

A whole child approach to disaster recovery

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Jacquie Lee (00:00:03):

Hi everyone. Welcome to tonight's webinar and hello to all of the viewers who are watching the recording. Before we begin, MHPN would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands, seas, and waterways across Australia, upon which our webinar presenters and participants are located. We wish to pay respect to the elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the memories, traditions, culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I'm joining you all tonight from beautiful Kaurana country in South Australia, and I'd like to invite you to share which lands you are tuning in from the chat. Hi everyone. Thanks for joining us. My name is Jacquie Lee and I'll be facilitating tonight's session. I'm a practise development officer here at Emerging Minds with a background in psychology, communications and knowledge translation. I've helped to develop our range of disaster focused resources, including our community trauma toolkit and our more recent practise guide. And I'm really excited to hear from our presenters tonight and learn more about child-centered approaches to disaster response and recovery.

(00:01:19):

Next slide. So tonight's panel tonight we're privileged to be joined by Sarnia Rolston, our child and family partner from Queensland. Christopher Gostelow, a psychologist in WA, and Tayla Iellamo, an occupational therapist from New South Wales. I'm so sorry, Tayla. I should have asked how to pronounce your surname before this.

Tayla Iellamo (00:01:43):

You did well!

Jacquie Lee (00:01:44):

Thank you. You would've received, oops, sorry. Before we continue, this is the third webinar in the seventh series on Infinite Child Mental Health presented by Emerging Minds and the Mental Health Professionals Network. Series seven topics include trauma, children in out-of-home care disasters, suicidal ideation, school refusal, or school can't or cannot, as I believe there's a move to call it instead and play with infants and toddlers. Now, you would've received everyone's bios along with your webinar invitation, so I thought we'd get things started with a brief introductory question for each of our panellists. Sarnia, I might start with you tonight. You'll be sharing your experience as a parent,

but I know you've also done a lot of work in the child abuse prevention space. Can you tell us a bit about your work in this area?

Sarnia Ralston (00:02:44):

Sure. Thanks Jacquie. So I work for NAPCAN National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect supporting communities through workforce capacity building and advocacy in the prevention of abuse and harm space. And I've been in the community sector for approximately 24 years, which seems like such a long time, but extremely passionate about supporting families to increase their wellbeing factors and reduce risk factors. And we know it's an adult's role to protect children. And when families and communities are well supported, we can all do that. We all have the capacity to keep children safe. So it's such an honour to do the work that I do.

Jacquie Lee (00:03:25):

Thanks, Sarnia. We're so privileged to have your kind of dual insights to share with us tonight. Chris, you have a wealth of experience in critical incident management and disaster recovery. What continues to draw you to this line of work?

Christopher Gostelow (00:03:45):

Thanks, Jacquie. Good question. Look, I think there's a whole range of things. I've seen it change significantly over the years and the approaches we've taken and we've learned a lot from previous experiences. I understand that it can actually make a significant difference if we do really good work, it can impact children and families and communities. So for me, I've been involved and seen enough of the changes that can be instigated that to know it's a valuable good thing and to be able to take learnings from one experience into another, it just further values the whole work. I think it's also the complexity. It's a piece of work where you're talking about individuals, groups, bigger groups, communities, and even the states sometimes. So that complexity I find fascinating too.

Jacquie Lee (00:04:32):

Yeah. Well, we're fortunate to have your wisdom to help us all navigate some of that complexity tonight. And Tayla, thank you for joining us. How has your background in occupational therapy shaped your approach to supporting children and families affected by disasters?

Tayla Iellamo (00:04:50):

Thanks, Jacquie. Sure. So in the disaster context, my OT lens really focuses on taking a holistic view. I look at the child, I look at what they need to do in their daily life and how the environment is impacting them after disaster. We know that the environment plays such a huge role. It can be completely different to what it was. It can disrupt routines, it can create barriers, and really the children don't have any control over this. So I guess my approach is really to understand the whole

picture of that child in the context of their family, but also in the context of their community that's recovering and I guess really providing practical solutions with all the adults around them.

Jacquie Lee (00:05:34):

Fantastic. Thanks Tayla. We all love the practical solution and it'll be great to unpack your insights for each of those different areas of a child's life. Just a quick bit of housekeeping before we get into it to, oh sorry, no learning outcomes. You would've seen those when you registered, so we won't go over those. If you do want to see the learning outcomes in the slides or access the case study or the panel bios, just click on the view supporting resources button under the video panel. You can access the stream chat in the top right corner. And if you need any technical support tonight, you can click the tech support button in the top right hand corner of your screen. If the web chat stops at any time, please try refreshing your browser and don't worry if something does happen and you miss anything, the webcast will be recorded and you will receive an email with the link to the recording as soon as it's available.

(00:06:50):

Very quickly, some ground rules, please be respectful of other participants and the panellists and please keep comments on topic in the chat box. So every one of our panellists will give a short discipline specific presentation tonight and then there'll be a q and a session between the panellists. Last thing, I just wanted to quickly clarify that whilst our panellists may use the term child throughout their presentations tonight, tonight's learnings can be beneficial when working with infants, children, adolescents, or youth. So without further ado, I'd like to invite Sarnia to kick us off with her presentation. Thanks Sarnia.

Sarnia Ralston (00:07:37):

Thanks so much Jacquie. And I'd like to acknowledge I'm on the land of the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji people here in Far North Queensland and pay respects to traditional owners of this land. From my lived experience perspective and reflecting on the case study, we know that strong connections across a child's ecosystem create safety and stability. And in the case study mom, Tiffany relies heavily on her family for support. However, during recovery, normalising that help seeking outside of her immediate support system is really so important. I know in my own situation after the fires in 2019, I had to allow myself to help seek and I didn't want to feel or seem vulnerable. I've worked in the community sector for many, many years and always been that person offering the help and supports. So I really felt vulnerable and a sense of shame reaching out for supports. But once I placed my children at the centre and their perspective and understood and reflected on that, if I wasn't okay, then they weren't okay.

