

21 August 2020

Senator Tim Ayres  
Chair, Finance and Public Administration References Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
By email to [fpa.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:fpa.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Chair,

**Inquiry into 2019-20 bushfire season – further information following Save the Children’s appearance**

On 30 July 2020, during my appearance before the Committee’s inquiry into the 2019-20 bushfire season, I indicated that I would write with further detail about child participation arrangements in bushfire-affected communities that Save the Children is supporting, once those arrangements are in place.

Save the Children is in the process of establishing these arrangements with interested councils. Given the Committee’s interest in receiving information by 21 August, I am writing to provide an interim update.

*Child participation in local community emergency planning*

The evidence tells us that preparing well for emergencies, and achieving successful emergency management, requires putting children and young people’s needs – and views – front and centre. From our experience, children and young people have both the capability and desire to support emergency planning efforts in their families and communities and can make a significant contribution to the emergency management process. There is good evidence that children’s involvement:

- improves the quality and effectiveness of emergency planning, especially at a local level, by introducing fresh and new ideas, perceptions and experiences;
- empowers children as natural change champions in their home and local community, communicating risk, persuading others to act and ensuring resources are appropriately targeted and effective for their peers;
- boosts individual protective factors for children, like increased confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and positive coping skills; and
- increases accountability to children and young people.<sup>1</sup>

Building on this evidence and our global toolkit for child participation and child-led co-design, with particular reference to disaster risk reduction and resilience, Save the Children has developed a roadmap for child and youth participation in emergency management planning, summarised on the following page.

The model is designed to be adaptable to individual council initiatives and timelines, as well as children’s needs and aspirations, and is delivered over four stages. Sessions are delivered by two experienced Save the Children facilitators.

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of relevant evidence, please see Save the Children’s written submission to the Committee’s inquiry (pages 23-24 and 30).

MOBILISING	CO-DESIGNING	DOING	EMBEDDING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activating children and young people as change agents</li> <li>• Introducing children to child rights and what meaningful participation looks and feels like</li> <li>• Training adults in decision making roles on authentic and impactful participation for children and young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting children and young people to safely share their lived experience</li> <li>• Empowering children and young people to choose and create their own goals and aspirations for the project</li> <li>• Co-designing a local participation roadmap with children and young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring local emergency planning by examining different roles and responsibilities in emergencies, including children's and adults' roles</li> <li>• Further reflecting on 2019/20 bushfire season experiences - to discuss ideas and issues and co-create plans and/or solutions for the future</li> <li>• Sharing reflections across age ranges and consolidating into recommendations for decision makers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with children and young people to design and deliver local events or activities that communicate their experiences with community</li> <li>• Supporting children and young people to present their ideas, solutions and recommendations to decision makers</li> <li>• Closing the loop with timely and constructive feedback from decision makers to children and young people</li> <li>• Amplifying voices through digital and virtual means</li> </ul>

With the generous support of the Paul Ramsay Foundation, Save the Children is currently offering to work with councils and local communities to embed this approach to planning for emergencies in relevant local government areas without cost to councils, or to other partners or participants.

Councils that are interested in being involved are being asked to make an upfront commitment to:

- formally consider and respond to the recommendations submitted by participating children and young people – these recommendations may be made in person, via video or in writing;
- participate in Save the Children's training workshops on the nine areas of meaningful and ethical child participation, which provide practical tips and tools to help local organisations embed children's voices into design, delivery and evaluation;
- nominate a key staff member to help facilitate local child-led initiatives if required, and connect this project into council decision making processes; and
- where relevant, connect Save the Children with existing local children and youth groups and service delivery networks.

The arrangement includes working in partnership with interested councils to build local understanding of effective child participation and ensure children and young people can meaningfully share their experiences and hopes for the future with council and the broader community.

At the time of writing, discussions are well advanced with interested councils across the mid and south coast region of NSW and eastern Victoria. We expect to be able to share further details shortly.

Save the Children anticipates that delivery of the model, as summarised above, will begin with interested councils in late August and early September.

#### *Other related matters*

I also take this opportunity to expand on my comments about other related matters raised on 30 July.

The Committee asked about arrangements for children's services, including Child Friendly Spaces, during the response to the bushfires, and about recommendations for addressing the deficiencies in meeting children's needs that are identified in our submission. I was interested to hear these deficiencies also emphasised in the evidence given by Emerging Minds and the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN) in the same session, in the context of their recommendation to establish a National Infant, Child and Youth Disaster Resilience Reference Committee.

Save the Children's key recommendations are detailed in our written submission. These include:

- Responses to future bushfires should include establishing Child Friendly Spaces as an essential service in every evacuation, relief and recovery centre. Our submission provides more detail about what this would involve.

The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People has since released a report recommending: *'Strengthening partnerships with local and community based NGOs who have designed and implemented programs that support children and young people in evacuation and recovery centres'* (giving Save the Children's Child Friendly Spaces as an example) and *'Potential for Save the Children's Child Friendly Spaces or similar infrastructure to be further incorporated in evacuation and recovery centres'*.<sup>2</sup>

Given Committee members' interest in understanding how Child Friendly Spaces operate, I have attached a two-page fact sheet for the Committee's information.

- 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.
- 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. They should provide for children's active involvement at all stages of the emergency management cycle, from planning and preparedness to response and recovery, including activities in their communities.

If these minimum standards existed, they would contribute significantly to addressing the question raised during the hearing about how to systematically involve children in emergency management planning and relief, including given that each cohort of children inevitably 'ages out' of such participatory processes over time. Minimum standards, supported by arrangements to ensure compliance – as detailed in our written submission (pages 23-27) – could provide an enduring national architecture for meaningful children's participation and involvement.

