



Children's experiences and needs in the 2019-20 bushfires

CONSOLIDATED SUBMISSION TO INQUIRIES INTO THE 2019-20 BUSHFIRE SEASON

April 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Save the Children Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work. We pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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Executive summary

Save the Children is Australia's leading child rights organisation and the world's leading independent humanitarian, emergency relief and development organisation for children. Guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we work to promote children's rights and protect and enhance children's lives, including by responding to disasters and supporting communities to recover and rebuild.

Save the Children has prepared this submission as a consolidated response to the four major inquiries currently underway into the 2019-20 bushfire season and its associated arrangements.¹ It is being supplemented by additional material that is specific to each individual inquiry.

In this submission, Save the Children presents a perspective on the 2019-20 bushfires which aims to reflect children's experiences and needs. We draw particularly on our recent experience delivering emergency response and recovery support to children impacted by the bushfires, as well as what we have heard directly from children and their families.

Children's needs were systemically misunderstood and overlooked in the response to the 2019-20 bushfires. Children are uniquely vulnerable in bushfires, as they are in other emergencies. Children also experience and process traumatic events differently than adults. Yet services for children were not regarded as essential services in the 2019-20 bushfire response. No systemic effort was made to ensure that high quality Child Friendly Spaces were available to support children and families where they were needed in bushfire-affected communities. This was an enormous missed opportunity to prevent potential trauma and harm to children's wellbeing and development during the crucial early window for such support.

Children must be at the centre of emergency preparedness, response and recovery efforts, and their perspectives, experiences and needs must be considered in all disaster risk reduction and community resilience-building activities. This must include genuine participation by children at all stages, in accordance with children's rights to be heard and taken seriously about matters that affect them. There are practical steps we can take to achieve these aims.

We urge all Australian governments to act on climate science, and listen to children's calls to protect our climate and environment, for this generation and the next. We are already experiencing significantly increased future bushfire risk as a result of climate change. We must act to adapt now.

Our key recommendations flow from those considerations:

1. Responses to future bushfires should include establishing Child Friendly Spaces as an essential service in every evacuation, relief and recovery centre. Planning and preparation for future bushfire seasons should:
 - enable rapid and effective deployment of Child Friendly Spaces upon establishment of every evacuation, relief or recovery centre;
 - include allocation of appropriate funding for those spaces to be delivered alongside other critical services in all centres;
 - include planning for how those spaces form part of an integrated and coordinated response and transition to recovery;

¹ These are the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (the Bushfires Royal Commission), the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry, the Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season, and the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee's inquiry into lessons to be learned from the Australian bushfire season 2019-20.

- provide for nationally consistent and high quality Child Friendly Spaces, which could be achieved by consistent deployment of Save the Children's extensively tested model; and
- involve children's perspectives about their needs and priorities for such spaces.

All Australian governments should adopt a coordinated approach to ensuring children's rights and needs are recognised in future bushfires and other disasters, and addressed as part of a systemic and integrated response to such disasters, including through all relevant COAG processes and streams of work.

(see pages 9 to 18)

2. Recovery efforts should be long-term, community-led and have children at their centre. They should include multi-year school support planning, including funding for specialised school-based post-disaster recovery interventions that complement other activities. (see pages 20 to 22)
3. A disaster risk reduction and resilience education strategy should be developed, with a focus on school education, and informed by an expert review of bushfire education. (see pages 22 to 23)
4. Minimum standards for child participation in disaster risk reduction and resilience practice and decision-making should be developed and adopted, including a focus on bushfires. The standards should:
 - provide for children's active involvement in decision-making at all stages of the emergency management cycle, from planning and preparedness to response and recovery, including activities in their own communities; and
 - specifically require government to genuinely consult and engage with children when developing policies and laws, and making decisions, relating to climate change adaptation and management of the natural environment, including publication of how children's views were sought and taken into account.

(see pages 23 to 27)

5. In line with recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and requirements under the Paris Agreement, Australia should promptly take significant measures to reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases, establish targets and deadlines to phase out the domestic use of coal and its export, and accelerate the transition to renewable energy, including by committing to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. (see pages 27 to 29)

1. About Save the Children

Save the Children is Australia's leading child rights organisation and the world's leading independent humanitarian, emergency relief and development organisation for children. In any crisis across the world, children are always the most vulnerable – more than half of those affected by emergencies each year are children, and crises can severely affect both their physical safety and emotional wellbeing. When a disaster strikes, Save the Children is ready to deploy with life-saving essentials and long-term support, such as education and counselling, to ensure children and families can recover from their losses, restore their lives and build resilience for their futures.

Our work is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UN Convention**) and our experience in translating its principles into practice. This includes policy, advocacy, program interventions and service delivery to promote children's rights and protect and enhance children's lives, especially those most in need of support. Save the Children has existed for over 100 years and we have worked in Australia for over 65 years. We are committed to ensuring all children are supported, including during times of crisis.

Each year we directly reach around 30,000 children and adults across Australia, working with the children and families who most need support through our integrated, place-based early childhood, family support, school-age engagement and youth services,² as well as our emergency response and community-based recovery interventions. Our work in many of Australia's most marginalised and disadvantaged communities has seen us establish a sizeable standing workforce in every State and the Northern Territory of qualified early childhood, youth and family support workers who are trained in supporting children and families to recover from disasters.

Save the Children has been at the forefront of responding to countless disasters in Australia. In 2019-20, Save the Children responded extensively to the devastating bushfires across Australia, as well as Tropical Cyclone Trevor in the Northern Territory, the Huon Valley bushfires in Tasmania and major floods in far north Queensland. Working with other emergency response agencies and government agencies, we provide psychosocial support in emergency contexts to provide children with a place to play, recover and begin to process what they have been through, while parents rebuild their lives knowing their children are safe and cared for.

Resilience-building is embedded in all of Save the Children's programming and forms part of our continuum of support for communities. We work with children and families to build community connections, develop parental capacity and nurture safe and strong relationships with peers, family and community. This allows our emergency response and recovery work to draw on our existing connection to, and relationships within, affected communities, enabling a more rapid and appropriate response that is informed by the needs and aspirations of the local community and coordinated with existing local services.

² This includes specialist expertise in domestic and family violence, youth justice, and migrant settlement support, as well as many long-standing two-way partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Aboriginal community controlled organisations in remote areas.

2. Save the Children's perspective on the 2019-20 bushfires

In this submission, we present a perspective on the 2019-20 bushfires which aims to reflect children's experiences and needs. Our perspective particularly draws on our work in communities as part of the immediate emergency response to the bushfires, which is now transitioning to supporting children in the long-term recovery process, and our commitment to supporting children to have a voice about their experiences of the bushfires, the response, and their own needs, aspirations and capacity to contribute.

Our submission is also informed by our international work in disasters as a global humanitarian leader in providing psychosocial support to children and families, and our broader technical and operational expertise in keeping children and families safe in times of crisis, developed over many years globally and in Australia.

We are directly supporting children and communities affected by these bushfires

In the 2019-20 bushfire season, we established 10 Child Friendly Spaces in evacuation, relief and recovery centres in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Reaching impacted families in the hours and days after their evacuation, our staff worked with over 1000 children, parents and carers during this critical period to provide psychological first aid and emergency support.³

At the request of local authorities, we also mobilised to provide psychosocial outreach support to heavily impacted communities where recovery centres have closed. Our teams – comprised of specialist youth, early childhood and family support workers – deployed to provide bridging support before longer-term recovery programs become fully operational and while local supports return to capacity or rebuild. To date, we have delivered outreach services to 11 locations across New South Wales and Victoria, reaching around 750 children and over 200 carers.⁴

As the immediate emergency passes, we are working with families and schools to ensure the most heavily impacted children receive the support they need to process their experiences and mitigate the long-term mental health and other impacts that a disaster like this can have on children. We have commenced work with bushfire-affected communities and schools to offer access to our in-school recovery programs, including our *Journey of Hope* program, which supports recovery and builds resilience of children through group-based support.