(00:08:42):

That really helped me to accept help and support that I otherwise wouldn't have. And what I know is also returning to school is so important. We hear it in the case study and schools do provide routine and for our young people and our children, I know my children love it, so as soon as they can return to normal, the better. But in both of our situations in the fires in 2019 and the floods in 2023 here in far North, we were on school holidays and routines were really not easy to maintain. Just trying to get food post the bushfires was our focus. It was incredibly difficult. I was incredibly under prepared with basically a packet of hot cross buns to get us through, which turned into being two weeks of our town being cut off, the supermarkets were stripped bare helicopters were flying in food.

(00:09:34):

It was really just the focus on what are we eating today. So coming back to the school focus and creating that ecosystem around our young people help seeking so important. But teachers and educators and other significant adults also play a huge role in the emotional support and we all need to consider the children's voice. Children need to become an effective part of the recovery effort and placing them at the centre, we can actually give them what it is they need and we may not have even considered. So in the case study we hear about behavioural issues that Tiffany is experiencing with her children and we know that everyone being on the same page and understanding the impact disasters have on young people, we could see even more harmful impacts on the child and family if people aren't aware of those long-term impacts. And I know in my experience it took the support of a clinician who's actually a really great friend just through conversation over a glass of wine I was saying about the behaviours I was seeing in my own children, they were regressing in sleep, refusing to be alone to the point of having to go in every single room with them not leaving to play in the backyard.

(00:10:53):

And she said to me, have you considered that this could potentially be an impact of the disaster experience? Which I hadn't at all. And I've been heavily exposed to community and the community sector and supports for children and families for many years. So normalising recovery efforts and making them available to everyone can really reduce the stigma attached to help seeking when community organised activities might be able to occur. It helps our children reconnect with peers and also give us a common language that we can all share experiences formally and informally. I'd also like to within that point highlight the impact and importance of child safety within the recovery effort. And this does start in preparedness and needs to include child safe planning, education and awareness of child safe practise and supporting everyone to notice any harmful behaviours in a high stress time like disaster and post disaster in recovery. It can be a time when parents aren't fully present and able to be focused on the child protection needs of their children or they could be particularly vulnerable to people that are not having the best interest of kids at heart. Next slide.

(00:12:16):

The disruption in everyday life impacts on so many areas of a child's life. We just never know the areas of impact that families are experiencing and we can't assume many families have resilience factors and also feel negatively judged if they're experiencing difficulty in returning to normal post-disaster. And that's why it's so important for that ecology and that support around children and young people and the families that support those children. And for some they may not even realise the issues of rising like the child's behaviour mentioned before are a direct impact of the disaster. If a parent's in their survival brain, it can be really hard for them to identify issues that they may have been easily able to identify pre-disaster exposure. We also need to help everyone in the child's ecosystem have the same language, the same understanding of each individual's child's experience. It's not just to relieve the pressure on the families, but also the child and the community of how to respond, what it is the young people need.

(00:13:25):

I know in my situation, it wasn't until two years post fires that the connection was made between questioning if my child could potentially have a DHD or learning impacts or behavioural issues of things happening or was this a post-disaster trauma response? But I can tell you it definitely released the pressure when I thought that it could have been linked to the disaster exposure and that there was something I could do to support my child. In this post floods, my youngest is now terrified of cows. She goes into flight mode, freeze mode whenever we pass them on the road, whenever people talk about them at school. Even the word she said no saying the C word, which is cow, just side note because it really put her into flight mode. And if the school and environment around her wasn't aware of that, there was no way she had capacity to learn because she was just frozen in class. So it's so important to not assume that educators, teachers or adults around young people have the tools that they need. It's so individual for individual child's experience and that's why when we place a child at the centre, we know exactly what it is that we can do to respond to their individual needs and experience. Next slide.

(00:14:45):

Supporting all adults in a child's life can really be a healing process for all and the whole family and our beautiful children. I know for me what helped a lot was Dr. Dan Siegel's, the whole Brain Child Books, emerging Minds Brain Development Modules and the Brain Builders Resources from Thriving Queensland. Kids just helped me immensely. And the more we understand the brain and body in our systems, the more we can be an active participant in the recovery process. Normalise it's okay to slow and sit and be. Next slide. Anything we consider as an adult should be considered from a child's lens. Any tools, any resources? How can we translate this for our kids to understand what it is that children need to feel a sense of control in this otherwise unpredictable time? We've been thinking and talking about it a lot in preparedness, but post recovery, it seems to not be a part of the discussion.

(00:15:47):

So collaboration amongst parents, teachers, community leaders really can enhance recovery and it's important to also have informal interactions as well as the formal opportunities to connect around the child and unpack any concerns. When we all work together on a shared approach for supporting children, we can really make an impact. And so just to wrap up post-disaster support really does begin in preparedness with thinking about child-focused systems and continuing that through to post-disaster exposure and recovery and how we can look at child-focused systems, tools and resources that involve all adults in the child's life. Thank you.

Jacquie Lee (00:16:32):

Fantastic. Thanks so much Sarnia. I really appreciate you sharing those personal experiences and stories with us. I think what you said at the end there about post-disaster recovery beginning in preparation is a really strong take home message. Yeah. Thank you Chris, take us away.

Christopher Gostelow (00:16:58):

Yeah, thank you. Look, I'm going to zip through the first couple and then spend a bit more time in the last three. Again, look, as a psychologist walking into the post-disaster space, it's really, really important that you are really clear in your own mind and with other people about who your client is, what is your mandate? And you've got to prepare yourself. I'll say more about that later, but prepare yourself to walk into that environment. You've got to be able to form swift relationships with the people you're working with. And there are some techniques we'll talk about a bit later on that too. Again, it's easy to have expertise, but it's important to also be aware that you're not walking in as the expert you're walking into provide support. So maintain that balance across those is a really important thing. Acknowledging and affirming, I mean, we're talking about a situation here where Tiffany has held her three children and herself together in incredible circumstances.

