

Response to Parliament of Australia, Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee: Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20

This submission has been developed in partnership by the following individuals and agencies:

This submission is led by **Emerging Minds**, who are currently responsible for leading the *National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health* (funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program) and the **Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network (ACATLGN)**, based at the Australian National University and member of the *National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health*.

This submission has been developed in consultation with the following organisations and individuals:

Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience

Australian National University

Australian Red Cross

Curtin University

Emerging Minds

Phoenix Australia: Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health

Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health, (Child and Youth Mental Health Service, Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service)

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History and relevance of this submission

Authors of this submission have shared or currently share an ongoing working relationship in the fields of disaster risk reduction, response and recovery. We have contributed to the development and implementation of numerous disaster risk reduction programs for children and young people, and responded to numerous disaster events including but not limited to: the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983, the Bali bombings in 2003, the Millennium Drought, the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, the Queensland floods in 2010-11, the New South Wales bushfires in 2013, the Sydney Siege in 2014, and the Margaret River shootings in 2018. More recently, throughout the summer of 2019-20, each of the submission authors were involved in responding to and supporting communities, families, and children impacted by the national bushfire crisis. Many also provided evidence-based advice to government, emergency management agencies and philanthropic organisations about allocation of resources to best support recovery.

Many of the individuals and agencies involved in this submission have a history of working together under the leadership of the late Emeritus Professor Beverley Raphael AM. Professor Raphael is internationally recognised for her lifelong contribution to infant, child, and adolescent mental health, and the importance of supporting child mental health in disaster recovery. She promoted the inclusion and active participation of children in disaster risk reduction, resilience and recovery, and was a national and international consultant in the field of disaster mental health across her career. Professor Raphael founded ACATLGN at the Australian National University in 2007.

Over the period 2017-19, led by ACATLGN and Emerging Minds as part of the *National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health*, the submission authors assisted in the development and creation of a *Community Trauma Toolkit*. The toolkit provides evidence-based resources and training aimed at building capability for disaster risk reduction, response, and recovery in different workforces, communities, and families at each stage of a disaster event (preparedness, response, and recovery), with a **focus on supporting infants, children and parents/caregivers**. During the development of this work, engagement and consultation with workforces (including first responders, emergency workers, educators, general practitioners, community leaders, and health and social service workers) and communities impacted by disaster provided us a unique insight to the challenges and knowledge/practice gaps that arise for communities and families before, during and after a disaster.

The submission authors have been involved across the spectrum of disaster risk reduction and resilience (from prevention, mitigation and preparedness to immediate response and long-term recovery) across a range of media via multiple agencies. This work, along with lessons learnt during the development of the *Community Trauma Toolkit*, demonstrated to the consortium **the urgent need to establish an advisory reference group to ensure that the specific needs of infants, children,**

young people and their parents/caregivers are properly addressed in Australian disaster risk management policy and practice.

Infants, children and young people as potentially vulnerable people

We would like to draw attention to the *Final Report Volume II* written in response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, where the introduction defines vulnerable people as “incorporating groups **such as young people**, older people, the ill and the infirm.” Section 1.4.4 of Volume II, entitled ‘Vulnerable people’, reveals that over 40% of those deceased were considered potentially vulnerable, and 14% of the total deceased were under 18 years of age. Two thirds of those (9% of total) were infants and children under 12 years.

Section 1.4.8 of *Volume II*, entitled ‘The Psychological Impact’, notes that “Exposure to such an event is traumatic and can have long-term adverse psychological consequences, **especially for children.**” The section also notes that “the impact on adults is [also] often profound”, which in turn, can affect the psychological wellbeing of the family as a whole. The report noted that “it is not only a child’s exposure to a bushfire that can have adverse long-term psychological consequences, but also parent’s exposure and its impact on the parents’ psychological health”. This is also evident when it comes to the impact on educators and school leadership and the consequential alterations in teaching, learning and recovery trajectories.

During the development of the *Community Trauma Toolkit*, needs analysis discussions highlighted knowledge and practice gaps around how to interact with children during and after a traumatic event, how to support families and educators, and how to minimise the secondary impact of parent/carer and educator trauma on children in their care. Those discussions also highlighted the value of children’s active participation in disaster risk reduction and resilience building activities, both before and after a disaster event.

Though there existed widespread understanding that supporting children before, during and after disasters is crucial to enhancing disaster resilience and mitigating impact for children and families, apart from a small number of specialist practitioners, people were not sure *how* to do this, what it looked like in practice, or what kind of child-specific considerations were required when preparing for, or responding to, disaster. This was particularly the case for infants and pre-schoolers, and children with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. There was a considerable lack of evidence and resources to assist workforces in supporting children who belonged to vulnerable populations, such as children with an illness or disability, or children who speak English as a second language. There existed **a great need** for:

- clear, specific guidance from evidence-based sources;
- funded research;
- funded disaster risk reduction, resilience and recovery programs specifically for infants, children and young people;
- accredited training; and
- **one central committee or knowledge hub** that could provide customised solutions and knowledge to fit specific situations.

