



## **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**

Sourcing protective clothing for kids is a problem. Face masks, goggles, leather gloves, woollen balaclavas, non synthetic hats. Can the panel please give some guidance?

### **Jane Haywood**

We don't have protective clothing here for our kids. If we're in a shelter in place situation it would be in our downstairs area. We've got a huge supply of woollen blankets. That was the best that we could do for if we find ourselves in a situation of needing to cover and protect our children. As far as our plan goes being outside would be a movement of students when safe to do so. And we plan on using blankets because a lot of face masks come with the plastic framing. A lot of hats and things are synthetic and decking out 35-40 children is just not an option for us. So, we will be blanketing if we ever need to.

### **Chair**

Regarding practise. Any further thoughts on how practise can be become more of a learning experience?

### **Jane Haywood**

I think it has to be understanding. I think there has to be an understanding of what the circumstances could be for that plan to be enacted and lots of discussion. For the discussion every time we do a drill here we have different questions and it is just so interesting. I think parents would be surprised with what gets covered. And that's been over years. I think you have to work towards that understanding of all those why, when, how questions about the plan itself.

### **Briony Towers**

In my PhD research I found that the strongest predictor of the sophistication of children's knowledge and understanding was the extent to which they had a genuine role in the plan. Some children had been given token jobs to keep them busy. Some children had been given jobs that it was very important that they knew their job and how to do their job when to do their job and those children, their understanding of their family's bushfire plan and of bushfire risk in general was quite amazing.

And there are socio cultural theories of child development which say that children's intellectual development progresses according to the goals of development in a household or a community. In those households where those children had those jobs it was very important that they were able to do those jobs effectively. And the children took those jobs very seriously. That had a huge impact on their learning. And I think that's come through really clearly in the work that that Jane and Lisal do with the students at Strathewen Primary School because those children are being positioned as the bushfire educators of that community. And so, they take that role very seriously and they really step up to it and gives them a sense that their role matters and is important. And I think that is a huge part of the learning process.

## **Rob Gordon**

I think if you look at what parents, particularly of young children do naturally is they have a kind of running commentary of what they're doing when they're bathing or dressing a child. There's usually a constant patter of conversation about what you're doing and why. And I think that's really important as you're actually performing your plan, making it and performing but the parents are constantly describing and converting the actions into words. "We're doing this because of this, and now we're going to do this because this is happening next" and so on. So, you're weaving the whole thing together as a kind of narrative in their minds, otherwise, we don't really know what they're thinking until you get to the other end of it.

## **Briony Towers**

In my presentation I did mention that children will come up with their own explanations for why we do things a certain way or why we do certain things. And children actually have a lot of ideas about how bushfires behave and how they impact on people and property.

I remember one child I interviewed from Woodend, her family's plan was to stay and defend, this was before Black Saturday and her job was to fill up the bath and when I asked her why she had to fill up the bath she told me that it was because if the bushfire came from that direction then the water in the bath would stop it. I guess that's an example of giving a child a job but not using that as an opportunity for them to further build their understanding of bushfire. All those little jobs that we can give to the children it's all an opportunity for them to develop that understanding of bushfire more generally.

## **Chair**

There was a survey done in Maffra that showed 60% of the cases teenagers were in charge of siblings while the parents were doing other things. And you mentioned before about token jobs. What sort of examples have you seen of where teenagers are in charge of younger siblings but doing really meaningful tasks? And what sort of things are involved there?

## **Rob Gordon**

Well, I can think of an example I came across in Black Saturday of a teenager a young teenager his job was to look after the younger siblings inside the house. This teenager got very angry afterwards because they felt they'd been put at risk, angry with their parents. The parents in fact successfully protected their house but I think their problem was the teenager didn't know what the parents were doing and knew that the parents didn't know what was going on inside the house. So you had this loss of the attachment. And of course, even teenagers will imagine what could be going on outside so I think that you could even do it with electronic communication.

But I think if you're going to have kids looking after young kids the parents need to be constantly connecting with them. "How's it all going? Is it okay? We're out here, we're doing alright, it could be a while, have you given them a drink?" And so on, so that again you preserve that sense of attachment.