(00:17:54):

So to be able to affirm that the great work that's happened and the efforts entailed in that is amazing. We must affirm and we must acknowledge what's happened so far? Needs identification. We need to negotiate what those needs are because there might be perceptions of a parent different to the children and different to you as a professional. Next slide, please look from a systems and ecological point of view, I tend to walk into these environments just seeing a set of systems and they're all connected. They're all based on relationships, they're based on strengths, history. And again, I'll mention history because when you walk into a disaster in a community like this, what is the disaster history of that community? What has happened in the past? How has it been dealt with? What was successful? What did people want? What did people not want? So you need to go in with some level of history and if you don't have it, you need to ask about it.

(00:18:51):

There'll be challenges as well. Systems evolve no matter what. And look, those last few points there, I think they're pretty self evident, but systems through disasters will be disrupted, disturbed, and so on and so forth. Next slide, please look, child mental health and wellbeing is optimised through a systems and ecological approach. Look, what we're talking about here is safe environments, familiar people and places to return to familiar routines. We need to rely upon systems and ensure a level of synthesis of those systems. Synchronicity. So the family is working with the school, the school and the other agencies are working together. The local community is synthesised and organised. So ideally that cohesion will represent itself in terms of purpose, a shared sense of what our purpose is, language, ideally, we're talking about some common language that can be used across all those environments. Some shared terminology.

(00:19:51):

Communication processes and messaging need to be controlled and ideally operating smoothly. Leaders and the adults need to be aware that what they're doing in their own behaviour, even when they're surprised by seeing their own behaviour because they'll be undoubtedly at times they're models for children. So how is it that they're actually positioning themselves to model for children? Given that the last point is that we know that children's reactions and coping are significantly affected by the adult behaviour around them, adults and the ecosystem of adults is powerful for children. Next slide, please look. Interventions and monitoring within that ecological approach. Look, basically we ideally want, but in reality we're talking about evidence informed so often because circumstances are so different between different contexts, even with the same type of disaster, we're really keen to make sure that we're being child, we are having interventions as a child initiated but also adult initiated.

(00:20:54):

And there are quite a number of more formalised evidence-based interventions, particularly for school environments and other places that can be introduced to support children, the voice of the child. I think we all recognise that we need to listen to and find out what the needs and opportunities for children are. Safe expression and processing, differentiating the child's needs versus the adult needs. Short, medium, long-term strategies will be required. A planned, I think about as a layered approach because what Tiffany and Aisha have been through and the other two siblings has been close to probably one year because this event was last year. So what's occurred already, what layers have taken place and what's the history that we need to be aware of before we walk in there? We're not walking into greenfield space. Things have occurred. What can we take away? How can we make sure we don't make the same mistakes?

(00:21:46):

How can we pick up on the great work that's already been done so far? System, group and individual interventions, coaching and guidance, psychoeducation. The psychoeducation can be formal as in briefings, but can often be informal through just casual conversation that just sow seeds for people. People within schools, the leaders in schools need psychoeducation as do the teachers. And they may well have great access to that, but they need to understand disaster impacts on themselves and on children and families. Whole school approach is part of what schools are ideally about, where they're planning for, how they're providing their support to those parties. Next slide please.

(00:22:30):

Involving children is really, really, really important. So look, basically what we're talking about here is the purposes of recovery are outlined there, but we're talking about opportunities to involve children and we are talking about two-way information flow. We need to listen, we need to share, we need to educate, but we need to be educated by our children too. We need to be looking towards structured and incidental interactions, planning the actual act of planning, disaster planning within home or community or even school. That act of the planning is actually a psychological intervention oftentimes because it allows children to address their fears and concerns and to know that actions were planned to address those going forward. So the physical act of planning is also a psychoeducational act. There is a need to look for symbols, and I often refer to symbols because for me, symbols are important.

(00:23:24):

Children are really looking for symbols just as much as if not more than adults. And so in the post-disaster space, children need to be guided to see some of those symbols. There could be symbols in nature, there could be regeneration of some of the foliage, there could be something changing about the way the river system is, or it might be changes that indicate recovery is underway. Likewise within the home. What's different now that wasn't here before? So what things are moving forward within the community? They need to be symbolic actions in terms of pointing out, well this road is now intact or repaired or this building is now operational. So we are looking for symbols. There are reminders for children that in fact we are moving towards a return to a level of normality even if it is a new normal. And the last thing I want to mention is that symbolism can actually go much, much wider.

(00:24:21):

And I've often seen schools affected by cyclones or other disasters such as Isha has experienced, where other schools reach out and they do it often spontaneously and they might email the principal of the school affected and they'll offer support and positive messages. They may even sent objects. The incredible power of the symbolism of some other community reaching out and actually touching upon this community. It's incredibly powerful for the children, it's powerful for the parents, the staff,

and so it goes. So again, I'll just leave with that point about symbolism within that context of ecology. Thank you.

Jacquie Lee (00:25:02):

Thanks Chris. That was fantastic. We sped through that. I feel like we could have an entire webinar just going through all three of your presentations that point at the end about symbols of recovery and moving towards that new normal. I haven't heard that concept voiced before, but it makes so much sense. Thank you. Before we continue, I just wanted to quickly remind everyone that if you want to ask a question for the Q and A session, just click the three dots in the bottom right corner of the video panel and click the ask a question button. Thanks. Alright, Tayla, the floor is over to you.

Tayla Iellamo (00:25:52):

Thanks Jacquie. So I'd also like to acknowledge I'm on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. So when responding to community trauma or disasters, these are five essential elements to keep in mind. This framework offers a practical guide to shaping your interventions from a whole child approach, supporting recovery after climate related disasters. So for children, this means creating a sense of safety and calm, empowering them with a feeling of control, fostering connection with others, and nurturing hope as they look towards the future. Next slide. So when working with children after disasters, our focus as clinicians is on rebuilding their sense of safety and helping them regulate their emotions. So as an OT, we often start with body-based strategies. Teaching children how to calm their nervous system through breathing movement and simple relaxation techniques. Strategies that don't require any resources can be very helpful after disaster.