We are currently assessing how this long-term support for recovery can best be provided in the context of uncertainty created by the spread of COVID-19 and the limits it places on face to face engagement in the foreseeable future. Given the complex and compounding nature of multiple disasters now impacting these communities and the effectiveness of the program in supporting children to recover from any collective trauma, we are strongly committed to delivering *Journey of Hope* as soon it is deemed safe for the community and our staff to do so.

We support children's voices to be heard

Save the Children's response to the 2019-20 bushfires has included supporting children's voices to be heard about their experiences and needs, drawing on our commitment to children's right to be heard and our global expertise in supporting that right. This submission incorporates what we have heard from children – including, for younger children, from their parents and caregivers – about their experiences, concerns and priorities.

³ This included around 800 individual children, some of whom returned on multiple days.

⁴ The spread of COVID-19 has resulted in a pause on these in-person outreach activities.

3. Children are uniquely vulnerable to the short and long-term effects of bushfires

Tens of thousands of children in Australia have been directly affected by the catastrophic 2019-20 bushfires, unprecedented in their scale, severity and frequency. Some children have lost family members and been evacuated from their homes and displaced multiple times. Many more have been affected by service closures, disruptions to learning and development, and the harmful physical and mental health impacts of living through a protracted crisis.

We know that in any emergency children are the most vulnerable, during the immediate crisis and after. Research and past experience tells us that the short and long-term impact of these bushfires on children's mental health, educational outcomes and wellbeing will be enormous, especially in communities that have been most heavily impacted.

Disasters such as the recent bushfires can cause trauma and significantly affect children's physical, mental, cognitive, emotional and social wellbeing and development, creating problems that reverberate into adulthood, impacting educational and employment outcomes. Lisa Gibbs et al have summarised the evidence:

The impact of disasters on the mental health, well-being and social inclusion including school engagement and social engagement of children and young people is well established. These effects, including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress, can extend into adulthood. For those who do demonstrate mental health problems or social difficulties, the presentation of any impacts will vary across age, time, setting and will interact with the effects of the disaster on the child's parents, family and community. Children's and young people's sense of safety and security, their ongoing development and their social relationships can all be compromised.⁵

Similarly, a 2018 study conducted by the Society for Research in Child Development concluded that, without early intervention, children experiencing trauma may experience negative developmental effects that impact educational and functional outcomes later in life.⁶

Research indicates that bushfires in Australia have had extended negative impacts on student learning progress and academic achievement. For example, the *Strengthening School Communities* study by the University of Melbourne found that children attending primary schools in areas affected by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria demonstrated reduced academic progress across both literacy and numeracy compared to their peers up to four years later.⁷ This study only examined academic results two to four years after the event, so it is possible – indeed likely – that the reduced academic progress continued beyond that time.

When children's wellbeing and development are detrimentally affected by disasters, the social and economic costs are also felt by their communities and society as a whole, particularly as affected children become adults. Continuing developmental difficulties and reduced mental health and psychosocial wellbeing can seriously impede people's ability to participate in their communities, as active citizens, and in the economy throughout their lives. Given these broad-

⁵ Gibbs, L. et al, 2014. 'Where do we start? A proposed post-disaster intervention framework for children and young people', *Pastoral Care in Education* 32(1): 68-87, pp 68-9, references omitted (emphasis added).

⁶ Goodman, G., et al, 2018. 'Trauma and long-term memory for childhood events: Impact matters', *Society for Research in Child Development* 13(1).

⁷ Gibbs, L. et al, 2019. 'Delayed disaster impacts on academic performance of primary school children', *Child Development* 90(4).

ranging and long-term effects, addressing children's needs during and after disasters is both a preventive measure to reduce harm and a social and economic investment in our nation's future.

4. Children experience and process traumatic events differently from adults

While individual children's responses to distressing and potentially traumatic events can vary, children as a group experience and process such events differently from adults. Meeting children's needs in an emergency requires a recognition of these differences.

An event like the extreme bushfires of 2019-20 can be terrifying and potentially traumatic for anyone exposed to it. For children in particular, traumatic events can be extremely destabilising and disrupt their understanding of the world and their own place within it, including their sense of security, stability and safety. Children may not have the capacity to understand, explain or make sense of events they have experienced, and adults commonly lack the capabilities and confidence to support children in processing these experiences.

During and in the immediate aftermath of an emergency, it is vital for children to have a place to feel safe and receive psychosocial support from trained professionals to begin to process what they have been through. Child-appropriate psychological first aid and recovery support is critical in supporting children to express themselves, develop positive coping strategies and reduce the risk of long-term impacts to their mental health, wellbeing and development.

This support typically includes play-based activities to assist children with processing their experiences and expressing what they are experiencing and feeling. It can include drawing and other creative and art-based activities, as well as age-appropriate discussions and other engagement with children, depending on their age, stage of development and other considerations. Crucially, effective support for children differs significantly from the support that will be most effective for adults who have been exposed to distressing events.

It is also valuable for such support to model to parents and other adult caregivers – and, where appropriate, older children – how they can support children in their families in this processing and recovery outside the immediate intervention setting and over the longer term.

5. Children's needs were systemically misunderstood and overlooked in the response to the 2019-20 bushfires

Based on our experience operating Child Friendly Spaces in bushfire-affected communities through 2019-20 – especially in January and February 2020 – and what we heard from children and their families in those communities, Save the Children's key insight is that children's needs were systemically misunderstood and overlooked in the response to the 2019-20 bushfires.

In the 2019-20 bushfires, children in heavily affected communities consistently lacked a safe place where their needs could be met, including for support in processing their experiences. This was a systemic failing. The most direct harm from this was borne by those least able to influence decisions and actions relating to the response: children themselves.

Sadly, despite the heroic efforts of individuals, communities, organisations and governments to respond to the fires, and the demonstrated resilience of children themselves, this systemic failing resulted in an enormous missed opportunity to prevent potential trauma and harm to children's wellbeing and development during the crucial early window for such support.

Research and our own experience make it clear that the harm caused to children during the initial crisis will continue into the longer term, unless mitigated in the future by appropriate recovery and resilience-building interventions.⁸

In the following sections, we elaborate on this by distilling what we heard from children and what our own frontline staff saw during the response.

Children's services were not regarded as essential services

As our staff on the ground saw, too often the needs of children were not considered in the response to the bushfires, other than in terms of their immediate physical safety and security. In Save the Children's view, the lack of focus on children's needs in the response to the 2019-20 bushfires reflects an alarming misunderstanding of those needs. In particular:

- Children's needs were commonly, and mistakenly, thought of as secondary or subsidiary to those of their parents and other adults. Often, they were treated only as encumbrances to adults who needed to be placed in child-minding.
- This mistaken perspective failed to recognise that children have their own developmental, wellbeing and safety requirements and interests, and their right to have them supported.
- There was a systemic lack of understanding of children's specific need for adequate mental health and psychosocial support in the immediate aftermath, to support their longer term recovery and their resilience and ensure their uninterrupted psychosocial, emotional and cognitive development.
- There was also a systemic assumption that parents and caregivers have the capacity and knowledge to adequately plan for, and address, their children's needs in an emergency. This is a dangerous assumption and unlikely to be true in most cases, especially given the extreme impact of major disasters such as the 2019-20 bushfires.

This is not to say that there were no examples of effective local responses to children's needs. It is also important to emphasise that the failings being described here were not failings of the individuals or organisations involved in responding to the bushfires. Rather, the failing was systemic: a lack of coordinated and consistent awareness of children's needs and focus on addressing them through appropriate interventions, actions and funding. This was in stark contrast to what would be expected in international humanitarian responses to emergencies overseas, where mechanisms are in place so that children's specific needs are typically given greater focus than occurred here in Australia.⁹

This systemic failing and lack of understanding was particularly evident in the lack of child-specific services available in evacuation, relief and recovery centres. These centres were often chaotic and challenging environments for families, filled with makeshift structures, long queues, and exhausted and overwhelmed adults and children. Most people in these centres had stories of being evacuated multiple times, of driving in slow-moving convoys while fires burned nearby, of having inadequate food, power and fuel supplies, of being separated from families where one parent had stayed behind to fight the fire, and/or of living in temporary basic accommodation with multiple families under the one roof. Many families had lost pets and livestock and were experiencing substantial financial stress.

