



# Why the Be You Bushfire Response Program has been vital for Australian communities

The Be You Bushfire Response Program provides mental health support to schools and early learning services affected by the Black Summer bushfires. Learn about the positive impact the Program has had in the Snowy Valleys region of southern NSW.



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**Batlow Technology School was one of the schools to benefit from the Be You Bushfire Response Program.**

*The following article contains material about bushfires that some people may find distressing. If you find yourself in need of assistance, visit [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au) or call our Support Service on 1300 22 4636.*

The Black Summer bushfires of late 2019 and early 2020 had a huge effect on communities all over Australia, including the Snowy Valley region in NSW.

Like other parts of Australia, the children and young people of the Snowy Valleys had different experiences, responses and memories.

It's something the Be You Bushfire Response Program has helped them not only explore, but use as a springboard for healing – both for themselves and the broader community.

The Program provides targeted mental

health and wellbeing support to learning communities affected by the Black Summer bushfires, and empowers communities to lead their own recovery, and to recognise their strengths, levels of resilience and ways of coping.

For the Snowy Valleys, a key part of recovery was creating a community book which brought together hundreds of submissions from children and young people with lived experience of the fires, around four central themes: reflection, growth, nature and resilience.

“It's entirely children's and young people's work, everything from poems and art to song lyrics, stories and photos,” says Sally Hodges, Be You Bushfire Response Contact Liaison Officer (CLO) for the Snowy Valleys.

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Sally explains that the book's concept was raised at an initial meeting of the Snowy Valleys Council's Be You Working Party, a group that was formed in direct response to Black Summer.

"From the Black Saturday fires in 2009, we knew that children often feel powerless afterwards. Adults try to help by shouldering all of the burden, but that only leaves children feeling a bit helpless," Sally says.

"Not only is there something very therapeutic about art, the book is a safe way for adults to talk about the Black Summer bushfires with children.

"Adults can be concerned about re-traumatising children by bringing it up, but



A child's artwork from the community book.

we also know that not talking about it leaves children to experience it by themselves."

Snowy Valleys Council's Children's Services Manager, Kylie Wilesmith, who drove the formation of the council's all-important Be You Working Party, agrees.

"As well as giving children a voice, the book was also intended to remind early learning services, schools and families that just because the bushfires have been and gone, it doesn't mean you won't see trauma in children in years to come," she explains.

"The book is great to have as a platform to allow children to talk about it."

*“Not only is there something very therapeutic about art, the book is a safe way for adults to talk about the Black Summer bushfires with children.”*

—Sally Hodges



Sally Hodges (fifth on left) with her Be You Bushfire Response Program team at the Community Book Launch.





Batlow Technology staff members Loren Curtis and Fiona Cooper read the Be You Sessions and Events page

## A listen-and-learn approach

Renae Pettit is also a Be You Bushfire Response Program CLO working with primary and high schools in the Snowy Valleys.

One of the schools Renae supported was



Batlow Technology School principal Michelle Wainwright with Be You Bushfire Response Program Contact Liaison Officer Renae Pettit.

Batlow Technology School. There she delivered staff wellbeing and trauma guidance and support to educators, working alongside principal Michelle Wainwright.

“The wellbeing workshop gave practical ways to build intentional and incidental self-care into the day,” says Renae.

“This enabled educators to recognise the importance of prioritising their wellbeing so they could, in turn, support students in their learning.”

Renae’s role started with listening, developing relationships and building trust. Both Renae and Sally note that part of that was helping communities identify which services could benefit them, particularly in the very early days.

“It was different for every school,” says Renae.

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“But for some, the support was too much too soon – such as when they were still in the immediate crisis-response space and didn’t know what they wanted or needed. It was my role to help them navigate that and say, ‘Let’s see what we can do when it feels best for that to happen.’”

Sally agrees. “Sometimes the learning communities simply needed us to be their filter, to say, ‘These are the support services you may find useful’, whether that was connecting them to online mental-health resources, local psychologists, therapists or even GPs – bearing in mind the remoteness of some of these communities – when they were ready.”

For the other learning communities in the Snowy Valleys, the Program opened doors that may have otherwise remained closed.



Batlow Technology School primary school students in the music room.

“I wish we’d been overrun with offers of support in the early childhood space,” continues Kylie from the perspective of Children’s Services Manager at the Snowy Valleys Council.

“But to be honest, we felt a bit isolated early on. Thank goodness for Sally and Be You



Batlow Technology School principal Michelle Wainwright tastes the baking efforts of her students.





Michelle Wainwright and Renae Pettit talk with secondary school students.

because otherwise we'd have been left rowing our own boat.

“Just having that connection to the Program, that we could tap into for information and resources so quickly, was incredible.”

## Prioritising wellbeing

Amid the various needs, one avenue of help the Program offered was consistently

used by Snowy Valleys' learning communities.

“The staff wellbeing sessions that we offered as a priority became a bit of a go-to and the uptake was exceptional,” explains Renae.

The Snowy Valleys communities made great use of the resources from [Emerging Minds](#), a Be You Bushfire Response Program partner. Schools and early learning services also used the [BETLS Observation Tool](#) for observing behaviours, emotions, thoughts, learning and social relationships.



“The learning community leaders and directors were really keen on supporting their staff first and foremost, which was admirable,” says Sally.

“They were happy to invest time into educating staff about self-care, and simply by inviting us into their centres at a time when few people could visit due to the

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coronavirus pandemic, showed that they respect their staff and their staff's mental health."

Kylie says the impact the Program's staff wellbeing sessions have had in her learning communities has been immense.

"As educators, a lot of us lived through this traumatic event ourselves and the thing is, if we're not right, how can we get anything done for the children and families in our communities?" she says.

"That's why we had a Be You wellbeing day for ourselves as educators to start with, and then another for the broader community on the anniversary of the fires in December 2020.

"We're not specifically trained in trauma so while we have an understanding and a lived experience, being able to access professional advice and support for both us and our communities has been incredible."

*"A lot of us lived through this traumatic event ourselves and the thing is, if we're not right, how can we get anything done for the children and families in our communities?"*

– Kylie Wilesmith

When schools were ready, the educator wellbeing sessions were followed up by a session on supporting students through trauma-sensitive approaches.

"This was also well received," said Renae.

"We found that many educators in the Snowy Valleys community are intuitive in their care of students in challenging times.

"They know the value of relational practice, creating safe and familiar classrooms and supporting students to regulate their thoughts and emotions."



Primary school students and their educator at Batlow Technology School.



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Reflecting on why the Snowy Valleys community needed help from the Be You Bushfire Response Program team, Kylie adds:

“I think the response we’ve had from children and young people wanting to contribute to the community book speaks for itself,” she says.

“We had more than 300 submissions, so if that’s a reflection of need, it’s huge.”

Find out more about how [Be You](#) can support your learning community to prepare for and recover from critical incidents and disasters, or access its [Bushfire Response Resource Pack](#).

“Thank goodness for Sally and Be You because otherwise we’d have been left rowing our own boat.”

– Kylie Wilesmith



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