

Be You Bushfire Response Program Transcript

Preparing learning communities for the bushfire season

Presented by Ben Rogers, Nicola Palfrey, Briony Towers and Leigh Johnson on 29 October 2020

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to our Bushfire Response Program webinar. This is the first webinar as part of the program, and we're really excited to get things started today. Today's focus is on preparing learning communities for the upcoming bushfire season. My name's Ben Rogers and I'm the Manager of Community Trauma at Emerging Minds, and I'll be facilitating the webinar today.

If you haven't attended a session like this before, you'll notice that you won't be able to use your microphone or webcam, and you'll be in listen only mode. As I can see the numbers increasing, we have a large audience today. Rest assured you will be able to ask questions, as well as write comments in the question box. I might just orientate you to that first. You will notice if you're on a desktop computer, if you look to the top right of your screen you'll see a dashboard. There'll be a question box you can write in there, as well as if you're on your phone, you'll be able to find that at the bottom of your screen.

Before we begin, I'd like to take an opportunity to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. I personally would like to acknowledge the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains, and I'd like to pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging, and our panelists for joining us from across the country today. So, they would also like to acknowledge the land on which they meet, the people of the Ngannawal Country, as well as the people of the Dja Dja Wurrung, Boon Wurrung and the Wurundjeri lands of the Kulin Nation. We wanted to remind everyone before we begin that your own wellbeing is a priority, and if any concerns arise as a result of this webinar, please refer to the wellbeing tools on the [Educators Resources through the Be You website](#), as well as any services that are provided through your Employee Assistance Program.

Before we get started, it's really important to take a moment to remember that when we're talking about mental health in any context, including bushfire preparedness, it can affect us in different ways, and we all come with our own unique experiences to the webinar today.

So, at any point, if you're feeling like you need to take a break, really acknowledge that. Rest assured that we will be recording the webinar. So, if you do take a break, you can come back and watch at a later date. You can see on the screen there's some contacts if you need to reach out, as well. We also, recommend that you reach out to your own networks available to you in your learning community.

If you can't tell, we're really excited to bring you this webinar today. This is the first of four webinars that will be presented as part of the [Be You Bushfire Response Program](#), and you can see the learning objectives that we're aiming for today.

The first one, number one there, is looking at the benefits of preparing for bushfires, so we'll unpack that today. We'll also look at practical and psychological strategies, which can support learning communities with preparing for bushfires, and ways in which children and young people can be involved in preparing for bushfires as well.

Now we want to make it as interactive as possible, and as mentioned, there's a question box that you can ask questions throughout. We've got a team standing by, who will be able to respond as best they can. And I'll be looking closely at the questions as well, and I'll be drawing them out for the Q&A as part of the second half of the webinar. Before we dive into meeting our panellists, I just wanted to take a moment to give an overview of the [Bushfire Response Program](#), and what we're doing at the moment.

We're funded by the Federal Department of Education and the Department of Health to deliver mental health support to schools and learning services affected by the bushfires at the beginning of the year. This is a program that's brought in four organisations: Beyond Blue, Early Childhood Australia, headspace, and Emerging Minds have come together. I really like this visual representation, actually, because it really embodies the kind of key components of the program.

You can see there at the start is the Contact Liaison Officers. We have 25 amazing Contact Liaison Officers across the country and hopefully they're joining in today. Their role is to support early learning services and schools across bushfire affected areas.

The way they're doing that is through, firstly, trauma support and guidance by drawing on key information and resources to assist educators which test understanding the impact of the bushfires, as well as building educators' capacity to support children and young people as part of the recovery process.

That middle pillar there around recovery planning is a key element as well. CLOs are working closely with educators to identify short, medium, and long-term activities as part of the recovery process.

Finally, the last column there is looking at community support service mapping. So, helping learning communities understand the complexities of referral pathways, and what services are available to them.

This is a great picture, we have 13 priority regions that we're supporting at the moment. You can see it's from South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland. I wanted to extend a big hello, and welcome to everyone joining from those regions. We're also joined by educators from other regions across Australia as well, so a big welcome to you.

It's now my pleasure to introduce today's panellists. Welcome everyone, before we dive into your presentations and get into the Q&A to follow, it would be really nice to explore what's drawn you into this type of work.

Starting with you Nicola, as Director of Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network, ANU, what's drawn your interest into the area of community trauma and natural disasters?

Nicola Palfrey (Director of Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network, ANU)

Thanks, Ben. And thanks for having me along today and welcome to everybody. I was drawn into this work as part of the work we do with Emerging Minds and the National Workforce Centre. My background is in working with children and young people impacted by interpersonal trauma.

Delving into the world of community trauma over the last three years has been an amazing journey - just understanding the ripple effects of natural and other disasters, and community trauma events like pandemics, have been really fascinating to me in terms of the different levels of impact. But also the great resilience and capacity we have to support children and young people moving through these really challenging times.

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

Thanks Nicola, and welcome Briony. As a researcher, what led you into this area of bushfire preparedness?