At the same time, initiatives to embed capacity for children's participation in local communities, such as the current initiative described above, can support 'top down' minimum standards through increasingly locally-driven, 'bottom up' action involving children. Indeed, over time, as younger children become teenagers and then young adults, members of earlier cohorts can be expected to increasingly take on leadership and mentoring roles within their own communities, including with successive generations of children.

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<sup>2</sup> NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, *Children & young people's experience of disaster: 2020*, July 2020, pp 135-6, available from <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/disaster-report-2020>.

As I indicated at the hearing, Save the Children supports the proposal to establish a National Infant, Child and Youth Disaster Resilience Reference Committee or similar mechanism, as recommended by Emerging Minds, ACATLGN and others. There is a clear need for stronger coordination and a specific strategy for meeting children's needs in emergencies. Save the Children makes the following additional comments:

- Save the Children believes there would be significant value in the proposed Committee including a mechanism for children to be directly part of the Committee's decision-making and work. This could be through including children as members, via a sub-committee, or through other mechanisms such as children's advisory groups to inform the Committee's decisions and work. Children's direct involvement would reflect the right of children to participate in matters affecting them, as recognised in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and would be particularly important and valuable given the proposed Committee's focus.
- The proposed Committee would fill an important gap in current arrangements. To be effective, it would be important for the Committee to be appropriately supported through related arrangements, including a commitment by government to fully resource and implement relevant advice and activities of the Committee, including translation of the Committee's work into practical action in planning for, and responding to, disasters on the ground.
- In line with Save the Children's overall recommendations (listed above), we suggest as important early priorities for the proposed Committee or any similar mechanism:
  - developing a strategy to ensure that disaster preparedness and planning systematically integrates children's services with other essential services in an emergency, including provision for Child Friendly Spaces in every evacuation, relief and recovery centre;
  - developing a strategy for child-centred recovery from disasters, including in schools; and
  - auspicing the development of minimum standards for child participation in disaster risk reduction and resilience practice and decision-making, drawing on existing Australian and global best practice knowledge held by organisations including Save the Children. This could also be informed by the current experience working with councils and communities in bushfire-affected areas at a local level, as described in the first part of this letter.

I would be happy to provide a brief written update for the Committee's information once the arrangements for local child participation, described above, are more established. In the meantime, if we can provide further detail, or to discuss anything in this letter or arising from our submission or my appearance before the Committee, please do not hesitate to contact either myself or Marion Stanton, our Head of Government Relations, on

Kind regards,

Howard Choo  
Australian Social Policy and Advocacy Adviser  
**Save the Children Australia**

Attached: 'Child Friendly Spaces: Supporting children in the immediate response to an emergency'



Save the Children

# CHILD FRIENDLY SPACES

Supporting children in the immediate response to an emergency

When an emergency hits, whether fire, cyclone or floods, we set up child friendly spaces in evacuation and recovery centres to give children a place to play, learn and receive emotional support while their parents sort out their homes and livelihoods, knowing their children are in safe hands.

## Providing support within 48 hours

Within 48 hours of an emergency being declared, Save the Children works with local agencies to set up a Child Friendly Space within a Relief or Recovery Centre. Our staff, who are trained in providing psychosocial support in emergencies, create a safe space for children aged 0-12, with additional resources available for young people.

## The main objectives of a Child Friendly Space are to:

- Offer children opportunities to develop, learn, play, and build/strengthen resilience after an emergency or crisis, or during a protracted emergency.
- Identify and coordinate responses to particular threats faced by all children and/or specific groups of children, such as those with particular vulnerabilities, during and after the emergency.



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 and they loved being with you all.

— Parent of a child in a Child Friendly Space



## How Child Friendly Spaces help:

- Protect children from physical harm and psychological distress in challenging environments;
- Support children to process their experiences using age appropriate play activities;
- Establish a sense of security, routine and normalcy after disruption;
- Minimise the disruption to children's learning and development following a disaster;
- Provide space for parents to focus on immediate needs as they rebuild their lives;
- Enhance the capacity of families to care for children by helping parents understand how to talk to their children about their experiences;
- Identify vulnerable children and families and link them to complementary services;
- Give parents an opportunity to recover and sort out their homes and livelihoods knowing their children are in safe hands.



Photo: Sharyn Nimmo/Save the Children

In Wagga Wagga, three-year-old Emma\* set up toy figurines on top of a toybox to represent her family. She shared with staff how the family's pet dogs weren't able to be evacuated from their home. Her siblings also shared their concerns for the toys they left behind. When their parents returned, staff showed them their children's artwork and advised them on how to talk to their children appropriately about their concerns.

\*Name has been changed to protect her identity.



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 bushfire affected communities. Exact service duration, team composition and activity range can be tailored to meet the needs of impacted children, young people and families as identified by local leaders.

***Once on the ground, our teams set up an inclusive space from our youth or early years vans, and provide:***

- Recreational, experiential and reflective activities including free play, sport, drama, expressive drawing, painting, and targeted games with a psychosocial purpose;
- Reassurance and comfort (psychological first aid) to reduce immediate distress and promote short term coping and adaptation;
- Support, encouragement and information to parents and caregivers regarding child needs in emergencies, and linking to protective community structures and other supports.

We also work with children to voice and amplify their needs and aspirations, to inform the design of future support responses. On request, our teams can also provide early screening services, to provide government with a specialist perspective on the wellbeing of children and their needs in recovery.

**For more information please contact:**

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