



Save the Children

**AFTER THE STORM: A PERSPECTIVE
ON THE IMMEDIATE RELIEF AND
RECOVERY APPROACHES
IMPLEMENTED TO SUPPORT
CHILDREN**

Submission to Phase 2 of the Inquiry into the
2019-20 Victorian Fire Season

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Acknowledgement

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 respects 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 response to the independent inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian fire season conducted by the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM). This inquiry has been conducted in two phases. Save the Children submitted a response for the first phase of this inquiry in April 2020¹. While our recommendations from the first phase of this inquiry still stand (e.g., recovery efforts should be long-term, community-led and have children at the centre), there are some key learnings from the last 12 months that we feel are critical to ensuring the effectiveness of immediate and longer-term relief and recovery efforts for children in Victoria.

For our phase two submission, Save the Children addresses the progress and effectiveness of Victoria's immediate relief, and recovery arrangements concerning the 2019-20 fire season. We aim to reflect children's unique needs and perspectives in this submission, and our submission is informed by what we are hearing directly from children and their families and communities in bushfire-affected regions in Victoria. We particularly draw on our current experience delivering immediate relief and recovery support to children and families impacted by the bushfires in East Gippsland – a region where we have a long-standing presence and an ongoing service delivery commitment, which we have built on to provide intensive and continuous relief and recovery support for communities since the 2019-20 bushfires.

Through our work in this region, we have found that a focus on the National Principles for Disaster Recovery is key, but equally important is how these principles are implemented. First, advanced planning, ongoing consultation and the ability to adapt interventions based on changing need will help ensure that the right intervention is delivered by the right provider at the right time. Further, support needs to be informed by and reflect what young people are saying they need. Involving children and empowering them to champion change in their local community will ensure resources are targeted and effective not only for them, but also their peers.

In alignment with the National Principles for Disaster Recovery, for relief and recovery to be successful in meeting children's unique needs, it is critical that related activities are planned, coordinated and flexible. We have found through our work that ensuring children's voices and support needs are reflected in relief and recovery efforts does not just happen organically. Rather, it is something that has to be carefully planned with the relevant stakeholders and continually revisited based on evolving needs. Without appropriate support that is informed by and reflects what children and young people are asking for, well-intentioned approaches end up falling short of what communities need. Building a planned and ongoing approach to consulting with children and young people during relief and recovery arrangements will ensure allocated funds and identified interventions are achieving their aims and contributing to a more resilient community. Moreover, children's participation in such decisions improves policy-making and service delivery by better informing policy and services, enabling them to be better targeted, more comprehensive, more relevant and more likely to reach and engage their intended beneficiaries. Children's participation also has direct benefits for children's own mental health and wellbeing through improved resilience and social and emotional wellbeing, as well as enhancing children's safety – institutions and cultures encouraging children to speak are a protective factor against harm to children.

¹ See Save the Children, 2020. *Consolidated submission to inquiries into the 2019-20 bushfire season*, available from [https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/34d65730-536f-43c6-aaa8-1cdca0c710c3/save-the-children-submission-childrens-experiences-and-needs-in-the-2019-20-bushfires-\(1\).pdf.aspx](https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/34d65730-536f-43c6-aaa8-1cdca0c710c3/save-the-children-submission-childrens-experiences-and-needs-in-the-2019-20-bushfires-(1).pdf.aspx).

We have three key recommendations:

- 1. Future relief and recovery approaches need to recognise the capacity of children and young people to identify solutions that will work for them.**
 - A real commitment to child participation is critical if communities are serious about strengthening future emergency responses.
 - A two-way learning approach is necessary and requires children, community, partners and the government to work together to plan for and carefully consider future challenges.
- 2. Children need to be seen as individuals with their own ideas and solutions, but also within the family environment and community context.**
 - Recognising children in their own right and the complexities and relationships that impact on their lives will lead to approaches that help them to live a life they value.
 - When looking at children's ability to bounce back after disaster, there is also a need to support the community and family unit to take the pressure off adult caregivers and other adults, such as teachers, who are dealing with their own distress and trauma.
- 3. A planned, coordinated, ongoing and adaptive approach to relief and recovery efforts is critical to meeting children's needs and supporting their wellbeing.**
 - For some children, there has been no opportunity to discuss their experiences prior to engaging with our services. In these cases, it is key to build in time and space for them to safely process and reflect on what has happened.
 - A combination of advanced planning and responsiveness are key to supporting children to deal with the immediate and long-term impacts of disaster.

I. Save the Children's Responses to Emergencies

In any crisis, 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, emotional wellbeing and capacity to thrive across their lifespan. When 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 their losses, restore their lives and build their resilience for the future.

Save the Children has been at the forefront of responding to countless disasters in Australia. During the 2019-20 bushfire, Save the Children responded to 17 communities across Victoria and NSW, supporting children and young people impacted by this devastating crisis. We have also deployed teams to support in the immediate aftermath of Tropical Cyclone Trevor in the Northern Territory, the Huon Valley bushfires in Tasmania, major floods in far north Queensland and the 2021 NSW floods. Working with other emergency response agencies and government agencies, we provide psychosocial support in emergency contexts and beyond – including during the relief and recovery phase. Our services provide children with a space to play, have their voices heard, recover and process what they have been through. Our emergency relief and recovery work – including in East Gippsland – draws on our existing connections to, and relationships within, affected communities, enabling a more timely and nuanced response that is informed by the needs and aspirations of the local community.