Briony Towers (Research Fellow, Centre for Urban Research RMIT)

It was around 2007. I was in Tasmania during my Honours degree in Psychology, and one of the academics at UTAS had an idea for a PHD project that would look at children's knowledge of bushfire risk in South Eastern Australia. Even though I'd grown up in the bush myself, I knew nothing about bushfire and it sounded interesting. I spent the first year doing fieldwork, interviewing children all over Tasmania about the bushfire risks in their communities. I've been fascinated by children's knowledge of bushfire, and their participation in bushfire risk reduction ever since. I've been really lucky to be able to carry on with that work through the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, which has funded us for many years now. I'm really excited to share some of those things with you today.

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

Thanks, Briony and welcome to you. Leigh as a principal at Harkaway Primary school we can see you've just come out of class in the background there. What's drawn your curiosity into this area of bushfire preparedness or bushfire education?

Leigh Johnson (Principal, Harkaway Primary School VIC)

Thanks for your question Ben and thanks for having us on. Back in '83 we had the Ash Wednesday and I remember being really, really worried about my mates who I knew were in the area being affected by the bushfires. I guess that's carried on with me through the State Emergency Service and working with the CFA in different contexts for the SES. As an educator I want our kids not to have to go through what I did and have this aimless anxiety, but to be able to have the power to make a difference.

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

Thanks, Leigh and welcome to all of you. On behalf of our audience, I wanted to give you a big, very warm virtual welcome to the panellists. We'll kick things off by starting with you, Nicola. Nicola's going to introduce the area of bushfire preparedness, as well as some practical and psychological strategies that could be incorporated into learning communities. So thank you, Nicola.

Nicola Palfrey (Director of Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network, ANU)

Thanks, Ben. Yes, so thanks for having me today. All of the information that I'm sharing with you today comes from the [Community Trauma Toolkit](#), which hopefully a lot of you are aware of, which is available via the Emerging Minds website. It pulls together the learnings of all the experts and lived experience in the field.

I wanted to start with this graphic on timelines, which when I first worked in this space were really helpful for me to orient myself to this space and think about communities being somewhere on this timeline at any one point in time. Either preparing for upcoming seasons of fire or flood or other hazards; in the immediate aftermath; in the short-term or longer-term recovery; and underneath all of that is ongoing adversity, such as drought, as we conceptualise them.

This is kind of thrown that up in the air a little bit. I suppose the thing I wanted to acknowledge is, a lot of the communities that we're living in at the moment are at multiple places on this timeline. We're all in preparedness as we come up to summer if we're living in an area that is bushfire prone, or flood, or storms, and other natural hazards, as I mentioned. However, a lot of communities are also in the immediate aftermath of other incidents, critical incidents in school communities or broader communities in the short-term, a couple of months after these events. And then obviously, all of the regions that Ben spoke of earlier are in the long-term which is four months plus post-disaster, and then the ongoing experience of a pandemic. It really helps to acknowledge that and realise why it feels like we're getting pulled in 100 different directions, it's because we are. But today we're here to talk about preparedness and the role of preparedness in not only equipping people to know what to do, but also to feel like they're psychologically and physically prepared for upcoming seasons. It's gone from theoretical to very real in a lot of our children's and young people's lives after living through either witnessing directly, or indirectly all of the events over the last 12 months.

When we think about preparedness, the reason we want to talk about and why we want to bring it to the fore is that we know that children are already thinking about it. As I said, perhaps before this year it wasn't front of mind for everybody, but I think this year it's realistic and real to say it is. Kids and young people are living through the pandemic, but they're also living in the aftermath of some of the worst fires Australia has ever seen. We know that, living through that and witnessing it, can produce feelings of anxiety and stress and worry in children, as well as grief. They are very resilient, we talk about resilience in kids a lot, but resilience does not mean 'not impacted'. It means that we are able to move on following adversity, so we really need to think about how to support kids through their experiences, and to move from and learn from them.

The preparedness work that we're going to talk about today is really significant in helping build resilience, because it helps kids build their sense of agency. They have a very important role, in terms of how to cope and how to prepare, and Briony and Leigh will talk about that in more detail. In terms of in the school environment, working with the children and young people in your community about preparedness, psychologically and physically, can really help them feel equipped and more able to cope in the actual circumstance of another disaster or overwhelming event.

Psychological preparedness is what it sounds like, getting yourself in the mindset of how you might cope in an emergency. Having a sense of ability to cope can really mitigate the impacts of exposure to adversity, and the long-term impacts. [The High Five model](#) that is widely available can really provide a helpful framework, for working with children and young people to think about what to do in the event of an emergency. We would recommend that the adults and the educators in communities work through this model themselves, and then share it as appropriate through age and development with the kids and young people that they work with. It's about understanding the risks of where you live, your community, and those around you; and connecting with others, knowing who else is around and who can help in a circumstance.

The third one is really important, identifying the strengths that we already have. So, we do have the capacity now because, unfortunately, most kids have been through a fairly frightening time over the last 12 months. Even if it's just watching it from afar, or being exposed to smoke and so forth, or hearing about a pandemic. What do they know? What do they have in their repertoire to be able to manage stress and worry, to identify how they feel it in their body? And what skills do they have to be able to manage it? Going over those skills and reiterating them when they're not stressed, really equips them better to be able to cope in the event of another frightening situation.

Learning about what to do in an emergency and looking after your life is not just about 'in the event', like how to keep yourself safe in a critical situation, but how to look after your wellbeing. In terms of: even if you are exposed to a really frightening event, or a disaster, how you look after your wellbeing, and move forward to find other strengths so it doesn't go on to dominate you and how you're feeling about your life and your future.