⁸ In relation to the harm caused to children by disasters and bushfires in the absence of appropriate early interventions, see above, especially footnotes 5 to 7.

⁹ Discussed below, at pages 16-17.

These circumstances were distressing enough for adults, let alone children. Yet these evacuation, relief and recovery centres had extremely limited facilities to support children's needs or provide respite for families with children. It was clear that services for children were not deemed essential.

“Our children are the most relaxed and happy they have been since we evacuated over a week ago. We are finding it hard to know what there is for children in the area ... we will see you again tomorrow!” – Parent, Albury

“I’ve been putting this off. If I knew you were here, I would have come sooner.” – Parent, Batemans Bay

There were systemic barriers to supporting children effectively

In deploying to provide essential support for children in the communities hardest hit by the bushfires, Save the Children encountered systemic barriers.

There was no systemic mechanism to ensure child-appropriate support in evacuation, relief and recovery centres. In the absence of a planned and coordinated approach, Save the Children was forced to itself track the establishment of these centres, contact emergency services personnel directly to negotiate access, and self-fund the rapid, reactive establishment of Child Friendly Spaces wherever communities remained accessible by road.

To do this effectively and responsibly – and in a way that integrated with other efforts – we had to devote considerable effort to understanding individual communities' rapidly developing circumstances and needs, and what other services, supports and plans were being put in place, without the benefit of any systematic coordination, planning or support to meet children's needs.

In centres where Save the Children was able to gain access, Child Friendly Spaces were typically only established several days after the centre had already opened, and without strong coordination with existing services. This meant that children were left unsupported in processing their experiences and exposed to the potentially further traumatising adult-centric environments of the centres at the very time when the crisis was at its peak.

“I didn’t realise a children’s club was here when I came last time. This place is so cool!” – 8 year old boy, Batemans Bay

Even once Child Friendly Spaces were established, Council and evacuation, relief and recovery centre staff often did not understand and were not aware of the need for safe spaces to meet children's specific needs. This often meant suitable and safe locations for Child Friendly Spaces were not readily available in these centres, and such spaces were sometimes difficult to locate or inaccessible for families. For example:

- One Child Friendly Space was established in an isolated indoor gym which also acted as overnight sleeping quarters for the Army and contained masses of community donations,

leading to a constant stream of service providers and volunteers attempting to access supplies and creating difficulties in maintaining children's safety and privacy.

- Another Child Friendly Space was established in a small room which restricted the number of children and breadth of activities it could safely accommodate. This occurred in Batemans Bay, at the epicentre of the bushfire crisis in New South Wales, where there was enormous need for such a space for children.
- Another Child Friendly Space was initially proposed by evacuation centre staff to be established in a basketball stadium in a space with no physical boundaries, constant public foot traffic, and no air-conditioning (with expected temperatures in excess of 45 degrees Celsius), making the space unsuitable and unsafe for children.

The lack of a coordinated and systemic response led to insufficient resources being available for support to be consistently available for children's specific needs, especially those at particular risk of marginalisation. 'One size fits all' support for children – offered without differentiation according to age, gender, cultural or language background, family circumstances, or additional needs – will not meet all children's needs, and particularly not children who are already especially vulnerable.

Our frontline staff in Child Friendly Spaces were often called upon to support children with additional needs, who are some of the most vulnerable children in a crisis. Providing this support often required 1:1 engagement with a child, sometimes with multiple children with additional needs present. This was far more challenging than would have been the case if there had been a systematic – and appropriately resourced – approach to meeting these children's needs.

“Without this space and all that you wonderful people do for the children, we would not have coped. The children felt safe, they had things to do, they were a lot calmer and they were smiling! They loved it down here.” – Caregiver with two children on the autism spectrum, Bairnsdale

Child Friendly Spaces were provided only where private funding was available

There was no systematic funding mechanism to support the establishment of Child Friendly Spaces or other child-focused support where this support was needed. State government agencies and local governments were reluctant to support the funded delivery of these services.

Child Friendly Spaces are essential services in disaster responses, including bushfires, yet during the 2019-20 bushfires they were delivered only where private funding could be sourced to establish them and meet children's needs. In all but one location where Save the Children established Child Friendly Spaces, funding to enable them came entirely from private donations and philanthropy, with no government support.

The absence of systematic government funding support for Child Friendly Spaces to be delivered alongside other essential services was especially glaring in light of their evident value once established through private resources. Children, families, emergency personnel and other partners consistently recognised the importance of Child Friendly Spaces and reinforced that Child Friendly Spaces are an essential service in emergencies, providing a safe and protective environment where children's psychosocial wellbeing and resilience can be supported and strengthened. We elaborate on this, and provide examples, in the next section of our submission.

6. Child Friendly Spaces are essential services in bushfire responses

Save the Children is the leading provider of Child Friendly Spaces in Australia. Our globally tested model has been tailored to Australian circumstances over many years of experience, and is calibrated to each individual community's needs when delivered.¹⁰

Child Friendly Spaces are a globally tested intervention

Child Friendly Spaces are a widely used intervention delivered by agencies in humanitarian settings across the world. They are based on a substantial shared knowledge base¹¹ and delivered as part of established inter-agency coordination mechanisms to ensure all needs, including children's, are met in a disaster.¹² They address children's short-term emergency and post-emergency needs by providing physically and psychologically safe environments for children and promoting children's psychosocial wellbeing in the hours and days after evacuation or displacement from their homes and communities.

"I don't want to leave! Can we come back?" – 7 year old boy, Batemans Bay

Child Friendly Spaces complement immediate life-saving interventions such as shelter, health or food interventions. They implement the five key elements which international experts have identified should be promoted by interventions in the immediate period after disasters: a sense of safety, calming, a sense of self- and community/collective efficacy, connectedness, and hope.¹³ These five elements underpin the principles of psychological first aid.¹⁴

"I wish we lived here so we could see you every day." – 6 year old girl who attended for six consecutive days, Albury

In Australia, Child Friendly Spaces are generally established within evacuation, relief and recovery centres, in agreement and coordination with local government and/or State disaster agencies. Staff are trained in psychological first aid and trauma-informed practice, and have expertise spanning early childhood education, family support, primary education and youth work.

¹⁰ For example, cultural and language-group makeup, representation of children with additional needs, existing community networks and strengths, and availability of other suitable supports in the community.

¹¹ See, eg, IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support and World Vision, 2018. *Operational guidance for Child Friendly Spaces in humanitarian settings*, especially pp 9-14, available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/operational-guidance-child-friendly-spaces-humanitarian-settings-enar>.

¹² Discussed below, at pages 16-17.

¹³ Hobfoll, S. et al, 2007. 'Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence', *Psychiatry* 70(4): 283-315.

¹⁴ Gibbs, above n 5, p 70.

Families have consistently told us that Child Friendly Spaces provide a sense of security, routine and normalcy. They enhance families' capacity to care for children by helping parents understand how to talk to children about their experiences. Children are supported to process their experiences and articulate their own needs through age-appropriate play-based learning and activities, often including creative and art-based activities.

“This is the best play set-up!” – Child, Wangaratta

“The cat was down on the beach and his chair was on fire – the cat was scared. Then the fireman put out the fire and the rainbow came.” – 7 year old girl describing her drawing in a creative art activity, Bairnsdale

Child Friendly Spaces also:

- act as a gateway for staff to identify families with potential vulnerabilities and link them to nearby complementary services such as child psychologists and family therapists;
- remind parents and communities of the importance of children's needs, helping to avoid the 'benign' but harmful neglect that children often experience in emergencies; and
- enable parents and caregivers to access critical relief services for their family, knowing their children are safe and in a positive environment, while children avoid exposure to potentially distressing and re-traumatising discussions between parents and other adults.