Save the Children delivers three critical interventions that support during the immediate relief and recovery phase, including Mobile Child Friendly Spaces, Journey of Hope and Our Voice.

- **Mobile Child Friendly Spaces:** In the aftermath of an emergency, as evacuation and recovery centres begin to close and families return to their communities, it is critical that children and young

people continue to get the support they need to make sense of what has happened and deal with intense feelings of grief, shock, anger and fear. As time passes, losses begin to sink in, and children are looking to regain some control over their lives. Some children isolate themselves whereas others may have a strong need to be with peers. Children need productive activities and a safe environment to process distressing events and return to whatever structure of daily life is possible, participating in concrete and purposeful tasks that give them a feeling of success. Our mobile outreach aims to fill this gap for large numbers of affected children until longer-term recovery programs commence and local supports return to capacity or are rebuilt. At the request of local authorities, we can deploy specialist Youth, Early Childhood and Family Support workers within 48 hours to disaster-affected communities.

- **Journey of Hope:** Journey of Hope is an evidence-based, in-school program that helps young people build resilience and develop new ways to cope with worry and anxiety in uncertain times. The program teaches children social and emotional skill building to promote self-efficacy, problem solving and positive coping so they may have the capacity to overcome current and future trauma.
- **Our Voice:** Our Voice supports local councils, service providers and community to engage with children and young people, enabling them to become powerful agents of change and have their voices and needs reflected in planning for emergency preparedness, response and recovery. Sessions are delivered by two experienced Save the Children facilitators over four stages, tailored to suit the needs and objectives of children, young people and local council. The facilitators also train adults in decision-making roles on authentic and impactful participation for children and young people.



Figure 1: Our Voice and Journey of Hope team members

The next section summarises our experiences and provides more context around each of our three key recommendations. Overall, not only do children need to be considered in relief and recovery efforts, but these approaches also need to be determined by and with them. Ensuring children are safe and well after a

disaster doesn't stop when relief and recovery centres close. Once the threat to their physical safety has subsided, a strong focus on psychosocial support needs to be prioritised.

2. Future relief and recovery approaches need to recognise the capacity of children and young people to identify solutions that will work for them

Children's lives have been changed dramatically by the 2019/20 bushfires and COVID-19, creating destabilising and uncertain times. We know that children are resilient, capable of actively shaping their own lives (when given the opportunity), and experts about their own lived experiences. However, children in East Gippsland have expressed to us that they are frustrated that their capacity to help with rebuilding and preparing for future disasters has not been tapped into. Allowing children to take an active role in prevention, preparedness, response and recovery matters is key to getting these approaches right.

A real commitment to child participation is critical if communities are serious about strengthening future emergency responses for children. This requires consulting children about issues that matter to them. Through our programming we have heard repeatedly from children that they want to be included in all aspects of emergency management planning and that in most cases, their opinions have not been sought. We have found that relationships are well-intentioned and respectful between stakeholders and government agencies within the region, but engagement with children and young people is still minimal or a one-off exercise that is not meaningfully embedded into future approaches.

Children continue to be thought of as a subsidiary to their parents or other adults. However, children have the right and capacity to identify their own solutions, interests and needs and have these listened to and taken seriously. A two-way learning approach is necessary and requires children, community partners and government agencies to work together to plan for and carefully consider future challenges. For example, through delivery of Our Voice, young people pointed out that they had been recipients of services that were not sufficiently aligned to their needs. Having a space or outlet for young people to articulate their needs and preferences for relief and recovery services is important. However, we have found that timing is key, as some children who require additional support and were engaged too late may not be in a position to articulate their needs.

As described above, children's participation can improve the relevance, effectiveness, targeting and localisation to place of relief and recovery services and supports. Such participation also has direct benefits for children's mental health, wellbeing and resilience, which we know from the global evidence base as well as from recent experience in supporting children's voices to be heard in recovery from the 2019-20 bushfires in Victoria and New South Wales.



Figure 2: Children share during a Journey of Hope session

3. Children need to be seen as individuals with their own ideas and solutions, but also within the family environment and community context

Save the Children acknowledges the critical role of community in a child's life as well as in the recovery process. We also recognise that every community is unique, with its own history, values and experiences. Individual and community recovery are not interdependent, but closely connected. For children to be properly supported post-disaster, their community and family unit has to be equally considered. Children should be seen holistically and ecologically, and at the centre of service responses. Recognising children in their own right and the complexities and relationships that impact on their lives will lead to approaches that help them live a life they value in the aftermath of disaster.