The AIM Approach is developed by the Australian Psychological Society, so it's another nice, simple model that can be used by educators and families and children alike. It's really about bringing to fore the conversations that we know what to expect if we're in a crisis situation: that you will be worried, that you will be frightened, that you will be anxious in those situations, that you might have thoughts that will go through your head that are catastrophising and not very helpful. Once we learn how best to manage them and get some strategies in our toolkit around how to manage feeling very overwhelmed, how we notice it in our body? Do we use our deep breathing techniques? Do we know grounding techniques? How do we notice our thoughts if they're starting to spiral? What can we do about them? So you're starting to feel like you have capacity and ability to cope in a stressful situation. As I said, if we can practice those skills and embed them and feel like we have that, we're much more likely to be able to actually implement those strategies when we are overwhelmed.

Kids will need support with that, kids who've had more adversity or more frightening experiences might need additional support but educators know that. They're very well placed to be able to know exactly what supports kids do need that are in there in their classes and in their communities.

'Practical Preparation' is what it sounds like. Again, educators are very familiar with this, but actually working through it and letting children and young people know what's in place is very reassuring. To know what the plans are, the evacuation plans, what people should have in the case of emergency in terms of contacts, and talking to kids about what's in place in the school, what's in place at home. We never know when disasters strike - they might be in school term, they might be outside of it - so working with them to make them feel equipped. Where to get information, we learnt a lot over the last summer about where kids accessed information and what kind of apps they used, whether that be about fire threat or air quality. So they have a lot of knowledge themselves, but as Briony and Leigh will go on to talk about, it's really important to understand what they know and what they don't know or what they might be misinformed about, so we can make sure that they're getting the accurate information.

And so, really, we're talking about psychological preparedness and practical preparedness, they fit together seamlessly in that one really is supported by the other. You can't feel psychologically prepared if you don't know practically what you need to do, and you can be practically prepared, but if you have no strategies for managing stress and overwhelm, then the best laid plans can fall apart.

The last point I want to raise and it will be built on, as I said, is an understandable resistance sometimes as adults have about talking to children about frightening subjects. It could be disasters, it could be COVID, it could be divorce, any of those sorts of things. Adults, often their natural instinct is to protect children from frightening events. However, what we do know is that talking to children about disaster preparedness doesn't make them feel more anxious. It actually makes them feel less anxious, because they feel more prepared and more equipped. How we talk to them is important, when we talk to them is important. When we allow them to ask questions and clarify things, it leads to them feeling more capable, and more in control. But we need to do it when we can do it, so we can't do it when we're feeling overwhelmed or stressed. That's why the preparedness is so important, so we're not having these conversations in the midst of a disaster for the first time.

It's much easier to support kids psychologically, to implement a plan, if we've talked to them before we're in the midst of having to use it. Kids like anything need to go over plans more than once, often, to get reassurance and to get clarification. Setting up an atmosphere where kids can ask questions, can feel equipped, can understand that the adults know what's going on and what role they have to play, really is best practice in terms of supporting them – and us - in terms of feeling best placed as we go into another summer, which we know is already causing some anxieties. We're reaching anniversaries and days are warming up and windy. All of those things have already started to happen, as you guys are well aware.

That's just setting the overall framework of why we might talk about preparedness and how psychological and practical preparedness go hand in hand. And I'm going to handover now to Briony, who's going to take into a bit more detail about her work in this area. Thanks, Briony

Briony Towers (Research Fellow, Centre for Urban Research RMIT)

Thanks so much, Nicola.

And thank you to Beyond Blue and Emerging Minds for this really great opportunity to share some of what we have learned through our research with children and schools.

Probably the most important thing we've learned is that most children want access to knowledge and information about bushfire. Over the last decade or so, I've interviewed hundreds of children around Australia about bushfire hazards and disasters, and I'm constantly amazed by their enthusiasm for discussing what they know, what they're curious about, what concerns them, and what can be done to keep their community safe.

My colleagues in the fire agencies often lament how difficult it is to engage adult community members in discussions about bushfire, and I keep telling them they will never have that problem with children. When children become aware of the potential for a bushfire to occur in their area, or they experience a bushfire emergency, they want to know what they can do to protect themselves, their families and the things they value. When we provide children with access to knowledge and information, and we support them to use that knowledge and information to take protective action, they actually feel less afraid of bushfires.

While our instinct might be to shield children from the realities of living in a bushfire prone environment, the research tells us that providing children with knowledge and information actually has a really positive impact on their sense of safety and security.

But, when we're providing children with access to knowledge and information, we need to remember that they're not blank slates. A major finding of my research across different studies, in different states, in rural areas, and on the peri-urban fringe, is that children always come to the topic of bushfire with their own theories about how bushfires behave in the landscape and how they impact upon people, property, and the environment. When we're engaging with children in learning and action for bushfire safety, it's really important to spend time in genuine dialogue with them so that we can understand their existing theories, because those theories have a profound influence on how they perceive bushfire risk and how they interpret new information. For example, I once interviewed a 10-year-old girl from Woodend, which is a high bushfire risk location in Victoria's Macedon Ranges. Her family were planning to stay and defend their property, and her mom had delegated her the job of filling up the bath. When I asked her why she had to fill up the bath she told me it was because if a bushfire came towards the bathroom, the water in the bath would stop it from spreading through the house. One of the most important misconceptions children have about bushfires is that they travel in this really predictable kind of linear way, via direct flame contact.