“We wouldn't have gotten through this day without this space for the children to play” – Parent of 3 year old girl, Wagga Wagga

“It was good to come in and off-load. I've been feeling really stressed. It was good to destress.” – Parent, Morwell

“This is the second time we've been here. Kids love the space!” – Parent, Batemans Bay

Child Friendly Spaces were highly valued by children, carers and response personnel

Despite the challenges created by the lack of a systemic focus on children's needs or systemic mechanism for the establishment of Child Friendly Spaces, their benefits during the 2019-20 bushfire season were clear and repeatedly recognised by children, their families and (once established) other agencies providing services.

“Honestly we are doing really well and that is because of you guys. We can't tell you enough what it means to us to have our children being taken care of while we sort everything out. We can't thank you enough for what you have done, it means so much to us to know our kids are happy and well looked after.”
– Parent with four children, Wagga Wagga

“Guess we will see if the house is still there. Our goats got out and went to the neighbour's paddock. Hope they didn't try to get back though, their horns would have got caught in the fence and they would have been burned. Thanks for having us here, it was good.”
– Older child about to return home after four days visiting a Child Friendly Space, Bairnsdale

“This service has meant so much to us. We have been through a bushfire before and there wasn't a kids' space set up. This has made the biggest difference so we can talk to Council and that our son also has a chance to have some fun amongst all the stress.” – Parent, Bega

“It is so great to see the children go into the room all stressed and come out so happy.” – Staff member from another response agency, Batemans Bay

“It is so important what you are doing.” – Parent, Wangaratta

“Thank you for playing with me today, I had big fun!”
– Child, Bairnsdale

A systemic approach is needed to meet children's needs with Child Friendly Spaces

In our experience, Child Friendly Spaces are most effective when, in addition to providing safe, stimulating and supportive environments for children, they are:

- part of an integrated, coordinated and systematic service response which focuses strongly on children's needs as well as those of adults, involving all relevant community, non-government and government actors;
- built on existing community structures and strengths, including strong existing working relationships with Councils and other service providers;
- connected, through comprehensive planning and preparation, to a continuing plan to support children and families once the immediate post-crisis period is over, such as by providing a springboard for mobile outreach and 'pop ups' to provide support during the gap in time between evacuation, relief and recovery centres closing and community-based recovery interventions becoming fully operational;
- genuinely inclusive, non-discriminatory, and accessible to all children and their needs; and
- designed and implemented with the benefit of children's participation, especially children in the communities where the spaces are being established.¹⁵

Unfortunately, during the 2019-20 bushfires, none of those conditions were consistently met. This was despite the best efforts of many on the ground in bushfire-affected communities. The hard work, deep expertise and understanding, dedication and resourcefulness of those responding to the bushfires and involved in meeting children's needs in communities could not overcome the absence of a systemic focus on, or response to, children's vulnerability and needs.

Even allowing for the rapidity with which the bushfires spread, and their extreme scale, the response to children's needs was far too reactive, with Child Friendly Spaces deployed only in a limited and ad hoc way. This left too many children without support when they most needed it.

We should draw on global expertise to build on existing Australian mechanisms

The lack of focused attention on identifying and meeting children's needs during the bushfire response in Australia was in stark contrast to what typically occurs in international humanitarian responses to comparable emergencies overseas, where a systematic assessment of children's needs and coordinated response to address those needs is the norm.

In international responses to major disasters, strong institutional arrangements facilitate a focus on children's needs, as part of broader coordination mechanisms. These institutional arrangements include clearly identifying needs in a humanitarian emergency and explicitly designating accountability across the key areas to specified lead agencies, spanning government and non-government agencies. Global cluster leads are designated across 11 key areas – including education, early recovery, shelter, protection, health and others – and country-based emergency-specific clusters are established as needed.¹⁶

Together with UNICEF, Save the Children is the global cluster lead for education under these arrangements. Based on our extensive experience operating as part of coordinated responses to major disasters globally, Save the Children can attest to the value of this 'cluster system' and

¹⁵ Our experience in Australia is consistent with international best practice inter-agency principles identified by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and others: see, eg, IFRC, above n 11, pp 13-14.

¹⁶ For a brief overview of the cluster system and its objectives, see UNHCR, 2020. *Emergency handbook*, Cluster Approach (IASC), available from <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>.

other systematic mechanisms in ensuring a coordinated approach is taken to meeting children's – and all people's – needs during an emergency.

Integrating children's needs into Australia's bushfire management systems – alongside wider disaster, emergency and crisis management – will require coordinated involvement by all levels of government. Local emergency plans provide for arrangements at local government and community levels, within frameworks established by State and Territory governments. The Australian Government provides financial and other assistance and can play an important national leadership and coordination role. COAG has recently highlighted that the 2019-20 bushfires were a 'national-scale disaster' and recognised that building resilience to disasters arising from natural hazards requires coordinated action from all governments, together with the private sector and communities.¹⁷

Save the Children's view is that a nationally coordinated approach is required to ensure children's needs are considered and addressed consistently in future disasters across Australia, as part of an integrated and systemic approach. Children's needs should be a substantial and explicit component of all ongoing and future work undertaken by COAG in relation to disaster risk reduction, emergency management, response, recovery and resilience-building, and reviews and actions arising from the 2019-20 bushfires. These should include a focus on children's needs in, among others:

- developing the National Action Plan to implement the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework that COAG endorsed on 13 March 2020;
- implementing the National Partnership on Disaster Risk Reduction that COAG agreed on 13 March 2020;
- the post-bushfire review of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements;
- implementing the National Bushfire Recovery Plan; and
- ongoing discussions at COAG meetings between all First Ministers, the Australian Local Government Association (as the standing local government representative in COAG) and others as relevant, preferably with one jurisdiction agreeing to lead on ensuring national coordination through COAG in relation to children's needs in emergencies.

We must act now to prepare for our children's future

As a prosperous and stable country, we are in the fortunate position of having the futures of our children largely in our own hands. Children in Australia are already being increasingly exposed to emergency events – far more than were their parents. This will only increase in the future, accelerated by the effects of climate change.¹⁸ This is the new reality. Now is the time to draw on the knowledge and approaches developed by the global humanitarian and emergency sector over many years and adopt them, adapted for the Australian context, in a systematic and thorough-going way.

*“Act as if you loved your children above all else” –
Greta Thunberg, address to World Economic Forum
at Davos, January 2020*

¹⁷ Meeting of the Council of Australian Governments: Sydney – 13 March 2020 – Communique, p 2, available from <https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/communique-13-march2020.pdf>.

¹⁸ Discussed in more detail at pages 27-9 below.

We must do all we can to meet our children's needs in future disasters. Globally, it is widely recognised that support for children is an essential service in any emergency. We cannot assume that children will be safe and their rights, needs and interests recognised and addressed in disasters in Australia – past and recent experience clearly shows that, without action, this will not occur. A clear and pressing case where action is needed is in planning and preparedness for the rapid deployment of Child Friendly Spaces to meet children's needs, integrated with other essential services and interventions, in future bushfires.

Recommendation 1

Responses to future bushfires should include establishing Child Friendly Spaces as an essential service in every evacuation, relief and recovery centre.

Planning and preparation for future bushfire seasons should:

- enable rapid and effective deployment of Child Friendly Spaces upon establishment of every evacuation, relief and recovery centre;
- include allocation of appropriate funding for those spaces to be delivered alongside other critical services in all centres;
- include planning for how those spaces form part of an integrated and coordinated response and transition to recovery;
- provide for nationally consistent and high quality Child Friendly Spaces, which could be achieved by consistent deployment of Save the Children's extensively tested model; and
- involve children's perspectives about their needs and priorities for such spaces.

