaution she was much more relaxed.

It's also really good to encourage your children to play an active role, once you've talked through the plan a great place to start is by getting them to pack a fire box with their sentimental items, favourite toys, photos, their pocket money, anything that they would hate to lose. This is a really meaningful activity for children and they get a lot of comfort from knowing that if something did happen to the house they will still have their most precious things. Bear in mind that children's special things are sometimes in daily use so add those things to a list that is kept in the firebox, and they can quickly add those things in the event that you do need to leave.

They can also pack a Go Bag with a few changes of clothes, toiletries, some bottled water, some non-perishable snacks. The snacks are really important, whenever I asked children what they would take snacks are at the top of the list. If you have older children you can enlist their help in explaining the plan to younger siblings. Kids are really good at explaining things in ways that other kids can understand. During the bushfire season you can get the kids to monitor the daily fire danger ratings for you. The fire danger ratings are forecast four days in advance, they can help you plan ahead for days of elevated fire danger.

Also, during the fire season remind them every now and again to update their firebox, especially after Christmas because they might have a few new favourite things and then if a fire does threaten they can help with the final preparations such as closing doors and windows bringing things in from outside, organizing pets, packing the car. And giving the kids a role will help you but it will also give them something to focus on which will help them stay calm.

Finally. Children learn by doing. When you feel they're ready practise the plan. Review the plan in advance and if they are taking an active role make sure they have checklists of what they need to do so they can work through those. During the practise, if things aren't going the way you would expect or are taking longer than you thought they would, don't stress, this is why you're practising. Make sure the kids understand this too. You can discuss all the challenges and obstacles in your

after-action review and find better ways of doing things. The children will likely have really great ideas for how the plan can be improved so be sure to involve them in that discussion.

When you feel the children have a good handle on your Plan A then you can introduce your Plan B. Reassure them that you'll be doing everything you can to make sure that your Plan A is doable but that it's always good to have a backup plan just in case. You can then talk through the steps for Plan B and check their understanding. Again, encourage them to play an active role and practise.

The key points I've covered tonight are included in this e-book which you can find online. Google Making a Bushfire Plan Involve Your Kids and it will come up first in your search results. The book raises some really important what if questions too and they're really important to think about as part of the bushfire plan.