And that a non-combustible barrier such as a brick wall, or a road, or swimming pool - or in this case, a bathtub of water - will prevent the fire from spreading. While her parents actually wanted her to fill up the bathtub so that they would have a ready supply of water to throw on spot fires, she'd constructed her own rationale based on a pre-existing misconception about bushfire behaviour.

When I'm doing bushfire research with children, or working on the design of bushfire education programs or materials, I put a really strong emphasis on starting where the child is at, which requires understanding their existing theories, misconceptions, knowledge gaps, and working with them from that point to bring them towards a more accurate understanding. While children might come to the topic of bushfire with various misconceptions and knowledge gaps, they do have the capacity to understand bushfire risk in quite sophisticated ways, but we need to scaffold their learning. What you can see in that first box on the slide there is the international equation for disaster risk - hazard x exposure x vulnerability, divided by capacity. This equation actually provides a really valuable framework for effective teaching and learning.

So, we start with the 'hazard', which is the bushfire itself. I've already described one of the misconceptions that children have about bushfire behaviour, but there's a multitude of them. Learning the basics of bushfire behaviour, for example how bushfires start and how fuel, weather and topography influence fire spread in the landscape is actually something that children really enjoy. But also, when they have a bit of an understanding of how bushfires start and spread, they're in a much better position to understand exposure. Exposure is where we have people, houses, and other assets in bushfire prone areas. While children usually have a pretty accurate perception about the likelihood of a bushfire occurring in their locality, they can tend to underestimate the exposure for their own property, particularly if they're living in a more built up area. Learning how bushfires can spread via burning embers and spot fires can help children to form a more accurate perception of their exposure. But in most Australian states and territories, there are also online mapping tools, which provide really reliable information about the levels of exposure for specific locations. For example, last year, some of Leigh's grade five students from Harkaway figured out how they could use the online [Vicplan mapping tool](#) to determine if their property had a high, medium, or low level of bushfire exposure. This was such a valuable learning activity, as one of the students exclaimed when she found her property on the map, "Oh my God, I had no idea I was in bushfire prone area because we are just surrounded by other houses. I'm going to pay so much more attention to bushfire stuff now".

Then we have 'vulnerability' which refers to the conditions that increase the susceptibility of exposed people, houses, livelihoods and other assets to damage and harm. Children are actually really good at identifying vulnerability in their households, schools and communities. They often recognise that because they haven't had access to knowledge and information, they lack an understanding of how to protect themselves from bushfire hazards. They also know that not everyone has the financial resources to fix up their house so that will withstand bushfire impacts. They're highly aware that there are young children, elderly people, people with disabilities, and other groups of people who may not be able to respond safely to a bushfire threat on their own.

Then we have 'capacity', which is the combination of all the knowledge, skills, strengths, and resources available within in a community, to reduce bushfire risk through, prevention, mitigation, and preparedness. What we really want children to understand about capacity, is that everyone has a really valuable contribution to make to risk reduction. Children often assume that risk reduction is the responsibility of fire brigades and parents and teachers and other adults in their community. That's true, but for risk reduction strategies to be effective everyone needs to be involved, so that everyone's needs are taken into account, and this includes children.

The best thing about doing this work with children is that moment when they identify a problem others have overlooked, or they come up with a really innovative, creative solution to a complex or longstanding issue and they realise that they really do have the capacity to make a difference.

When we're working with children on bushfires safety projects, we really try to emphasise that while they may need help to better understand some of the more technical aspects of bushfire risk and risk reduction, they are experts in their own lives, and that expertise is absolutely fundamental to developing effective risk reduction strategies that will keep them safe and protect the things that they value. Children have expert knowledge of their daily routines and activities. So, for example, some children walk to and from school with their siblings, or a group of friends, and they catch public transport. Some children have parents who work full time, so after school and during school holidays, they're looked after by a babysitter or an older sibling. Some children's parents are separated, so they might move between different two different households during the week. Children know these routines and activities like the back of their hand and that knowledge is so important for developing robust emergency plans that take different contingencies into account. Children also know what household and community assets are valued and cherished. Ask any child with a pet what they would most want to save from the impacts of a bushfire, and they will most likely tell you that it's their pet. I once interviewed a nine-year-old boy Huonville in Tasmania and he told me that he was really worried about what might happen to his goats if his family had to evacuate. I asked him what his goats meant to him and he said they were like his brothers. Children have expert knowledge of relatives, friends, and neighbours who might be vulnerable or have limited capacity to respond to a bushfire event without support. So, when we're researching bushfire safety programs in schools and we interview parents, they'll often tell us things like how their children have prompted them to make sure gran and grandpa's emergency plan is up to date, or to check in on an elderly neighbour on a high fire danger day.