All Australian governments should adopt a coordinated approach to ensuring children's rights and needs are recognised in future bushfires and other disasters, and addressed as part of a systemic and integrated response to such disasters, including through all relevant COAG processes and streams of work.

7. There are lessons to be learned from 2019-20 for future planning and preparedness

As outlined above, Save the Children's view is that the key lessons to be learned from the 2019-20 bushfire season are:

- children's needs were systemically misunderstood and overlooked in the response to the bushfires;
- planning and preparation for future bushfire seasons should include a systemic focus on children's unique needs and vulnerabilities and how they process distressing and traumatic experiences; and
- this focus on children's needs should include funded mechanisms to establish Child Friendly Spaces as an essential service in every evacuation, relief and recovery centre established in response to future bushfires.

Beyond this, Save the Children is not in a position to comment about the specifics of the planning and preparedness activities that occurred before the 2019-20 bushfire season. However, past

research has highlighted that children's unique needs have historically been overlooked in disaster and emergency management planning in Australia.¹⁹

Children's unique needs have historically been overlooked in emergency planning

The need to incorporate children's unique needs into emergency management plans in Australia has been highlighted in a wide range of literature over many years.²⁰

In State and national emergency planning, children are often referred to within a broader category of vulnerable groups, in ways that fail to recognise children's specific needs. As a recent review of national, State and Territory emergency plans and guidance documents highlighted, this can lead to guidance documents not only overlooking children's needs but even containing information that is actively dangerous to children, such as general guidance about consuming water during heatwaves which could actively harm infants if applied to them.²¹

At the local government level, a 2013 review by Save the Children found that many local emergency management plans make no mention of children, and overall if children are named it is generally a cursory mention:

*There is no detailed planning that focuses on the unique needs of children in emergencies and disasters. This means that particular activities that are focused on the needs of children are not developed, and responsibility for taking care of children in emergencies is not generally specifically allocated. ... **there is much more planning when it comes to managing the needs of animals.***²²

Given the systemic failure to adequately protect or focus on children's interests, safety and wellbeing in the response to the 2019-20 bushfires, it appears that the errors of the past have not been learned from.

Planning for children's educational continuity is important

Save the Children also highlights that planning and preparedness should include a strong focus on children's educational continuity during and after emergencies. In 2019-20, the worst of the bushfires were during the school holidays, which minimised the number of days of school missed by children. The situation would have been very different if the peak of the fires had been a few weeks on either side.

It is important that planning extend to alternative modes of educational delivery and mitigation and contingency plans for such disruption, while also recognising that the disruption to children's education extends well beyond any initial days that are missed as a direct result of bushfire or other emergencies.

¹⁹ See, eg, Save the Children, 2013. *Don't leave me alone: Protecting children in Australian disasters and emergencies – Government report card on emergency management planning*, available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/dont-leave-me-alone-protecting-children-australian-disasters-and-emergencies>.

²⁰ See Davie, S., Erwin, E., Stuart, M. and Williams, F., 2014. 'Child Friendly Spaces: Protecting and supporting children in emergency response and recovery', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 29(1): 25-30, especially the references cited at p 25.

²¹ Gribble, K., Peterson, M. and Brown, D., 2019. 'Emergency preparedness for infant and young child feeding in emergencies (IYCF-E): An Australian audit of emergency plans and guidance', *BMC Public Health* 19: article number 1278, available from <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-019-7528-0>.

²² Save the Children, *Don't leave me alone*, above n 19, pp 11, 24 (emphasis added).

There are wider lessons for managing disasters, emergencies and crises in Australia

In Save the Children's experience, the systemic failings exposed in the response to the 2019-20 bushfires exist across broader disaster, emergency and crisis management in Australia.

The dangerous misunderstanding and overlooking of children's rights, interests and unique needs which was laid bare during the bushfires also arises in the context of other disasters and crises which can cause community-wide trauma. This includes disasters arising from natural hazards, such as severe flooding and the effects of drought, as well as crises of other kinds including the current spread of COVID-19.

It is critical that we learn from the devastation of the 2019-20 bushfire season so that we are better prepared, and can respond better, in future seasons. These lessons also apply even more broadly: we must focus on children's needs in all disaster, emergency and crisis situations, learning from our systemic failure to do so in the past.

8. Recovering from bushfires requires placing children front and centre

In the immediate aftermath of the devastating 2019-20 bushfires, it is understandable that much community and government attention is on understanding what caused and contributed to the bushfires, examining the response, and considering improvements to future preparedness and planning.

At the same time, it is important to also focus on longer-term recovery and broader community resilience-building. These are part of effective disaster risk reduction practice, and directly bear on preparation and planning for future bushfires. Accordingly, we provide some brief observations about recovery and related resilience-building considerations.

Children should be central to recovery and reconstruction efforts

Successful recovery requires putting children's needs – and views – front and centre. Children are resilient and are key to the health of their communities. Supporting children to adequately recover and build resilience strengthens the future capacity of communities to cope with disaster. Children have the capabilities and desire to support recovery efforts in their families and communities and can make a significant contribution in post-emergency recovery and reconstruction processes.²³ Moreover, collaborating with children can itself help with recovery while building children's resilience.²⁴

"I said to Mum, 'We haven't lost our home ... just our house. We are not homeless. We will rebuild.'" –
11 year old girl, Batemans Bay

During the early stages of recovery from the 2019-20 bushfires, children in bushfire-affected communities have reported that they want to stay busy and need activities to keep them occupied. They are also reporting that they wish to have useful activities to do and for their

²³ Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard*, UN Doc CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009, [125].

²⁴ Save the Children, 2016. *Take care: A toolkit*, United Kingdom, p 4, available from <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/child-protection/take-care-toolkit.pdf>.

contributions to be valued by the community. Yet many fire-affected communities lack spaces for children to make such contributions, despite youth-led responses emerging in some places.²⁵

Recovery efforts should be driven by children's and communities' identification of priorities and needs, as well as by the Australian and global evidence about what approaches and interventions are most effective in meeting children's needs as part of effective recovery. These two sets of drivers are not inconsistent – recovery interventions will only be effective if they are supported by the communities where they take place, reflective of community priorities and values, in accordance with the community's pace and willingness to engage with outside support, based on a good understanding of the community, and part of long-term engagement with the community.

In line with these considerations, Save the Children's own approach to supporting community recovery emphasises a community-led approach, offering support where it is invited (such as where a local school community requests support), building on existing community structures and strengths, and actively seeking children's and young people's views about local needs during our outreach activities.

Schools are critical sites for recovery efforts

Research indicates that schools are critical to communities' – and children's – recovery from disasters. Children themselves commonly emphasise the importance of school when recovering from a disaster, both in returning to education and routine, and as a safe site through which specific post-disaster supports can be offered.²⁶ This is consistent with evidence and best practice that points to the importance of drawing on existing community structures, capacity and strengths, such as schools, throughout the recovery process.

It is widely recognised that, as one study put it, '[t]he school provides a critical access point at which to address the mental health needs of students, their families and the community, being well positioned to play a role in enhancing students' resilience in the wake of a disaster'.²⁷ However, the same study found that only a low number of recovery initiatives following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires targeted the school setting – a conclusion that the authors considered surprising given the importance and value of schools as a platform for such initiatives.²⁸ In developing strategies for supporting communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, it will be important to take full advantage of the school setting.

School-based recovery interventions must be responsive to the needs and priorities of individual schools and communities, and complementary to existing supports being offered in schools. One example is Save the Children's *Journey of Hope* in-school post-disaster recovery program, first implemented after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and since delivered to more than 85,000 children in numerous countries, including an adaptation in New Zealand following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. An evidence-based program based in social cognitive theory and implemented by trained facilitators in small groups of students, *Journey of Hope* teaches children social and emotional skill-building to promote self-efficacy, problem-solving and positive coping to

²⁵ An example of where children have been able to express these views and have them heard, as part of local responses, is through work being undertaken by Eurobodalla Shire Council, including a 'Youth in Recovery' forum held on 27 February 2020 bringing together students from local high schools and young people from the local community: Eurobodalla Shire Council, 2020. *Eurobodalla youth in recovery*, available from <https://www.esc.nsw.gov.au/council-services/community-services/youth/downloads/Youth-in-recovery-forums-summary-March-2020.pdf>.