(00:26:47):

Things like squeezing their hands together, going for a walk or giving themselves butterfly hugs when they feel overwhelmed. So using sensory supports can also help to reduce sensory input and help the children manage their overwhelming feelings and this heightened nervous systems. So for Aisha in the case study, this may look like introducing noise cancelling headphones or putting up curtains around the beds in the caravan to reduce the sensory input and create a safe space for her to be able to retreat to. We want to support by build the child's emotional literacy by teaching them to name and express their feelings, helping them truly process their experiences. Things like providing them with different tools to name their emotions. The bear cards, which I've put a picture in here, are a tool that I use with children in groups and individually to help them express their emotions.

(00:27:42):

What I love is that the bears don't actually have words which allows the children to create their own meaning from them. We want to teach them body signal awareness, for example, recognising how their heart rate or their breathing changes when they're anxious. You can explore this using body

mapping, which I've also put a picture there and encouraging them to identify the sensations in their bodies in response to different emotions. We really want to emphasise connection, encourage relationships with peers and trusted adults which foster a sense of belonging. Finally, help children find meaning in what's happened, whether that's through art, storytelling, journaling, or through play. Next slide.

(00:28:24):

So I feel like it's really important to note that children experience disasters differently from adults. What an adult perceives and experiences as threatening may not be the same for the child. So adults often focus on logistics and external threats, things like housing, finances, or rebuilding communities. Children however may focus more on the relational or the internal threats. Things like, will my mom and dad be safe or will I see my friends again? This mismatch in priorities can lead to misunderstandings and as clinicians, we can support to bridge this gap by helping adults recognise the children's fears and validating their own experience. So this can ensure children feel heard and supported in ways that matter most to them. Next slide.

(00:29:09):

As we know, families play a crucial role in the child's recovery. So when working with families, we want to start by highlighting the family's strengths and their past successes and help them reflect on what's worked previously in times of difficulty, which can really foster hope. We want to encourage families to reestablish routines and roles, which we know as Sannia pointed out, this can be really challenging to create this sense of predictability at home. This may be keeping the nighttime routine consistent every night. We want to provide psychoeducation to reframe maybe some challenging behaviours as actually signs of stress rather than misbehaviour. We want to suggest connection activities, things like shared storytelling or going for walks or even just to the park. And we really want to emphasise the importance of protecting this time together, even if it's you can only get five or 10 minutes a day supporting families in accessing resources, things like give it vouchers for practical needs and reconnecting with some community support networks for additional help. We might refer to family and child connect or mental health services as they're needed. So families really are the cornerstone of the child's recovery and we need to understand their unique situation and build the supports around them that it is important to note that children are reliant on their parents for survival after a disaster and some may worry or they might actually take on the role of trying to care for their parents during this time. Next slide.

(00:30:39):

So research, including the 10 years beyond bushfire report showed that schools have a shift and a focus from learning to wellbeing after a disaster event. This shift is critical to support the child's recovery and enable them to make sense of their experience. After disaster, children may present

with reduced attention or focus, difficulty retaining information, and they may show signs of heightened emotions like anxiety, sadness, anger, and hopelessness. We want to support to increase the classroom wellbeing strategies that are available. Things like beginning the day with a positive primer or a morning circle, check-in where students can share how they're feeling and they can actually prepare for the day of learning. This can also help the teachers scan for concerns in the kids. For example, like Isha in the case study, she might share that she's feeling tired or flat or over numerous days. The teacher can then check in with her during a break time to see if she needs additional support.

(00:31:38):

We also want to emphasise routines and predictability in the school space. So these provide a sense of safety and stability. And I hear so often from teachers that they feel this pressure to try and build in extra activities or programmes during this time of recovery. What we found that less is more, and it can be helpful to have the same wellbeing activity repeated every day or even for example, every Tuesday for the whole term rather than trying something new every single day. We want to encourage opportunities for play and movement. So include pretend, play and active play to help children process stress, make sense of the disaster events and build their peer connections. So children may act out disaster related scenarios, things like rescues or getting to safety or rebuilding their homes. Some of them may even dress up as healthcare workers or emergency responders as part of their play.

(00:32:31):

So in the classroom you might set up themed play areas like doll houses, sand trays with sticks, houses and figures, which allow the children to explore their emotions creatively. I really love the birdies tree storybooks that are a very supportive tool to help children make sense of their experiences as well. After a disaster, we want to foster connection and for the child to have a sense of belonging. So giving them meaningful roles can help them feel valued in the school environment. By Asia, this might look like tasks like the morning helper or handing out materials tidying the classroom or even running small errands around the school. So these can help build that sense of belonging and responsibility. And we really want to leverage external support programmes. Programmes like Kids Helpline Schools Programme or Sies and Storms programme can offer some structured ways to support and build emotional wellbeing into the curriculum. So by prioritising wellbeing through these strategies, schools can create an environment where children can feel safe, connected, and gradually reconnect and engage with learning. Thank you.

Jacquie Lee (00:33:46):

Thanks Tayla. That was fantastic. So many practical ideas, strategies and solutions in there for us all to sink our teeth into. I thought that table that you showed about the differences in the priorities and

perceptions of threat is so interesting as well and something that I guess can easily get lost in the chaos of a disaster. Yeah, that's fantastic. Thank you everyone. Audience members, I would like to remind you too that you can ask a question of the panel directly by clicking those three dots that are in the bottom right corner of the video panel. We also received a lot of questions from you all during the registration stage as well, which is fantastic. So we'll do our very best to get through as many as we can this evening. Just to kick off, Chris, you mentioned that you mentioned establishing swift relationships at the beginning of your presentation. Can you elaborate a bit on what those are and perhaps share some strategies that practitioners can use for establishing those relationships?