Children also have critical insights into the social, economic, and cultural factors that can impede bushfire planning and preparedness. I've interviewed children in rental properties, who have rightly pointed out that there's limits to what you can do in terms of vegetation management and structural mitigation when it's not your house. I once interviewed a nine-year-old girl in Macedon whose adult family members couldn't agree on whether they would stay and defend their property or leave early. She told me that any discussion about the bushfire plan usually ended in a huge argument and she was really concerned, because bushfire season was approaching and they still hadn't resolved the issue. Inclusive bushfire education that empowers children to take action requires that we acknowledge the social, economic, and cultural barriers to bushfire planning and preparedness, and that we provide children with at least some degree of voice and choice in what they might do to reduce bushfire risk in their own context.

When we start with children where they're at, and we provide them with opportunities to develop their understanding of bushfire risk and risk reduction, and we encourage them to tap into their own expert knowledge of their households and communities, they can make really valuable contributions to bushfire safety. First of all, children are really fantastic bushfire educators. At Strathewen Primary School children have made films and books to educate their community about fire danger ratings, bushfire planning and preparedness, and the fire history of the local area. At Harkaway, the grade 5/6 students have created films, websites, games and interactive workshops to teach the grade 3/4s about what they can do to be better prepared for bushfire season. When children are given the opportunity to actively participate in bushfire emergency planning at home or at school, their contributions really enhance the quality of emergency plans, children often pick up on things that their parents or teachers have overlooked. For example, I went and interviewed a five-year-old girl in the Perth Hills who realised that her family didn't have a plan for evacuating their ten budgies that lived in an aviary in the backyard. When she realised, she was mortified, so we consulted with a vet about what she could do to get them out safely.

And third, when children have had the opportunity to develop their understanding and take an active role in bushfire safety activities, they often have profound insights into how adults can make bushfire education programs and initiatives for children more engaging, relevant, and meaningful. Don't ever be afraid to ask your students for feedback on how you can improve your own practice.

Finally, bushfire risk is a really complex phenomenon and thinking about it can be really daunting for children and adults alike. But after many years of working with children and school communities, I'm convinced that we should always begin with the hypothesis that any subject can be taught in some intellectually honest form to any child, at any stage of development. I'll leave that with you as a provocation and hand over to Leigh in Harkaway, he's going to provide us with a principal's perspective. Thank you so much Leigh.

Leigh Johnson (Principal, Harkaway Primary School VIC)

Thank you Briony, and Nicola as well. And obviously Beyond Blue, Emerging Minds and the Be You team. How extraordinary that you guys are all out here at the end of what's probably been a crazy day. Back here in Victoria we're back to face-to-face, so thank you for making the effort to actually put yourself in this place today. We've only got a pretty short time, what I'm hoping is to really just inspire a heap of questions. So, I'm going to talk about a few things, particularly from a learner agency perspective, but with the hope that we can inspire a few questions at the end of this little talk. Two things to kick off with though, when we're talking about child-centred disaster risk reduction in the classroom – and Nicola pointed to that earlier on - is that taboo subject, do we broach this with the fear of causing anxiety, or do we actually tackle it front on? And so, if we're going to be authentic about this, let's face it, we're not teaching sex ed, it is not that awkward. I guess it may be a challenge for us to feel comfortable about it, but we can't avoid the anxiety. So, it is a taboo subject in many communities, but actually it's one that is absolutely crucial to get on board with.

The second really important point to kick off with, this is not about fixing bushfire safety preparation, it's about making sure that we do whatever it takes for the learning to happen about bushfire safety preparation. We can rip off those blackline masters, we can shove the kids some homework about 'do a bushfire plan, hand it in on Friday', give them a happy sticker. Well, that's the teaching but we want to make sure they've done the learning. That way, we know that they see themselves as key to actually being able to take action, to reduce the risks around them, and actually have agency for the safety of people around them as well, including their families. In order to do that kind of flip from a teaching focus to a learning focus, we need to actually have that philosophy of education there in the background. What's your school there for in the first place?

In the old days schools produced workers, it feels like now schools produce data, but from where we're coming from in this perspective, schools afford agency by giving kids the power to act. There's some confusion between schooling and learning and this conversation is not about schooling, it's all about learning. Let's face it, shouldn't schools be all about teaching kids to learn? If nothing else, we know that's exactly what we're doing in this day and age – and 2020 probably exemplifies that more than ever before. Having a philosophy of education that accounts for learner agency, it's simply these two things.

In your classroom, you have a culture where your kids are making rules and are they allocating resources? Do they have a say in the way things are shaped? There's a lot of work – Project Zero, Cultures in Classrooms - there's a lot of work around this at the moment. It's just the way you do greet kids at the door, the way that you treat kids with dignity, the way that you engage them with your questions, forever asking, "What makes you say that?" or, "Tell me more about that" rather than just keeping this discourse of knowledge into blank slates. We recognise kids are not blank slates.

So, what are students producing to help educate others? That's where this project has come from at Harkaway Primary School, we're positioning our kids as experts. There's no more important time in Australia right now than our kids knowing how to effectively learn about stuff. So, for us, there's no more important time for them experts, excellent at causing this learning to happen. We want to give it the best possible go of our kids learning about disaster risk reduction. This is the provocation - how do we generate learning opportunities so kids can take action to reduce the risks around them? Part of that is a philosophy that's very live and active in so many schools now - that nothing is taught until something is learned, and nothing is learned until you've done something with it. Just dwell on that for a moment, and I've put up some examples there but for the sake of time I won't go into them.