²⁶ See, eg, Gibbs, L. et al, 2015. 'Children and young people's wellbeing post-disaster: Safety and stability are critical', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 14: 195-201.

²⁷ Gibbs et al, above n 5, p 74.

²⁸ Gibbs et al, above n 5, p 82.

build on children's and communities' innate strengths and strengthen their capacity to overcome current and future trauma.²⁹

Recovery activities should also include a consistent program of support for school staff established before students return to school after a bushfire, as part of a long-term recovery plan. Given the scale and impacts of the 2019-20 bushfires, this recovery plan should extend for at least five years.

Recommendation 2

Recovery efforts should be long-term, community-led and have children at their centre.

They should include multi-year school support planning, including funding for specialised school-based post-disaster recovery interventions that complement other activities.

Bushfire education in schools

Schools also play an important role in wider disaster risk reduction and resilience. The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission found that 'teaching school children about fire is fundamental to improving community bushfire safety' and that '[a] concerted [school] education program ... remains the most effective approach to instilling the necessary knowledge in Australian families'.³⁰ Such school-based and child-centred bushfire and disaster risk reduction education can reduce bushfire risk and increase children's, families' and communities' resilience.³¹

More broadly, as Kevin Ronan et al point out:

*[N]ot only will children be instrumental in community efforts to reduce current risks, they are also the adults of tomorrow who will be dealing directly with the future risks associated with climate change. This is significant for the future of DRR for two reasons. First, helping today's children, and their families, learn disaster risk reduction and resiliency skills can contribute to reducing current risk including personal, household, school and community risks in relation to natural hazards. Second, CC-DRR [child-centred disaster risk reduction] has the potential to equip children and youth with the skills and knowledge required to develop the capacity to solve future risks.*³²

A formal disaster risk reduction and resilience education strategy is needed – at national and state and territory levels – to complement the existing National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, by adding a specific focus on school education. This should be informed by an expert review of bushfire education established to look at the best ways of delivering such education which draws on local competencies (especially Indigenous knowledge), leverages community partnerships and supports child participation.

²⁹ *Journey of Hope's* evidence-based model requires face to face engagement. Given the spread of COVID-19, Save the Children is assessing how best to support children's recovery needs in bushfire-affected communities.

³⁰ Victorian Government, 2010. *Final report of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission*, Volume II: Fire Preparation, Response and Recovery, Chapter 1: Victoria's Bushfire Safety Policy, p 55.

³¹ Ronan, K. et al, 2016. 'Child-centred disaster risk reduction: Can disaster resilience programs reduce risk and increase the resilience of children and households?', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 31(3): 49-58; Towers, B. et al, 2016. *Disaster resilience education: A practice framework for Australian emergency management agencies*, available from <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/publications/biblio/bnh-2803>; Towers, B., 2019. 'School-based bushfire education: Advancing teaching and learning for risk reduction and resilience', Conference Paper, AFAC19 Conference, Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, available from <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/publications/biblio/bnh-6508>.

³² Ronan, K. et al, 2014. 'Promoting child resilience to disasters: Policy, practice, research', Conference Paper, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC & AFAC conference, 2 September 2014, pp 1-2, available from <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/publications/biblio/bnh-1622>.

Recommendation 3

A disaster risk reduction and resilience education strategy should be developed, with a focus on school education, and informed by an expert review of bushfire education.

9. Children should have a genuine voice before, during and after bushfires

Children have a right to be heard and taken seriously about matters that affect them.³³ This includes a right to participate in decision-making before, during and after emergencies.

The UN Convention recognises that children's participation is a human right which is valuable in itself, as well as a means of accessing and securing other survival, development and protection rights. Children who are particularly vulnerable – including those affected by natural hazards, disasters and crises – most need this right, yet also face the greatest barriers to attaining it.

Children's right to be participate and be heard is one of four guiding principles that underpin the UN Convention, along with the principle of non-discrimination, the principle of the child's best interests, and the right to life, survival and development. Australia is legally obliged to implement these rights, having ratified the UN Convention in 1990.

*“Give us a say with input and decisions.” – Participant
in Eurobodalla Youth in Recovery forum**

* As part of Eurobodalla Shire Council's response to the needs of its young people following the bushfires, a forum was held bringing together students from local high schools and young people from the local community on 27 February 2020

A 2012 Save the Children review undertaken in the UK found:

*Collaborating with children and communities will help build children's resilience and ensure emergency plans are more **robust, inclusive, and fit for purpose in a localised context**. A growing body of evidence suggests that when children are given the opportunity to share their opinions and thoughts, it can significantly contribute to reducing their vulnerability before, during and after disasters.³⁴*

Children's participation in decisions about disasters and emergencies has numerous benefits. These span mitigation, prevention and preparedness, emergency response, recovery, and community resilience-building. Among other things, participation:

- leads to more informed, effective and targeted planning and action relating not only to children but also to their families and broader communities;
- enhances mental health, psychosocial wellbeing and resilience, both after a disaster and more generally;
- supports child development, including personal and social skills – meaningful participation leads to increased confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and positive coping;

³³ Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 12.

³⁴ Save the Children, *Take care*, above n 24, p 4.

- can be a protective factor, in relation to violence, abuse and neglect (as highlighted, in a different context, by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse³⁵) and in relation to needs being inadvertently overlooked;
- enables the perspectives, insights and needs of different groups of children to be considered, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children of different genders, children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and children with additional needs of various kinds;
- recognises children's roles and responsibilities as social actors and active citizens, which often increase during emergencies;
- can increase respect among adults for children's rights and their role as change agents;
- leverages children's ability to reach other children and their broader community-building, networking and mobilisation capabilities; and
- increases accountability to children.³⁶

Attachment 1 includes more detail about evidence on collaborating with children on disaster management.

However, it appears that children's perspectives were largely absent from planning and preparation for the 2019-20 bushfire season. Their voices were not heard in the response. There is every likelihood this will continue in the recovery process. For many children, the distress caused by the bushfires may have been aggravated by a sense of not being heard or taken seriously about their experiences or what matters to them, including frustration that climate change's contribution to the devastation of the bushfires and its implications for their future are not being addressed. This has enormous implications for children's wellbeing and development, and for the effectiveness of future bushfire planning and management.

This absence of children's perspectives is, unfortunately, consistent with what has happened in the past. A circuit breaker is needed. To this end, Save the Children recommends the development and adoption of minimum standards for child participation in disaster risk reduction and resilience practice and decision-making, including in relation to bushfires, to ensure these mistakes are not repeated in the future.

Recommendation 4

Minimum standards for child participation in disaster risk reduction and resilience practice and decision-making should be developed and adopted, including a focus on bushfires.

The standards should:

- provide for children's active involvement in decision-making at all stages of the emergency management cycle, from planning and preparedness to response and recovery, including activities in their own communities; and
- specifically require government to genuinely consult and engage with children when developing policies and laws, and making decisions, relating to climate change

³⁵ Commonwealth Government, 2017. *Final report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, vol 2, 'Nature and causes', pp 200-4 (factors that minimise the risk of a child being sexually abused), vol 6, 'Making institutions child safe', pp 157-64 (Child Safe Standard 2: children's participation and empowerment), and vol 13, 'Schools', pp 151-8 (children's disempowerment), 216-22 (child safe schools)

³⁶ O'Kane, C., 2013. *Guidelines for children's participation in humanitarian programming*, Save the Children, pp 12-13, available from https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/7718/pdf/children_participation_humanitarian_guidelines.pdf; Save the Children, *Take care*, above n 24, p 4.

adaptation and management of the natural environment, including publication of how children's views were sought and taken into account.