## **Michelle Roberts**

I've had a young fellow who was very pleased with the actions he took in the Black Saturday fires with his younger siblings where he was able to help them with the smoke, have damp face washers for them to cover their face. One of his siblings was asthmatic so they had practised how he would support his younger brother if he was having an asthma attack and they applied those learnings to this situation.

I'm thinking about my own son on Black Saturday where he spent the night of the fire with his friend talking to her on the phone as a point of connection while the fire was around her house and her parents were outside doing what they needed to do. He saw his role as keeping her calm and connected through all of that, and the parents were very appreciative and so was the young person herself.

Rob's point about someone holds you in mind, someone's supporting you, someone's checking in with you, you're not there on your own and happy to make big decisions all on your own. It's not uncommon for young adults to become the coping adults in the household when the parents start

to feel panicked and distressed and there's a bit of a swapping around of who's actually taking the parenting type role or the adult type of role. Sometimes kids do feel aggrieved about that, or parents feel ashamed that that's happened, but mostly in the end people identify that was the action that needed to be taken at that point in time and was.

### **Rob Gordon**

I've also noticed that sometimes because children depending on their age, and teenagers often have a more restricted view of things. Whereas the adults are spiralling out into all the possibilities and getting incredibly anxious and panicky about impending catastrophe, whereas the teenager or the child is just looking "There's flames outside the door we should do something about it." I think that often they are an asset because they will point things out to parents and I think the more we build that into the preparedness and give them the right to actually draw things to their parents' attention and so on, very valuable.

### **Chair**

In the 1939 bushfires Leonard Stratton said the best way of preventing and protecting was through the education of both adults and children and we know that Jane's certainly been doing that at Strathewen. Jane can you tell us what do you know about how was that moving in other schools and within the curriculum? Or is it just isolated in examples?

### **Jane Haywood**

Look it's definitely there, it's included in the curriculum as is disaster education and things. I guess for us we're in a position where our program developed out of need and evolved. We're fortunate to have a really good and positive working relationship with our local brigade and volunteers and amazing experts. And we've made it a real focus and a priority and integrate lots of other curriculum through our program. But I think a lot of schools are doing bushfire education and that's indicated by the number of schools that visit the Marysville Bushfire Education Centre or have visited over time, and hopefully there'll be further development in having centres like that schools can access and visit and learn and develop connections.

I still think there are some gaps there with schools. As Michelle said many areas that were once not considered to be at bushfire risk now are. The way the urban fringe has changed. I think we do need to be very mindful of risk in our areas and it's just such a great learning opportunity. I do hope more schools get onboard. They don't have to do a program like ours which is quite significant. I think schools can develop something that's specific to their needs and where they are. I think there's a lot of learning to be done in this field. We're trying to get them now that we're a little bit more COVID free to get out there doing some education as well and developing resources to help with education and other school settings. I think there's no end to the learning that can be happening to support community safety in this whole space.

### **Michelle Roberts**

Jane it would be a good opportunity to talk about the Disaster Resilience Network through the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience. DRANZSEN is a group purely focused on curriculum and learning that can be imparted in schools and early childhood centres. They have a wonderful website with a Knowledge Hub with lots of resources and lesson plans and activities. Briony and I are both on that group. And I think you are too Jane although I don't see you at a lot of the meetings because you're in class. But it's a wonderful resource and I think it's an opportunity to continue to build the learning in our schools.

And Jane is right the curriculum has quite a lot of Disaster Resilience education in it and more and more schools are interested in doing the preparedness as well as understanding how they can facilitate recovery when children and young people have been exposed to disasters.

### **Chair**

Could fire simulator software be useful for education particularly of older children? Now we've seen some in your school could you describe that.

## **Jane Haywood**

With our grade five six students we've used fire simulator software and it was amazing. I don't think it had been used with children before. And this was pre COVID. We had the crew and it was such an amazing learning opportunity for our little guys. And just looking at fire behaviour in a simulation of our local landscape - our valley, surrounding hills and mountains. There was the adult session in the evening and I think you'd agree Malcolm the learning was incredible.