What we did was set up a bushfire safety committee, and you can read all about [their manifesto](#) which was their, 'Hey, we've got something to say about child-centred disaster risk reduction', and say it they did. We gave them the power to produce to say that, to become experts on being a kid and dealing with these issues. Before we had this committee, we had a culture where we have our discovery learning, we use an inquiry model that is grounded in the Stanford University agile design methodology. Kids were running workshops, every year our senior kids would go down to the junior grades, and we have this model here where we have students modelling what it means to be a Harkaway learner and students who are mimicking what it means to be a Harkaway learner. We have this process of induction right across from prep to six - an apprenticeship model I guess you'd call it. Part of that is taking risks, and part of that is having something to say. The key message here is we're talking about agency and the power to act. We want to give our kids the power to act. If children don't have this naturally, which they don't, then we need to give them practice at having and developing this agency and this self-efficacy. This belief in themselves that they can actually learn the skills, the knowledge and the actions they need to take to actually be safe and cause others to be safe in bushfire safety. Allowing children to experience this in small successes is absolutely critical.

Here's what we did: our bushfire safety committee did heaps of stuff around producing a product that others can use to teach about bushfire safety. So that's a little bit confusing. Normally we just say, "make a poster", kids hold up the post them and we put a little sticker on it. But in this case, the kids had to design a product that then could be used by someone else to teach bushfire safety and preparedness. That was quite different - they had to develop a user profile, they had to develop questions of empathy, they were talking to kids in Gembrook who had recently experienced bushfire impact on them. They had to reach out to experts, to veterinarians, to Wildfire Safety Officers. They had to talk with the CFA, they tagged in with some CSIRO experts. They had to position themselves to become experts and then develop something with that knowledge that they had actually attained. This actually allowed our kids to really dive in and come up with some really great stuff. I had no idea at the beginning what the end would look like. So, holding things loosely in your head was absolutely critical for me as a teacher. To have the process, fall in love with the process, to be intimate with the process, but actually the product had to take care of itself. At the end of all of this our kids were aware of the product, or the process I should say, and they used it to actually produce all these different artifacts. For example, they made the web pages, they ran live events. Of course, there were the posters. There were the Scratch computer games that kids were making, they were using Macs and producing Maxon, they developed and understood all this language around bushfire safety. Our kids were making, on a Code Red day, a 'go zone' - they were contacting organisations that would maybe give families a discount to come there during a day. Then after all that here they are, as experts, presenting at RMIT University to master's degree students around what they have learned in their own context as experts. Their self-efficacy after that, their belief in themselves skyrocketed, amazing. Absolutely phenomenal. That's the point. We wanted to create the conditions for learning to happen, and learning it did.

Out of all of this, what we want is self-efficacy for our kids. We want our children at the end of this process to go, "I'm someone who knows what actions to take, to be able to reduce the risks around me and for others around me". We used [Albert Bandura's Four Sources of Self-efficacy](#) for that, and I'll just talk to these really briefly. There are heaps of examples for each of these four things. I want to make them pretty clear then hopefully you can throw some questions in the chat there. Performance outcomes - we all know a little bit of success breeds success. That's what we want. For our kids to jump on the computer, talk to the possum lady, ask about how they can make pouches for possums for bushfire season. Awesome – a little bit of success and then they can take it and run with it. Reach out to a veterinarian, "How do we look after horses? How do we prepare for horses for bushfire season? What are we gonna do for wombats?" These little bits of success then lead the kids to go down that inquiry model and actually start to rapid prototype a product, test it out, and see how they go. Gosh it, was fun. It was manic, it was just chaos, but gosh at the end of it all, it was huge fun.

The vicarious experiences of these ideas, that if kids see another kid, someone they can relate to achieving success: "yeah, if they can do that I can do that." A good example is if one little group wants to do a Save the Wombats plan, all of a sudden everyone wants to Save the Wombats. Then we can work through it and refine it and people do their different things. Just seeing others experience success, we know is a source of self-efficacy.

The physiological feedback - we were talking before about the AIM and the Five strategy, it's the same thing. It feels good to feel good. When our kids experience that little bit of success, they feel good about that and that spurs them on. So, they're starting to believe, "yeah, we've got this, we can do this, I can do this". And then working with us to do it as well. And simply that specific feedback, that last one being verbal persuasion, really awesome. So, when they do hold up their posters that they're going to give to someone else to use, to teach about being bushfire safe, then they're getting feedback. "Your heading looks fantastic, it's big enough to read, I love the way you've done the outlining on it. I can see it really clearly and I can engage with the content". Four really big things you can start with tomorrow.

Just in the last minute, I want to wrap up with a bit of a call to action. Number one: be really deliberate about the culture in the classroom, about being risk takers, about who does most of the talking. Am I the teacher? It generally is me doing most of the talking. I give my kids a stopwatch now, and they know I've got 10 minutes and then they can respectfully ask me to stop talking so that they can get on with it. Number two: knowing how to help. Having people like Dr Briony and other resources, obviously the CFA website and the CSIRO, there are so many resources you can turn to, to know how to help. Particularly in the mental health space right now. The whole [Be You project](#) is absolutely critical to being able to support our kids in all of this.