Purpose and scope of the minimum standards

The minimum standards should aim to enable consistent, meaningful, effective and safe participation by children in all decisions relating to disaster risk reduction and resilience across Australia.

They should extend to the full spectrum of disaster and emergency management, including disaster mitigation, prevention and preparedness, emergency response, recovery, and ongoing resilience-building.

They could include core components with additional modules as needed. Bushfires would be an immediate priority, as could be major disease outbreaks such as COVID-19.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child should guide the minimum standards

The minimum standards should reflect general principles derived from the UN Convention. These include:

- Children have rights to be listened to, to express their views on all matters that affect them, to have the opportunity to affect decision-making, and to freedom of expression, thought, association and access to information.
- Measures should be put in place to support and facilitate children's participation in accordance with their age, maturity and capacity.
- Participation should promote the best interests of the child and enhance the personal development of each child.
- All children should have the opportunity to participate without discrimination, including children from marginalised groups.
- Participation should be consistent with children's right to be protected from manipulation, violence, abuse and exploitation.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (**UN Committee**) has outlined nine basic requirements for meaningful children's participation which flow directly from the UN Convention: transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, supported by training for adults, safe and sensitive to risk, and accountable. These basic requirements are described in more detail in **Attachment 2**. The minimum standards should reflect these basic requirements.

The minimum standards should recognise that, in practice, different levels of participation are possible and may be appropriate in different contexts. Participation may entail consultation, collaboration or child-led approaches. For example, during preparation and planning – such as in the lead-up to future bushfire seasons – good practice is to engage in genuine co-design with children about their needs, priorities and suggested solutions and actions. Similarly, children should be actively involved in decision-making about recovery activities that relate to them. By contrast, during the initial stages of an emergency response, good practice may call for a

stronger focus on keeping children informed so they understand decisions being made about family and community safety.³⁷

Developing the minimum standards

The minimum standards should be co-developed by all levels of government – including the Australian, State and local governments – and relevant non-government agencies and community representatives. The co-development process should recognise the Australian Government's national leadership and coordination role, the responsibilities of State and Territory governments for emergency management, the role of Councils in their local government areas, and the critical importance of non-government agencies and community organisations and members, including schools.

Critically, children should be extensively engaged in developing the minimum standards, including through genuine co-design with children wherever possible. This is particularly important given the subject matter of the minimum standards; standards about children's participation cannot possibly be effective, fit for purpose or legitimate without extensive involvement by children themselves. This should include children from groups that are commonly marginalised and who have relevant lived experience.

The minimum standards should be informed by existing knowledge and practice about children's participation, particularly in relation to disasters. This includes comprehensive material published by Save the Children, either as sole author or in partnership with other leading agencies, covering topics such as child participation in humanitarian programming and responses (including disasters),³⁸ innovation in children's participation and accountability to children in humanitarian responses,³⁹ practice standards in children's participation for field staff,⁴⁰ monitoring and evaluating children's participation,⁴¹ and approaches to engaging with children via online chat and similar channels⁴² (which may currently be particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19).

Operationalising the minimum standards

Responsibilities for implementing the minimum standards should be explicitly agreed as part of their development, recognising that all levels of government play critical roles in disaster risk reduction and resilience-building, as do non-government and community actors.

Compliance by government with the minimum standards should be legally required and enforceable.

Implementation of the minimum standards and compliance with them should include transparency and accountability to children, supported through appropriate mechanisms and resources.

³⁷ For discussion of the challenges and some options for children's participation during the immediate response to a disaster, especially a large-scale sudden onset emergency, see O'Kane, C., 2013. *Review of children's participation in humanitarian programming*, Save the Children, available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/review-childrens-participation-humanitarian-programming>.

³⁸ See, eg, O'Kane, above n 36.

³⁹ Save the Children, 2018. *Innovating around accountability: A review of innovative initiatives in humanitarian contexts*, Norway, available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/innovating-around-accountability-review-innovative-initiatives-humanitarian-contexts>.

⁴⁰ Save the Children, 2005. *Practice standards in children's participation*, available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/practice-standards-childrens-participation>. These standards are currently being updated to ensure they are fully contemporary.

⁴¹ Save the Children, 2014. *A toolkit for monitoring and evaluating children's participation*, Booklets 1-6, available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document-collections/toolkit-monitoring-and-evaluating-childrens-participation>.

⁴² Save the Children, 2020. *The principles of interacting with children in chat work*, Finland, available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/principles-interacting-children-chat-work>.

The minimum standards should be documented and fully accessible, including by children themselves. Their implementation should be supported by extensive and child-targeted communications to ensure accessibility, including among marginalised groups of children.

10. Climate change is making bushfires worse

We need to listen to the science, and to children, about the changing bushfire risk profile and what this means for disaster risk reduction and resilience.

Four major inquiries into the 2019-20 bushfires are now underway. The relevance of climate change is recognised in the terms of reference for all four inquiries.⁴³

Save the Children's position on these matters is informed by our own expertise in climate change related issues (recently reflected in Save the Children Australia becoming the first non-environmental NGO to be accredited by the Green Climate Fund⁴⁴), our familiarity with how disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation meet in practice,⁴⁵ our awareness of the significant impact of climate change upon the realisation of children's rights, and what children are saying about climate action.

Acting on the science to reduce future bushfire risk

The science is clear – disasters like the 2019-20 bushfires are significantly more likely to occur because climate change has increased the length of the fire season, reducing opportunities for fuel reduction and preparedness action. As temperatures continue to rise, heatwaves become more common, and droughts more intense and longer, the number of days of extreme fire risk is increasing. This places more and more lives and livelihoods at risk in more and more places.

Expert advice is that the global community needs to significantly escalate action to transition to low-carbon economic systems. The more quickly we reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the less risky the future becomes. The more we do now to reduce emissions, the less harsh future impacts will be – and the lower the cost of future disasters.

Australia's unique environment creates the opportunity to power the transition to a low-carbon economy. Australia should significantly strengthen emissions reduction commitments in advance of COP26 – the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference to be held in 2021.⁴⁶ This would signal to the international community that we take climate risks seriously and will be part of the global solution, and signal to the business community that Australia is a safe place to invest in the low-carbon future. COP26 will be an opportunity for Australia to highlight its commitment to addressing these risks and advocate for other countries to do their part.

⁴³ The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (Bushfires Royal Commission) is required to inquire into 'Australia's arrangements for improving resilience and adapting to **changing climatic conditions**', the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry is directed to consider '[t]he causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, **climate change**, fuel loads and human activity', the Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season is directed to consider 'all challenges and implications for bushfire preparedness arising from increasingly longer and more severe bushfire seasons as a result of **climate change**' and the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee's inquiry into lessons to be learned from the Australian bushfire season 2019-20 is considering 'all challenges and implications for bushfire preparedness arising from increasingly longer and more severe bushfire seasons as a result of **climate change**'.

⁴⁴ For more information, see <https://www.greenclimate.fund/>.

⁴⁵ See Save the Children, 2013. *Reducing risks, enhancing resilience: Save the Children and disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation*, available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/reducing-risks-enhancing-resilience-save-children-and-disaster-risk-reduction-and-climate>.

⁴⁶ COP26 has been deferred from its original date of November 2020 in light of COVID-19.

Recommendation 5

In line with recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and requirements under the Paris Agreement, Australia should promptly take significant measures to reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases, establish targets and deadlines to phase out the domestic use of coal and its export, and accelerate the transition to renewable energy, including by committing to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

We also know that reducing emissions, however rapidly, is no longer sufficient. Our past emissions are driving current risks and increased fire danger is part of Australia's 'new normal' for the foreseeable future. As detailed earlier, to address this increased risk, we need to build resilience and adaptive capacity at all levels – particularly among communities and local governments in hazard-prone areas.