Christopher Gostelow (00:35:11):

Yeah, thank you Jacquie. Look, absolutely. Look, when you're walking into a disaster environment, now this is again some months after the disaster, but no matter what, it's important that you be sensitive and as such, I think it's important to be highly authentic. So you need to walk in because you want to be there and be yourself. It's really important to know yourself and know your strengths and your challenges, but to really focus on establishing relationships, I find the three Vs really quite helpful. So the three Vs for me are the vocal, realising the importance of your vocals, how are you presenting in terms of your vocals, and how would it affect somebody who's more sensitive than otherwise? So your vocals, your visual is important. What nonverbal behaviours will you use to allow you to connect? And it can evolve perhaps at times appropriately, some sort of gentle touch or gesture of that nature that would actually support somebody in knowing that you're there to reach out for them and support them. And the third part of that is the verbal. So what you say, your choice of language is really, really important. So providing you're aware of those and you walk in knowing that those are key issues and with a willingness to listen to people and not to offer to provide solutions, which were actually not within your capacity to oversee or guarantee, then I think you're in a position to form swift and effective working relationships with people.

Jacquie Lee (00:36:45):

Thanks Chris. So it's nothing to do with Taylor Swift then.

Christopher Gostelow (00:36:49):

It's funny, but as you know, I did actually do a quick search recently just to double check on is there some other interpretation of swift relationships and it was Taylor Swift only that came up. So yeah, Taylor Swift and her relationship with her fans, it seems to be a dominating factor when you search on Google.

Jacquie Lee (00:37:12):

Thanks Chris. This is a question for the panel from Bella - Sarnia mentioned having only having hot cross buns at hand during the time of the disaster. I'll put it to you all. What steps can practitioners

take to ensure children's physical health and basic needs are met during disaster recovery, especially when resources are limited?

Sarnia Ralston (00:37:55):

That was a pure lack of preparedness on my part, but I think steps would be definitely normalising the help that's available, making it available to everybody in the community. I mean obviously it was quite a different situation in 2019 fires the whole town was blocked off, supermarkets did open, so there was only available help for people that had cash and that really had a diverse impact on families and people that maybe didn't have cash available to them. So once the help could start getting in, which was actually a couple of weeks, it was food hampers and packages brought through. But yeah, it was quite a long time, so people were just opening their doors to other families and people off the streets. But as far as clinicians that were in that sense, they were really in the midst of the response.

Jacquie Lee (00:38:59):

I guess that's the tricky thing as well. A lot of clinicians who are supporting people during a disaster have also been through the disaster themselves. Yeah, Chris.

Christopher Gostelow (00:39:13):

Yeah, look for me, in that immediate post-disaster environment, safety is critical. Everybody needs to know they're safe and that they can be in a safe location, which comprises some level of shelter as well. So fundamentally, those are critical. Food clearly kicks in and look access to food. I think the agencies do a fantastic job of doing that. But I guess what I'm really aware of, and I'll come back to that comment I made about symbolism, but having little items that for people are perceived to be little gestures of kindness. I've seen it happen repeatedly where a little bag of goodies or some sort of little packet of biscuits is given to somebody. It may not be nutritionally the best thing you can have at that point in time, but as a gesture of kindness and caring, it is incredibly powerful and people remember that for years afterwards. So again, there's different forms of food, I guess, and different meanings behind them.

Jacquie Lee (00:40:17):

Thanks Chris. On that note, a question has come through from Peter. What key preparation steps can a carer or parent take pre-disaster?

Sarnia Ralston (00:40:32):

I might jump in quickly on that one because I've learned now. So very unprepared for the fires, just in complete denial thinking they're not going to impact us and directly impacted us. And so planning for and moving to far north Queensland shortly after that, there's great preparedness, but one thing

that I did notice was there wasn't so much focus on what do the children need? What do they want? It says pack a bag for your children, but actually giving them responsibility. So who would like to work out a plan for the Guinea pigs and the dog and is there a plan for yourself? And that's, as I was mentioning, all of those practical tools, having similar within child-friendly focus is so helpful.

Tayla Iellamo (00:41:24):

Yeah, I'd like to second that, Sarnia. So supporting kids with actually having a role in that recovery when it happens. And it's helpful to potentially have a plan to talk through with them beforehand. So I think that real practical, having a role in the family and what they can do, but also preparing the children emotionally for what it might be like, what it might smell like, where they might be going if there was a disaster. So really helping them prepare emotionally for what might happen, but also as a family, having those practical kit or anything that they can have for a disaster happens. And something that I think is really important for pregnant mothers is making sure that you do have formula or access to those things because in a disaster, breastfeeding might be really difficult. So yeah,

Christopher Gostelow (00:42:17):

Back a quick comment too. I'd like to totally back up what was said by Sarnia and Tayla. I think those comments are totally valid and are extremely important for me. The other thing is that there's often a physical side of the planning, which is discussing and writing things down and putting things together. But for me, I'll come back to what I said before, it's the process around that which allows conversations to be child generated towards the psychological side as well. So the kids can lead the adults if you like, adults, knowing this is going to happen into that psychological space. Well how would we deal with this and what happens if I get scared with that or whatever it might be. So that physical plan and the psychological preparedness go hand in hand for me. The other thing about planning is that I'm aware that families that have done it as a progressive thing, you don't do as one off. It's not, oh, we did the plan last year. No, no, no, you might come back, you might remind, you might add to, you might amend. So for me that planning needs to be real and live and something that the children are engaged in just as much as the parents and that they're actually fully familiar with it and comfortable with it.

Jacquie Lee (00:43:33):

Thanks Chris. Thanks Tayla. And Sarnia, I think all three of your responses speak to the idea that children need to be given agency and be involved in those conversations. There was a question that came through during the registration around should we talk about what happened during the disaster with the child? I dunno if you have anything more you'd like to say about that.

Christopher Gostelow (00:44:07):

Look, I'm happy to make you a couple of comments if you'd like some, but look, I think it can be uncomfortable for parents at times when children ask really honest, well-intended questions that are a little bit tricky for us as adults to deal with. But I guess if we are honest about dealing with children's needs and addressing those appropriately, well, we need to be prepared to be a little bit uncomfortable sometimes, but we need to use the right language. We need to know when it's not appropriate to go to certain spaces at all and keep it within the confines and be aware that those answers may be asked, sorry, those questions may be asked repeatedly or in different ways over time and just stay with it as something that you can revisit with the children.