Response to selected *Terms of Reference*

We have responded below to the **two items b) and h)** of the inquiry's *Terms of Reference* which are most relevant to this group. Our responses are framed with a focus on infant, child and youth mental health.

b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;

(h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts;

Recommendations:

1. In response to these terms, the authors recommend the establishment of a **National Infant, Child and Youth Disaster Resilience Reference Committee.**

This committee would be made up of individuals and agencies who have significant experience and knowledge in disaster risk reduction and resilience; emergency management planning and response; disaster recovery; infant and child development, mental health and wellbeing; and clinical, school and community-based interventions.

The committee would serve as an expert advisory group, central knowledge repository and sounding board for the Australian government, the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee, other policy makers, and Australian communities to enhance decision-making, prioritisation, and transparency of approaches when supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Australian children, young people, and families.

This committee would provide strategic direction, coordination, and advice on allocation of resources, uptake of evidence-informed strategies, research priorities and best practice for this population group. It would help support a consistent approach across Australia towards enhancing the physical and mental health of infants, children and young people, and work towards raising the profile of children's mental health and developmental needs.

The committee would oversee:

- a) The development of a national strategy and national response to infants, children and young people's disaster risk reduction, resilience and recovery;
- b) Multi-sectoral co-ordination of care across Government and NGIO sectors as well as primary (and other levels of) healthcare with education, disability, and emergency services.
- c) The identification, development, promotion and implementation of appropriate and evidence-based resources, programs and strategies as best practice for supporting infants, children and young people, and their families across Australia;
- d) Identification of research priorities to address evidence gaps;
- e) The development of nationally consistent accountability and reporting frameworks and national standards that build workforce, community and

- family capacity to support infants, children and young people prior to, during, and after a disaster event;
- f) The development of policies, programs and strategies that promote and support children's active participation in disaster risk reduction, response and recovery.

In particular, the committee would oversee the development of **a national strategy targeting unaccompanied and separated children during times of disaster**. Unaccompanied and separated children were not within scope of the *Community Trauma Toolkit* but emerged during the needs assessment and implementation as a key area of concern for multiple agencies working in immediate disaster response and evacuation centres across Australia. Several years after the Victorian bushfires, the State Government of Victoria noted "current plans leave us ill-prepared to handle disasters that result in significant numbers of unaccompanied children."¹

This issue represents a pressing need, particularly when considering the practical complexity of multiple agencies working together. **The committee would assess current practice and develop a protocol for unaccompanied and separated infants, children and young people, based on up-to-date evidence and practice knowledge, to reflect the national need for clear national standards in this area.**

Additional priority issues of concern that would be addressed by the Committee include:

- the increased risk of family violence in post disaster settings;²
- long-term impact on academic outcomes;³
- families with children with a disability;
- families with a recent migrant/refugee background;
- children with existing mental health and other health and social issues; and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

The members of this submission acknowledge the important need to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation on the committee, due to the interplay of complex factors that can increase risk for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. Additionally, there is a lack of evidence-based research and appropriate resources that attends to the cultural needs of and impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children, and families in the context of disaster, and a lack of information and resources specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Concluding comments

The individuals and agencies in this submission hold between them many decades of experience working with infants, children, young people, families, and communities in disaster situations across the country and internationally. They have identified the

¹ State Government of Victoria (2013). *Emergency management planning for children and young people: Planning guide for local government*. Health & Human Services Emergency Management, Victorian Government Department of Human Services: Melbourne.

² Molyneaux R, Gibbs L, Bryant RA, Humphreys C, Hegarty K, Kellett C, et al. Interpersonal violence and mental health outcomes following disaster. *British J Psych Open*. 2020;6(1); Parkinson D. Investigating the Increase in Domestic Violence Post Disaster: An Australian Case Study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2019;34(11):2333–62.

³ Gibbs L, Nursey J, Cook J, Ireton G, Alkemade N, Roberts M, Gallagher C, Bryant R, Block K, Molyneaux R, Forbes D.(2019) Delayed disaster impacts on academic performance of primary school children. *Child Development*. Vol 00, No 0, 1-11. DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13200

urgent need for a central authority and knowledge repository to advise on approaches and supervise planning and responses for infants, children and young people before, during and following disaster events.

This group of individuals look forward to a continuous care model for infants, children and young people that is informed and informing for all agencies and individuals who work with infants, children and young people in disaster risk reduction, resilience, response (including emergency service agencies), relief (including evacuation centres to ensure the safety and wellbeing of unaccompanied and separated minors), and recovery (including educators to mitigate lost and adverse learning trajectories).

Essential to any strategies planning is a long term and flexible approach and time frame that is responsive to the needs and circumstances generated in the event of disaster events. The proposed **National Infant, Child and Youth Disaster Resilience Reference Committee** would advise the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee, develop a national reporting and standards framework to continually review and build evidence around supporting children, young people and families before, during and after disasters, and ultimately support the disaster risk reduction, resilience and recovery of Australian communities.