A really, really important thing that we don't do well in Victoria and that's TeachMeets. I know there's a few people out there that do really well bringing teachers together, like the [Primary Years program](#), they do this often. But just generally us, as teachers, getting together and just talking about this stuff. "What did you do up in St Ives? How did that go? What worked?" We know that collaborative stuff inside the school works, it's manifold when we do it between schools and across the nation, as well. Super important and really easy to do. The fourth thing is get your kids to do the same thing. We're part of a group called [Kids Teaching Kids](#), you can look it up. It's a model where the kids present to each other what they're doing to help their environment. We can be doing this around bushfire safety, as well. There's absolutely nothing stopping us from getting together virtually, and hopefully physically down the track, and getting our kids sharing their learning and just really listening to other kids share about their learning. Then that's that first step in that self-efficacy development. Thanks for listening and back to you Ben, I appreciate it.

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

Thanks, Leigh. And thanks to Briony and Nicola as well and they'll join me now for the Q&A. You all shared some really great insights, practical strategies, as well as key ways in which children and young people can have agency in this area. We've got just under 15 minutes, so we might dive straight into the questions.

Briony, something that came up, particularly with your quote that you put on at the end there was around engaging the younger audience. So young children. What kind of advice do you give to early childhood workers or anyone in the early childhood space?

Briony Towers (Research Fellow, Centre for Urban Research RMIT)

That's a really good question, and that's one of the reasons I put that quote up at the end. I've interviewed children as young as five and six about bushfire hazards and disasters. They are very capable of engaging in those conversations around bushfire planning. If your school is located in a high bushfire risk area, then that's a really great opportunity to provide a really safe space to explore some of the issues around bushfire evacuation, and sheltering in place, with those younger students. But what I'd really like to see happening is that we actually start to take a whole school approach to bushfire safety education, and we actually don't even start with bushfire hazards and disasters. We start with the role of the bushfire in our environment, and with fire ecology, and with indigenous fire stewardship. We start that with kinder kids at bush kinder and in those kinds of environments. I think there's some really nice examples of learning around indigenous fire stewardship in Dixon's Creek, and we can put that in some of the webinar materials.

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

Thanks, Briony. There's been a lot of questions come through, one of them I might point to Nicola to start but Leigh you might want to reflect on this. The question that came through is, "What would you say to educators that are scared of retraumatizing their students by involving them in fire related preparedness activities?".

Nicola Palfrey (Director of Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network, ANU)

It's a genuine and legitimate concern. I think my response would be that we can retraumatise people easily, by asking them to go over events in an unsupported way or triggering them through imagery and so forth. You do need to be mindful of that. Our aim is not to frighten or overwhelm people. However, the risk of not talking to them about it leaves kids to manage stuff on their own. And so it's always a balance between, we don't want to show gratuitous images necessarily, or to have uncontained conversations of really overwhelming events. But talking in a contained, calm and practical pragmatic way about what we can do to reduce risk, what we know and what is in place while bring anxiety down, so it's really important to be mindful of it. Not doing it doesn't make kids less anxious, it just leaves them to worry on their own without any reassurance. That's my theoretical answer, but Leigh I'd love to hear his view – he's with kids all day every day, so over to you, Leigh.

Leigh Johnson (Principal, Harkaway Primary School VIC)

I just want to reiterate what you're saying. I think the general question is, "How do we deal with anxiety in schools?" In my case I'm still in primary school, I'm not a psychologist. However, there's no good reason for not having a trauma-informed practice in the culture of the school. Which means that we know that things are going to trigger children to feel anxiety and experience what it means to have anxiety. And we will know in our culture - and what it means to be a teacher in our community, and a leader in that community - how to come alongside kids, how to have the conversation that deescalates it.

All this stuff we were talking about before, the skills of grounding, about breathing, and then allowing this to have that. My fear is: do we cause trauma to happen by not preparing our kids to be able to move through, what we know will be increasing seasons, where there's more risk of disaster through climate change? By having a culture from day one, as Briony was saying, our kids know we're going to be talking about disaster risk reduction and our kids know they're going to have something to say. They will have a voice, they will be heard and listened to.

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

Thanks, Leigh and Nicola. We've had some questions coming through around the innovation and the kinds of problems that children have been able to identify and solve. This might be a nice one for you, Briony and Leigh, to explore with your work at Harkaway.

Briony Towers (Research Fellow, Centre for Urban Research RMIT)

Some of the projects from Harkaway; one of the projects was by a group of students. The thing about Harkaway Primary School is it's actually located at the top of a really beautiful hill, and it looks down over quite a built-up area. And I was talking earlier about how children living in built up areas are often quite unsure or underestimate their exposure to bushfire. So, these children who come up to the school from the suburb down below were really unsure about whether they could actually be affected by bushfire and whether this is something they need to be worried about. So, they asked, "Could there be a bushfire in Berwick?", and we were like, "We don't know. See if you can find out. Go online and see what you can find". And they couldn't find anything. They couldn't actually find any information that could tell them whether or not they were at risk. So we made that their project, and they ended up designing a little pro bono consultancy table where they use [Vicplan](#), match it up on Google Maps, and they sat down with their classmates and showed them if they were in a bushfire prone area or not. The CSIRO scientists actually came to help them out with that at one stage. And now we're like, 'This is fantastic. We need to do this for the whole community, not just for kids, because people just don't know if they're at risk'.