## **Briony Towers**

Jane you should explain what the fire simulator is because some people might not have seen that before.

## **Jane Haywood**

I hope I do this justice. It's called the SIM table and it is done with using walnut husks. We were able to create the topography and the lay of the land in our local area and then set the weather conditions so that we could program in what sort of a day it would be, how many days since rain, wind conditions, temperature, fuel moisture, and all the rest. And then ignite simulated fires in the landscape to see how they would move, how spot fires happen, all sorts of things. And it was a great way for our children to see all of what they'd learned about fire science come to life on a table simulating fire behaviour. Just amazing.

## **Chair**

The opportunity to be able to change the variables so that people could say what would happen if you did this, what would happen if the wind did that? So, it's an area that I would hope is extended to lots of schools and lots of communities at some stage. As you said the adults got a lot out of it.

Rohan could we have a look at the poll that went up before? Briony, is that what you would expect from the discussions you've had with parents? And Michelle from your research?

## **Briony Towers**

Yes it's really good to see that there are some in the upper end of the confidence scale because I think a lot of parents I've interviewed through my research do feel really unsure about how to approach this. How much should they tell their children, how much should they involve their children, will it make their children afraid unnecessarily?

I've interviewed parents who hold the attitude that their children will always be in the care of an adult so therefore the adult will be making the decisions and therefore they don't necessarily need to know about this stuff. But it's really interesting because the more you talk to a parent like that and ask them questions and start to ask them questions about their daily lives during bushfire season and they start to realize that actually there are times when their child is on their own. Even if it's just for a short period or they could be with someone who doesn't know how to respond safely to bushfire. I always think the conversations are the most important part.

## **Michelle Roberts**

That reminds me of the story, a young boy's school bus dropped him off near home with an impending fire there. The problem that young man had for quite some time after was he knew that there was a hidden key, and he could have got into the house and sheltered in place, but his parents had never trusted him enough to tell him where the key was hidden. He felt aggrieved that he was exposed to such a greater risk because they didn't trust him with that knowledge.

I'm very pleased to see how many people have a degree of confidence of involving their children in their planning. Part of me wants to say that you're probably attending the webinar because you're those sorts of people that are very mindful of this and engaged. It's exciting to see that there's such a good representation of people who have given it some thought. Who are giving up their evening tonight to listen to the conversation so that they can learn more. And Malcolm you've said a number of times throughout this webinar share this with those people who aren't here. They might be the ones who really need to hear the messaging. So, I double that and encourage you to have conversations in your workplace in your community with your friends about "I watched a webinar

the other night that made me think about how we could keep our kids involved in our plans. Do you do that too?" And give them the opportunity to reflect on that themselves.

### **Rob Gordon**

Malcolm I think that it's a really valuable thing that we've got a number of people who live in bushfire prone areas but don't care for children. You hear so many stories of families with children who lob into the house of adults who don't have children - they could be passing, their house could have been ignited and they have to rush next door and so on. So, I think it's so important that everybody understands. And I'm thinking of big research projects done in the United States around particularly around hurricanes and so on. Which show that age is not a vulnerability factor in childhood. In other words, children are not more vulnerable because they're younger, they're going to be vulnerable for other reasons, because they don't understand what's happening, they're very imaginative, they've got other things on their mind.

So, I think your story Michelle about the parents who didn't trust their child I think it's really important to give children a role even at a young age, unless you've got some very clear reason not to. And I know in my practise I've certainly seen four year-olds who I think had a better grasp of what was going on in their family crisis than the mother who brought them along. They were very clear. I think we should encourage adults to err on the side of trusting children and using them as colleagues and comrades rather than feeling you've got to do everything for them.

### **Chair**

That's a great point to finish on, thanks Rob. Thank you Michelle, Briony, Rob and Jane for a really thorough and challenging session.

I'm sure your responses will get people thinking and certainly having another look at their bushfire plan and working out how they can involve their children.