Climate change and children's rights

Climate change is a major children's rights issue. It goes to the rights to life, survival and development, health, non-discrimination, and an adequate standard of living, among other rights.⁴⁷ Over time, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has increasingly commented on climate change and made recommendations about the need to act to address its effects on children's rights.⁴⁸

Disasters such as bushfires can have a significant detrimental effect on children's physical and mental wellbeing. Since 2013, the UN Committee has identified climate change as one of the biggest threats to children's health and recognised its role in exacerbating health disparities.⁴⁹ Children's health concerns should be at the centre of climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. These strategies should have a strong focus on child-centred adaptation, given climate change's disproportionate effects on children and children's power as agents of change.⁵⁰

Children are concerned about climate change and what it means for their communities. Their voices should be included in national discussions. In late 2019, the UN Committee urged the Australian Government to ensure that children's views are taken into account in developing policies and programs addressing climate change, the environment and disaster risk management, and to increase children's awareness and preparedness for climate change and disasters.⁵¹

Given these considerations, the proposed minimum standards for child participation in disaster risk reduction and resilience practice and decision-making should include specific requirements for consultation with children about decisions relating to climate change adaptation and management of the natural environment, including publication of how children's views are taken into account (see Recommendation 4 on pages 24 to 25 of this submission). Depending on the

⁴⁷ See *The global climate crisis: A child rights crisis*, Policy brief prepared by ChildFund, Plan International, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, Terre des Hommes and World Vision, November 2019, available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/global-climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>.

⁴⁸ Center for International Environmental Law and Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2020. *Children's rights obligations of states in the context of climate change: Synthesis of statements on climate change by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2020 Update)*, p 3, available from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a6e0958f6576ebde0e78c18/t/5e839a80ae70fb2a380b0c9e/1585683073206/CRC.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General comment No. 15 (2013) on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24)*, UN Doc CRC/C/GC/15, 17 April 2013, [50].

⁵⁰ Children in a Changing Climate Coalition, *Child-centred adaptation: Realising children's rights in a changing climate*, ChildFund, Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF and World Vision, available from http://www.childreninachangingclimate.org/uploads/6/3/1/1/63116409/realising_childrens_rights_in_a_changing_climate.pdf.

⁵¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Australia*, UN Doc CRC/C/AUS/CO/5-6, 1 November 2019, [40]-[41].

legal form of the minimum standards, this could be achieved through the standards themselves or through other associated instruments.

Save the Children notes that State governments and local governments play a crucial leadership role in ensuring that these UN recommendations are implemented in their jurisdictions, together with the Australian Government.

Save the Children anticipates that these concerns will be raised by civil society and by other countries during the upcoming Third Cycle Universal Periodic Review of Australia's human rights performance, which will be before the United Nations Human Rights Council in January 2021.

“Follow the science of the bushfires. Explain bushfire science clearly. People want climate action.” – Participant in Eurobodalla Youth in Recovery forum

Attachment 1: Collaborating with children in disaster management

Evidence tells us:

- [T]here are mental health and wellbeing benefits arising from [children's] involvement [in disaster management] (Peek 2008; Anderson 2005; Mitchell, Tanner & Haynes 2009).
- Children introduce fresh and new ideas (Bolton & Neuwelt, 2014) and perceptions of the surrounding world. They can have a sophisticated understanding about disasters (Harwood et al. 2014).
- Children can be key players in designing and creating resources for their peers, such as educational tools, a disaster management school curriculum (including a school emergency response plan), disseminating warnings, preparedness measures and reaction capacities, and planning for the protection of the environment to their parents and the wider community (Ronan et al. 2015; Bolton & Neuwelt, 2014; Finnis et al. 2010).
- They are also good at analysing and communicating risk (Mitchell et al. 2008), sharing and contextualizing knowledge, building credibility and trust and persuading others to act (using media, theatre, concerts). Children and young people are excellent social networkers and community-builders: they are good at mobilizing people and resources (Geiselhart et al. 2008).
- Children and young people can also play an active role as informant first responders, engaging in search and rescue, providing food, participating in emergency activities (Sunal & Coleman, 2013; Fernández & Shaw, 2015).
- Children's participation can also be beneficial at recovery and rebuilding phases (Bartlett, 2008; Pine et al. 2015).
- Children's accounts have proved to be important to raise subtle and unconsidered questions and dimensions about the impact of disasters, such as who is actually affected by the disaster and how vulnerability is produced during the recovery process (Walker et al. 2012).

Source: All text directly quoted from Save the Children, 2016. *Take care: A toolkit*, United Kingdom, available from <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/child-protection/take-care-toolkit.pdf>. Full references available in the source document.

Attachment 2: Basic requirements for meaningful children's participation

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has outlined nine basic requirements for meaningful children's participation which are applicable to disaster risk reduction and resilience decision-making and programming:

If participation is to be effective and meaningful, it needs to be understood as a process, not as an individual one-off event. Experience since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989 has led to a broad consensus on the basic requirements which have to be reached for effective, ethical and meaningful implementation of article 12 [the right of the child to be heard and taken seriously]. ...

All processes in which a child or children are heard and participate, must be:

- (a) *Transparent and informative – children must be provided with full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about their right to express their views freely and their views to be given due weight, and how this participation will take place, its scope, purpose and potential impact;*
- (b) *Voluntary – children should never be coerced into expressing views against their wishes and they should be informed that they can cease involvement at any stage;*
- (c) *Respectful – children's views have to be treated with respect and they should be provided with opportunities to initiate ideas and activities. Adults working with children should acknowledge, respect and build on good examples of children's participation, for instance, in their contributions to the family, school, culture and the work environment. They also need an understanding of the socioeconomic, environmental and cultural context of children's lives. Persons and organizations working for and with children should also respect children's views with regard to participation in public events;*
- (d) *Relevant – the issues on which children have the right to express their views must be of real relevance to their lives and enable them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities. In addition, space needs to be created to enable children to highlight and address the issues they themselves identify as relevant and important;*
- (e) *Child-friendly – environments and working methods should be adapted to children's capacities. Adequate time and resources should be made available to ensure that children are adequately prepared and have the confidence and opportunity to contribute their views. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that children will need differing levels of support and forms of involvement according to their age and evolving capacities;*
- (f) *Inclusive – participation must be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for marginalized children, including both girls and boys, to be involved ... Children are not a homogenous group and participation needs to provide for equality of opportunity for all, without discrimination on any grounds. Programmes also need to ensure that they are culturally sensitive to children from all communities;*
- (g) *Supported by training – adults need preparation, skills and support to facilitate children's participation effectively, to provide them, for example, with skills in listening, working jointly with children and engaging children effectively in accordance with their evolving capacities. Children themselves can be involved as trainers and facilitators on how to promote effective participation; they require capacity-building to strengthen their skills in, for example, effective participation awareness of their rights, and training in organizing meetings, raising funds, dealing with the media, public speaking and advocacy;*
- (h) *Safe and sensitive to risk – in certain situations, expression of views may involve risks. Adults have a responsibility towards the children with whom they work and must take every precaution to minimize the risk to children of violence, exploitation or any other negative consequence of their participation. Action necessary*

to provide appropriate protection will include the development of a clear child protection strategy which recognizes the particular risks faced by some groups of children, and the extra barriers they face in obtaining help. Children must be aware of their right to be protected from harm and know where to go for help if needed. Investment in working with families and communities is important in order to build understanding of the value and implications of participation, and to minimize the risks to which children may otherwise be exposed;

- (i) *Accountable – a commitment to follow-up and evaluation is essential. For example, in any research or consultative process, children must be informed as to how their views have been interpreted and used and, where necessary, provided with the opportunity to challenge and influence the analysis of the findings. Children are also entitled to be provided with clear feedback on how their participation has influenced any outcomes. Wherever appropriate, children should be given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities. Monitoring and evaluation of children's participation needs to be undertaken, where possible, with children themselves.*

Source: All italicised text directly quoted from Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard*, UN Doc CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009, [133]-[134]. The Committee's comments are an authoritative statement of how children's right to be heard should be interpreted.