Sarnia Ralston (00:44:52):

And I'd also like to add, that's what really helped me reading Dan Siegel's the whole brainchild and hearing the story of repetitive questioning and storytelling over and over and just that narrative, helping the healing and processing for that child in the book. And I use those similar storytelling and repetitive and always looking at the strengths and acknowledging, yes, that did happen and look at how this happened and look at the strengths that we had and felt that that was really part of healing.

Tayla Iellamo (00:45:30):

And I'll just add onto that as well. Children are experiencing it. They are going through the experience of recovery and it can really help them understand what is happening from the voice of their parent. And I think if children don't have any information, they have such extraordinary imaginations that they might make up the absolute worst case scenario. So I think it can really helpful, like Chris said, is to use child-friendly language in a way that they can understand based on their developmental stage to help them make sense of the experience that they're going through.

Jacquie Lee (00:46:06):

Thanks Tayla. Thanks everyone. There's a question here from Karen who says that her communities were severely impacted with flooding after cyclone Jasper. Now this year's wet season has started and it's triggering bringing some stuff up. Sarnia, I'm sure this could possibly relate. Karen's asked, how can we best maintain support once school and some social connections end this week? Some families are still living in emergency housing and not feeling safe for the wet season, which is totally out of their control, cabin fever and feeling trapped. And how best to explain to the children that this is a long recovery road there on. It's kind of a two part question. We may have answered the second part. So perhaps let's go back to the first one around how we can best maintain support for kids once those school and those social connections kind of break up for the year.

Sarnia Ralston (00:47:11):

Yeah, I hear you Karen. Absolutely. Even the rain today, I was like, oh, here we go. And I actually talked with my kids this afternoon, it was a pretty hectic rainy day up here in far north and just about

their experience at school and planning for the holidays. And we decided to make a jar with all of the activities we want to do and play dates and people would like to catch up with. And then each day we've decided we'll pull out something from the jar. So that's something that they're really looking forward to. Hope that's helpful. But yeah, I know there's some community events, particularly around Machans. There's already talk around a new year gathering and closing off the street. Yeah, so hopefully lots of community interaction.

Jacquie Lee (00:47:59):

Thanks, Sarnia. Chris or Tayla, did you have anything you wanted to add? I think

Christopher Gostelow (00:48:05):

The importance of the school was really highlighted by what's been said so far and the school as a common thread of support. But in the event that school goes on holiday, there's got to be other supports. And I would hope that the community has other supports in place to support children. But for me, one of the most powerful things is for parents to work with other parents and to actually get support for themselves and their children at the same time through social contact with. If they can be physically together, that's great, but if they can't or maybe they can link up in other ways through social media and so on. But maintaining those other social networks for me, for the children and even for the parents is really important. And again, it's continuity, it's familiarity, it's strengthening those relationships.

Tayla Iellamo (00:48:59):

Thanks Chris. And I'm happy to add onto that as well. I think as a parent, when your child is displaying these behaviours, it can be really hard to sit with the emotion that your child is having, but it can be really helpful to name the emotion rather than the behaviour of saying, oh, okay, you're feeling a little bit worried at the moment, or you're feeling really scared at the moment. I wonder if it's because of X, Y, and Z. And really helping them to understand what they're feeling. And like Chris said, I think involving other people around you, letting the school know that when it rains we might not come to school. We might be a little bit late or just helping everyone else around the child understand why they might be behaving the way they're behaving.

Jacquie Lee (00:49:43):

Absolutely. Thanks Tayla. Belinda has asked, given there is such a turnover amongst disaster recovery clinicians, how important do the panel perceive the importance of clinicians slash teams staying around for a significant period of time in order to support and build relationships with young people?

Christopher Gostelow (00:50:06):

Wow. Can I have a quick shot at that question? It's a really, really, really good question. We talked briefly about the idea of people going into those environments as practitioners going in with preparedness. That means knowing yourself as well as anything else. You need to know yourself. What are the triggers for you? What are your strengths? What is it that would be the challenges for you? So know yourself. I think hopefully you're not going in solo, you're going as part of a team or as part of an organisation, which will give you a chance to both lean on other people and share stuff with other people, but to be rotated. I think one of the things we've learned over the years for practitioners is the need to rotate people. Give 'em a chance to step away and actually have some time out of there to rejuvenate and reenergize.

(00:50:57):

It's not to say you're damaged, but it's trying to prevent and ensure that you have got the stamina to go forward. But again, that role clarity is important. Sometimes there are clinicians who are superb in that really early psychological first aid space and do that brilliantly, but they're comfortable to step away from that afterwards and let other people step in. So it's again, the practitioners, the clinicians can sometimes be layered. Some of your most clinical people won't even become involved until maybe months after the disaster, when the need for their services is more apparent because the other layers have provided support and all that support has worked to an extent, but there's still some issues for individuals or groups and that's where those clinicians can come to the fore. So it's being complimentary both as clinicians but also across disciplines. And I think we need to honour the value that can be provided. Again, we've got no perspectives today alongside of a psychologist. We must work in collaboration and recognise and value each other's skills and perspectives.

Tayla Iellamo (00:52:09):

I'm happy to add onto that as well. I think it's a really important point to raise because this work is messy and it's challenging because you're not just working with say a child in the context of their family. You're working with the child, the family, potentially the school, and then the whole community is impacted, which might also look at the other services that are there. So I think continuity is ideal and is key, but in order to do that, you really need to support the wellbeing of your recovery workers. So this is absolutely a shared responsibility. It's not just on the clinician or the recovery officer to take care of their own wellbeing. There's a responsibility of organisations to also support the wellbeing of staff. Things like offering debriefs after really challenging experiences that they've had or implementing wellbeing plans where the clinician or the worker can unpack their own stress triggers and also the stress strategies tell that to their line manager so that they're aware like, oh, okay, they're presenting like this. I might need to look at their wellbeing plan. And what was agreed to support in order to allow people to continue doing this work.