Leigh Johnson (Principal, Harkaway Primary School VIC)

Kids with high ability, high self-regulation skills and teamwork skills, were able to figure out what they were going to do and do it quickly. When we're having these kinds of conversations everyone wants to present the glossiest best: "Everything was amazing and the kids did stuff that's never been done before". But there were some epic failures in there as well. There were kids who were not able to achieve what we were hoping for them to, and that's okay. At the same time, they took risks and there was a heap of other learning that did happen, but it is incredibly complex. We're structured in a way that allows for that complexity, and for that messiness, for that sense of chaos to prevail for a while. It's not the kind of culture where every box gets ticked off every minute of the day.

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

There are a lot of questions coming in, we want to cover many. We might be able to add some resources at the end. We've probably got time for a couple more. Anxiety is coming up as a key theme and I know we touched on that before, but are there any strategies Nicola, Briony, or Leigh, that you would recommend for helping kids manage anxiety around bushfires?

Nicola Palfrey (Director of Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network, ANU)

In my practice, when I see clients and the main issue that they present with is anxiety, one of the first things I say is, "Anxiety is absolutely awful, but it's actually one of the easiest things to learn the skills to manage when you know how to do it and you're supported to do it well".

The defining characteristic of anxiety is feeling out of control and that's an awful feeling. We've all felt it, we need to normalise it. As Leigh was saying before we jumped on, he was sharing with his students that he felt anxious about coming on today. Modelling that it is a normal emotion and what he's going to do to manage that - eating sugar was his strategy. I think we have to normalise it, that it is normal to be worried, and anxiety is an extension of that.

However, regulation through breathing - and I always do just the basic physiology because people will argue with you that breathing doesn't work and it does - it's just you're not doing it for long enough or deep enough for it to work. It's not up for debate whether or not deep breathing will calm you down, it just does. We know the systems. And I think that inquisitive nature and showing kids that, you can get nice and gross with them about it if that helps about, you know, when they really hot and sweaty, or whatever it may be. But the basic science of anxiety management takes away what anxiety breeds, which is uncertainty, so it definitely will help you manage your anxiety. As I said before, you have to practice it when you're not anxious to use it when you are.

I say to kids - a music performance, you have to rehearse it so when you get onto stage your lines come out or your music comes out. If they're into sport I say, "Look at what they do before they kick a conversion in the footy. They take a deep breath. Look at what they do before they serve". So you're bringing it into real life examples. Everybody is managing anxiety regulation up and down, all the time. So I think normalising it, not shaming it, but saying, "You can have this but we need to practice it". There's hundreds of resources and tools, mindfulness, deep breathing, meditation. And recognising some kids need to go up, you know, they need to kind of burn it off. Not everybody is going to get zen to calm themselves down as well, so having different strategies.

Leigh Johnson (Principal, Harkaway Primary School VIC)

One really good example of that in the bushfire safety committee. At our school, we've got three times the average number of kids doing life with a disability, but being a smaller school. And so a lot of kids are doing life with pretty significant anxieties, so our role is not to command and control, it's actually giving kids the space to do what they need to do. One student sat in the corner of the whole time, he would not be part of a group. I was checking in every so often. In the end he got really passionate about, "Well, how do you help people with disabilities prepare for bushfire season? Because they're getting left out and they're getting put on a truck without a wheelchair." And he's found an expert in a university and he's emailed off to them to find some answers. Here I was, I thought he was doing nothing in the corner except playing with a dinosaur game on Google. It turns out he put everything in the subject line and not in the body of the e-mail, but we got a response. He saw himself after that as someone who can find out and do something to help. And that was that was just extraordinary. I'm not necessarily demanding compliance, but actually finding how do we come alongside and work with where it's at, then we had this incredible result for him.

Briony Towers (Research Fellow, Centre for Urban Research RMIT)

To add in to what Nicola and Leigh have said, is that the work that Strathewen Primary School has done provides a really valuable model for how we might address some of children's bushfire related anxieties when they have actually experienced an extreme bushfire event. There are a lot of resources in the [Emerging Minds Community Trauma Toolkit](#) that actually shows how Strathewen address some of those issues by providing children with that understanding of bushfire. Because a lot of those children, that Black Saturday fire, for that community really came out of nowhere. And so, the children actually learned that there are signs and signals in the environment that they can read, to know where the level of risk is at on different days. And that's hugely empowering for the children.

They actually had children that went from being so stressed that they were really, really struggling, to feeling really confident that they would actually be able to avoid a bushfire disaster in the future. I highly recommend those resources that Emerging Minds have produced with Strathewen.

Ben Rogers (Community Trauma Manager, Emerging Minds)

Thank you guys, Briony and Leigh and Nicola. We've just clocked over to four. I feel like we could talk for another hour together, so I really appreciate your time. I wanted to thank you for those insights that you've shared today. I really appreciate it. We will attach resources, as you mentioned, for this ongoing conversation.

And thanks to the audience members who attended today.

Keep an eye out for an email, which will have all of those resources attached, as well as a link to this webinar. We're planning another webinar early next year. So keep an eye out for that as well.

Thank you very much.

END TRANSCRIPT