By working in partnership with, and listening to community, our Journey of Hope staff have found that it is equally important to support children to build strong social connections. Since July 2020 we have reached 3,884 children across 68 schools across Victoria and NSW. In East Gippsland, we learned that the vast geographic area has contributed to social isolation for some and a lack of opportunities for children to connect with their peers. Recovery during a pandemic has exacerbated these challenges. By delivering in group settings, Journey of Hope encourages students to build positive peer relationships and learn how to support the coping skills of one another and allows facilitators to identify those children who may benefit from further support, such as 1:1 counselling. This collaborative environment helps children to build on their innate strengths and strengths of their families, schools and communities to further develop positive coping mechanisms and instil a sense of hope, empowering them to feel more in control over stressors.

When looking at children's ability to bounce back after disaster, there is also a need to support the community and family unit to take the pressure off adult caregivers and other adults, such as teachers, who are dealing with their own distress and trauma. Families have reported exhaustion and an inability to cope. It is evident to our staff working on the ground in East Gippsland that there is need for more social and emotional wellbeing support to ensure families have the tools to communicate and remain tolerant and understanding of each other in the months and years after a disaster. Further, parents and caregivers may benefit from additional guidance on how to talk to their children about what they have experienced and how they are feeling or seek help if things don't seem to improve over time.

Further, we have found through our work in schools with Journey of Hope that when trained program staff work directly with students, pressure is reduced on educators to deliver specialist content in an already crowded curriculum. Building and upskilling school workforces is important, but it is not enough. School workforces are already heavily overburdened, especially with transitions between remote and face-to-face learning and other disruptions caused after the bushfires and by COVID-19. Anecdotally, we have heard that teachers in the region are already feeling overwhelmed and exhausted at the end of Term 1, however, this level of exhaustion is not usually felt until the end of Term 4. Relying heavily on the existing workforce risks asking too much of an already stretched schooling system and its staff. With the best possible will, teachers and existing school-based staff cannot provide the kind of specialist social and emotional support that students need in these unprecedented circumstances.

4. A planned, coordinated, ongoing and adaptive approach to relief and recovery efforts is critical to meeting children's needs and supporting their wellbeing

A combination of advanced planning and responsiveness is key to supporting children to deal with the immediate- and long-term impacts of disaster. Continuous assessment of impacts and needs will ensure the right interventions reach the right children when they need it most. Through our experience, we have found that timeliness and the ability to act quickly is as important as getting the intervention right. Making the time and space for planning prior to a crisis will help alleviate the pressure to get things right in the moment. Overall, a coordinated and adaptive approach to relief and recovery efforts is key to removing any barriers to accessing appropriate supports during this critical and complex period.

Through our work delivering Our Voice and Journey of Hope, we have heard that children and young people in East Gippsland want a space to have fun and connect with their peers. Aside from school, sporting groups and one youth group, there are no ongoing events or activities across the region that focus on supporting children and young people to build positive peer relationships and social connections which have all been proven to support with recovery. Save the Children's group sessions appear to be one of the first and only opportunities for children to share their experiences in a formal and specifically trauma-informed way. This needs to be carefully considered in future planning of relief and recovery approaches, especially for children who have had limited social opportunities post-disaster.

Our teams have spent a considerable amount of time building trust and meaningful relationships with the children and young people in their care – listening to their needs, concerns and aspirations for the future. Overwhelmingly, we have heard that basic supports (e.g., mental health for children with additional needs) are missing from many fire-affected communities, and the capacity of existing services to provide this needs to be better understood. Although the community knows there is a need for additional mental health

services for children and young people, the pacing and rollout of these services have taken time. Proactive advanced planning and coordination are key to ensuring preventive intervention efforts are in place before a disaster occurs. Within East Gippsland, understanding community is paramount. Whilst Save the Children has established relationships in the area, it has been flagged that some disaster recovery programs were delivered without prior consultation. In these instances, agencies would come, do what they were funded to do and leave. Having time to consider what supports might be needed will take the pressure off communities, service providers and government to react during a crisis, and allow for any adaptations to be made once relief and recovery efforts are underway. Further, this sort of preventive approach offers enormous benefits in keeping children progressing developmentally and able to focus on learning, especially during periods of significant adversity.

Finally, after disaster an increase in wellbeing and mental health services that goes above the pre-existing policy, service delivery and practice settings is key. These services also need to be quick in their response to ensure children are receiving support at a time when they are ready and require it. Once the need for this additional boost in support ends, the approach taken needs to be carefully embedded into the new policy, service delivery and practice environment so the skills learned and capacity built in communities can be sustained. Overall, Governments should jointly ensure the availability of specialist, evidence-based psychosocial support programs for students' social and emotional wellbeing and resilience in every school, including primary schools. These programs would focus on promoting mental wellbeing through preventive measures and early intervention rather than trying to address mental ill-health only once problems emerge, especially during periods of significant disruption and adversity.

“Our student families and staff were impacted by the bushfires over 2019/2020 bushfire season. The number of students presenting with needs for support is high and we believe that all students would benefit from support. It is very difficult for us to identify and prioritise which students are of greatest need as they are all needing emotional support.” –Pauline Canfield, Literacy Specialist, Lucknow Primary School, Victoria, November 2020