Christopher Gostelow (00:53:23):

Can I just make one really important comment? I think to go into what's been said and everything's been said, I think is really important, but there can be a real investment by practitioners or clinicians stepping into that environment. They give a lot of energy and a lot of themselves, and at times you can actually lose sight of the bigger picture. And I talked about that need to be stepped away. But sometimes that involves you having an honest look at yourself and saying, no, I need to step away from this particular disaster. I'm not in a space to deal with this one. I'm still recovering, or whatever it might be from the last one. But also for people who are in aligned management responsibility role, to actually tap their staff on the shoulder and say, look, you've done brilliantly. What you've been doing is so supportive and helpful, but I need you to look after yourself in order that you can come back and provide support down the track for people and therefore you need to step away. So sometimes there's got to be support, which is quite assertively offered, I'll put it that way, in order to ensure that clinicians and practitioners do step away in order to take themselves and that invests in the medium to long term and ensures that it will be available when required there.

Jacquie Lee (00:54:46):

Thanks. Thanks Chris. Someone in the chat, Chris has asked if you could explain more about the three Vs.

Christopher Gostelow (00:54:56):

Yeah, sure. Happily. Look, I guess we often assume that what we say, the words we enunciate are what's most important. The reality is in this space in particular, especially in the early part of response and recovery, the words you say are going to get lost, they're going to go right off. People said they can't take 'em on board. So really in terms of establishing rapport and doing good work, I think being so aware of the need for the right tone of voice, you are walking in with a voice that is sufficiently calm but engaging that people will want to be around you want to interact with you. Secondly, that nonverbal space that the visual side, people will learn and take stuff on board from what they see you doing and how you behave, more so than by anything you say. So we must be really aware that this is not a regular environment.

(00:55:57):

These are people who under distress. And as such, we need to amend our approach to help meet where they're at. And as I said, I'll therefore put great importance on the issue of the vocal, your tone of voice. And if you need to prepare yourself before you walk in to make sure you've got the right tone of voice. And I've had to do that many a time in the past coming away from other tasks and suddenly I'm in a disaster type, then you need to prepare yourself in that way and really look at sometimes almost exaggerating some of the nonverbal behaviour in order that people understand visually that you are there for them and you're actually engaged in this. You're not thinking about anything else. And as I said that vocal things, you say they're important. People will hear some of

that, but it's sometimes entirely lost. I remember I asked you work in environments where we would show people in a post-disaster space visuals and we'd actually show them pictures of what might be happening for them. They would remember the pictures that would almost invariably forget the words that we put around those pictures.

Jacquie Lee (00:57:08):

Thanks, Chris. We've got time for one more question. Fiona has asked how do we best support communities that is fairly affected by mental health issues and multiple suicides following a major disaster, especially when it compacts the layers of disaster and trauma? It's a big question. Christie talked about the planned and layered approach. I wondered if this might relate to that

Christopher Gostelow (00:57:42):

Again. It does. I have worked in environments where there's been a series of if like a cluster of suicides within a short period of time brought about by disasters or other things, those communities. I think this is a big whole of community issue and whole of interagency network issue. It's not for one person to solve this. It's actually a much bigger problem requiring a whole lot of good heads to come together to look at what the evidence might suggest. But we need to listen. We need to listen to the communities. What is it they're hearing? What are people saying in those communities? What's the experience that we can learn from and take on board in order to plan? And again, I would see that as being a plan, a fairly complex plan with clear roles for various agencies, but a plan that would need to be not just short term, but medium and long term.

(00:58:38):

So to me, you don't address those issues within a couple of weeks. You are talking about a commitment by agencies and practitioners to providing a holistic support for a community and individuals within that over a sustained period. So I would hesitate to have any short-term planning unless it's just a stop gap just to hold things and contain while the other planning is in place. And you may need a short-term, really short-term strategy to hold things. But again, collaborative interagency, listening to people with intelligence from the ground as to what the community would respond to comment made before this have occurred in that community before or in other communities. What have we learned from that? What have they learned? We can't come in from outside and just impose a solution. It's got to be created by and informed by the people in that community and in other communities where we've got good experience. I could say a lot more, but I'll finish it there. Thank you.

Jacquie Lee (00:59:43):

Thanks, Chris. Tayla or Sarnia, did you have anything you wanted to add?

Tayla Iellamo (00:59:49):

Yeah, I'm happy to comment. It's a really big question. So I think what Chris has said, ask the community what they need, but I think it's really important in the preparedness stage and even in the immediate aftermath and also in recovery, is to build social capital within that community, which is actually the biggest predictor for recovery. So that is the level of relationships and social connections within that community itself. There's so much emphasis on the logistics and the infrastructure, and that's getting a lot of the funding at the moment. And there's this real, I feel like piece that's missing in terms of mental health recovery and the emotional, social, emotional wellbeing of communities, which we know is such an important factor to recovery, but the community knows each other. So I think that's a really important point. Working in communities in northern Rivers after the floods, they actually knew where they wouldn't see someone in the community for a little while. So they would go and check on that person and go, Hey, are you okay? Do you need anything? But it's the community that knows that. So it's really about finding that connector within the community and seeing what their ideas are for creating opportunities for the community to connect as soon as possible after disaster.

Jacquie Lee (01:01:09):

Thanks, Tayla. I just want to squeeze in one more question because it's comes through twice and it's another tricky one. But what do you see as being the best possible recovery for a child who has lost both parents in a disaster? Chris, I might throw to you leading expert.

Christopher Gostelow (01:01:37):

Sorry. No, look, I mean, that is a horrible scenario. And I guess the reality is that that child will need support. They'll need support at every developmental stage because again, my experience is that children who experience horrible things, such as the loss of both parents in a disaster will need to reprocess and re-experience that in different ways as they developmentally mature and into adulthood and in fact into senior adulthood. So it is a lifelong experience and series of memories for that child to carry forward into adulthood and beyond. I would hope that there is really good support for that child in the short term, but a sense of flagging that child so that in the right way, the school and further schooling down the track as they get older, can be sufficiently familiar to be able to address the needs of that child without being intrusive or getting in the way.

(01:02:44):

So I guess I'm talking about a case management approach really that may be sustained over a period of years, but I would imagine that that child is going to have to learn that they will have ongoing needs. But at the same time as that there is opportunities for growth. And I know it sounds a bizarre thing to say, but people who've experienced horrendous experiences like that can often be incredible and powerful roles, supports, and models for other people in the future because people will listen to that child and that adult as they get older, they will take on board what they have experienced and

the meaning and the messages for others. So for me, the strength that that child would carry forward is hopefully a network of support around them, family and otherwise. But the knowledge that they have, they may not recognise it now and I wouldn't expect them to as a young child, but they have the potential to use their adverse experience to positively impact upon others.

(01:03:49):

And I've seen it over the years, they can actually offer a level of credibility in addressing others and their needs that people who have not experienced that just don't have. So it's horrendous. Support is required. Support going developmentally forward, but really try to capitalise on what strengths would that child carry with them into adulthood? And how can those strengths be used in their own relationships and potentially in other circumstances? Again, I just want to reiterate that that's a horrible, horrible thing. It's the worst case scenario. It's a thing we all try to avoid, but I think we need to really provide the best possible support. Thank you.

Jacquie Lee (01:04:38):

Thanks Chris. I know I put you on the spot there, but yeah, I felt it was an important one to address. As you say, it's what we try to avoid, but unfortunately it does still happen. Thank you for all of your questions. I'm sorry we haven't been able to get to all of them this evening. I'd just like to now invite each of our panellists to take a moment to sum up the reflections on collaborating in this field. Sarnia, I might start with you.

Sarnia Ralston (01:05:16):

Thanks. Yeah, so reflections, just really placing our beautiful children at the centre. Even thinking about that last question to Chris and just thinking how if we can build the capacity of all of the adults around the child and children, that's where we can have sustainable impact. So as much as we can translate research and evidence into practical, on the ground, understandable supports for everybody, the child, the young person, the adults around them, the clinicians, the community. So yeah, just so important, and I love this approach of having Chris and Tayla online and really that collaboration of resources, practical evidence based. It's just great. So yeah, thanks so much for the opportunity to share and connect.

Jacquie Lee (01:06:14):

Thank you so much for sharing your time and wisdom with us. Chris, what are your reflections?

Christopher Gostelow (01:06:22):

Again, look, I just wanted to thank you for the opportunity to answer a few questions and to provide some information. It's been a pleasure to come to you from Whadjuk Nyoongar country in Western Australia around Perth. But for me, I guess these are extremely challenging environments to work in

for anybody. And it doesn't matter how often you'd be in there or what you've done in the past, they're all different and they're all challenging and they will test you. I take a whole lot of positive vibe and optimism from having worked in the space for a long time and seeing really, really good things done by really good people, particularly for children. And I've been around for long enough to actually come back and bump into people who I worked with sometimes decades earlier. And it may not have been anything I directly did, but it could have been something that was indirectly something that I influenced, that provided support for them.

(01:07:20):

And on occasion, you'll actually hear things from somebody that you don't expect to be talking with who will talk about a disaster experience that they were involved in. And you can ask, hang on. I was involved in providing a level of support, holistic support in that, and there is nothing as a human being, I think more fulfilling and more wholesome than to know that stuff you did 20 or 30 years ago has actually affected somebody to the point that their level of functioning and operation in their community and their life and their family was really positively impacted and that they've sometimes taken that learning and used it in their own family and beyond. I find that really rewarding. So this is challenging work. It's highly rewarding work. At the same time, for me, I just take away a level of optimism that what we're doing is with incredible intent to really look after our children and that there are good things we can do and that if we work together, we will do to support children, their families, and the communities they operate in. Thank you.

Jacquie Lee (01:08:30):

Thanks Chris and Tayla.

Tayla Iellamo (01:08:33):

Thank you. I've actually really enjoyed this conversation tonight and I've written down just a few notes of my reflections. I guess reiterating this is really messy work and like Chris said, it's really challenging because you're dealing with a child, a family, and a community that have all been affected. So we really need to be gentle with yourselves, prioritise your wellbeing, understand what you need to continue this work that you're doing, and also educate yourselves as Sarnia mentioned, around evidence-based. And I'm going to give a shout out to Emerging Minds because there is so many free trainings and resources that you can look at from a parent perspective if you are a parent, but also as a teacher and as a clinician, so that you can have a better understanding of walking into a disaster recovery affected community. And you have some tools, obviously.

Jacquie Lee (01:09:27):

Thanks Tayla. Thank you everyone for joining us tonight. Please ensure you complete the feedback survey before you log out and keep an eye out for your statement of attendance, which you should

receive in your inbox within a week. You'll also receive an email with a link to this recording and associated resources in the next week or so as well. We've got one webinar coming up in March next year. I can't believe we're already at the end of 2024. That one will be on suicidal ideation. So two, to see what's coming up with MHPN and register for upcoming webinars across a wide variety of topics, visit www.mhpn.org.au/slash/webinars. And while you're there, also check out MHPN's podcast series Mental Health in Focus, in partnership with ANZACATA. Please don't ask me what that stands for. You can find the four part series on Creative Arts Therapy, all episodes, which are up there now. They're available www.mhpn.org.au/podcasts, or by searching Mental Health in Focus in your preferred podcast app.

(01:10:58):

Before we close, I'd also like to remind you that MHPN supports over 350 networks across the country where mental health practitioners meet either in person or online. Visit the MHPN website to join your local network and get together with practitioners who are also interested in infant child and adolescent mental health like you. And if you want to start a new network, you can go to the website and learn how MHPN will provide you with advice administration and other support throughout the process. And finally, before we finish, I would just like to acknowledge the lived experience people and carers who have lived with mental illness in the past and those who continue to live with mental illness in the present. And thank you all once again for joining us this evening.