

Being Child and Youth Focused in an Emergency

Commissioner for
Children & Young People
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'Our planning for emergencies, disasters and recovery must address the unique needs of children and young people, and include an understanding of the specific community infrastructure they require in order to build their resilience and reduce their vulnerability.'

Commissioner Helen Connolly

As leaders, parents and members of the wider South Australian community, many of us make decisions that impact on young people every single day. These decisions have an effect on how they experience the world and their sense of place within it. This is especially true in times of crisis and disaster.

In emergency situations, the responses taken by professionals who work in the field of emergency management have a huge influence over how supported children and young people feel. Their actions and interactions will influence a child or young person's responses to a disaster and therefore their recovery. They need to be proportional, appropriate, and well-communicated.

Today's children and young people are being exposed to emergency events and disasters at rates much greater than those of previous generations. Unfortunately this is unlikely to reduce given disasters are becoming more and more frequent as temperatures rise and weather patterns change. Global warming produces more droughts, floods and bushfires than previous years so that typically there are more days of extreme weather year on year.

Because emergencies have a significant effect on both the physical and mental health of children and young people, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has declared their increasing occurrence a major child rights issue.

It is therefore essential that those responsible for the design and operation of our state's emergency management system understand this and show that through their delivery they embrace an attitude that ensures children and young people's wellbeing is paramount.

The practical ideas presented here are the result of many conversations, discussions and consultations undertaken with South Australian children and young people. By considering what they have shared we can build on what is already being done well.

What children and young people want from adults

For some time now, children and young people have been vocalising their increasing concern about growing inequality, lack of inclusion and the impact of climate change, particularly on vulnerable populations around the world. In the 21st century these concerns are emerging as key issues affecting intergenerational trust, particularly when governments and leaders dismiss children and young people's concerns, and take limited or no action to address the issues they see as critical.

Children and young people understand that trust is an essential element of a well-functioning society. They also know that their collective trust in society is built when they are valued, listened to, and respected for their own views and insights. This means those adults who are responsible for emergency management must commit to the view that children and young people are critical stakeholders, and ensure that their operations reflect this.

We know South Australia's children and young people want to be capable, engaged, energised and optimistic young citizens. They have told us they want to live in kind communities and engage with institutions and organisations that are:

- receptive to their feedback
- value inclusiveness and diversity; and which
- provide young people with opportunities to be involved.

How can Emergency Management Personnel influence children and young people's wellbeing?

Children are greatly influenced by what they experience and see, as well as by what they hear being said around them. They pick up on media commentary and general family and community conversations about emergencies and disasters. This plays out in their day to day lives and feeds into any fears or concerns they may carry relating to what will happen to them in the event of a disaster occurring.

In disaster situations they speak about noticing the pressure on their parents, teachers and community leaders. Their worries can include things like whether they or their parents or carers will be injured, miss school, lose their jobs, have to move away from their home, miss out on a holiday, or not be able to participate in activities that keep them connected to family, friends and community.

In conversations about the 2019/2020 bushfires and 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, children and young people told the Commissioner that they were concerned about their inability to have influence over, or be included in, decisions being made in relation to their own recovery. Some young people described feeling ignored and 'cut off' from information and decision-making. They said they felt invisible and were not heard or understood by community leaders.

Many described the reliance on family, friends, teachers, and other community members for reassurance and their most trusted sources of information as inadequate. Particularly as no other 'official' information or communication was being tailored for, or directed to them. In fact, the consistent message they heard throughout these two crisis' was 'you're too young, you don't understand.' What they would have preferred was to have information tailored to their needs communicated through channels to which they are already attuned.

How can you involve children and young people in emergency management?

In any disaster children and young people are vulnerable. They experience impacts that threaten their safety and wellbeing. For children and young people, watching how their parents/carers or other significant adults react to a disaster will often determine their own responses.

When we talk about things like health, wellbeing, learning, play, work and the environment, we need to ask ourselves whether we know what these actually mean to young people? We need to understand that the challenges they face are quite different to those that adults face and we need to acknowledge these differences and respect them even if they might seem insignificant to us. It's important that children and young people's concerns are not trivialised, ignored, or worse dismissed.

Given there are all kinds of emergencies, their impact will range from an event that disrupts daily life, to one that is so significant it is life changing.

As children and young people experience and process disaster differently, the job of adults in emergency management is to ensure preparation, relief and recovery efforts always keep this in mind. In plain terms it means prioritising the needs of

children and young people, as well as actively involving them in decisions that are likely to be made about what happens to them in the event of an emergency.

However before we can involve children and young people in disaster and emergency management, we need to know what children and young people think. We can't guess or assume what this might be. We need to ask them exactly what matters to them, what worries them and what they want in relation to those aspects of their lives that may be most effected by an emergency or disaster.

When we involve children and young people in all stages of emergency management we provide them with knowledge and skills that they can then build on. It sends them the message that they are a priority in the event of an emergency and that they have a role to play. It also makes it clear that adults think their wellbeing is important and that they want to put in place conditions that will enable children and young people to feel safe, connected and hopeful as quickly as possible.

Likewise, if we don't involve children and young people in emergency management, we can't assume or expect that their specific needs will be met.



'When people don't put 'value' into young people, our society, and how we feel, we soon lose faith in them.'



'The government needs to address things such as climate change and realise this isn't science fiction. It's real life and if we don't do anything about it soon, it will be too late.'

How to really listen to children and young people

Being believed and listened to about their own experiences is a priority for children and young people. Many children and young people have said they feel they are not truly being heard by adults; that they are seen as either a child to protect, or a risk to control, rather than as a thinking, feeling, individual who has much to offer.

Children and young people have their own views and ideas on hundreds of topics and want these views to be heard and considered. They can feel tokenised by systems that are not truly willing to engage with them in meaningful ways on the big issues that are of concern to them.

There are many accounts of authority figures not listening to children and young people, or listening and then openly disregarding their ideas and their needs. Examples include an officer who speaks over a child directly to their parent or guardian, or a mental health care worker or school counsellor who does not take a young person's concerns seriously. This can be particularly upsetting when they've worked hard to find the courage needed to speak up. Many young people say that in the eyes of the law they are made to feel as though they are their parent's 'possessions'.

Where possible children and young people want opportunities that allow them to make their own decisions about their education, health care, recreation choices and even the politics they pursue.

Children and young people come into contact with many helping professions throughout their lives – teachers, counsellors, and doctors to name a few. Others have more specialised involvement with mental health professionals, legal professionals and the police. In a disaster or emergency they may also have direct contact with firefighters, ambulance officers, state emergency service professionals.

Whatever the circumstances, children and young people overwhelmingly want someone they can trust to be informing them of the situation they find themselves in. They want to be able to access information that is clear, simple, detailed and unbiased. This information also needs to be tailored to the age they are. Older children are very clear that they do not want to be given information that is aimed at a five-year-old and younger children too don't necessarily need or want the detail that older children do.



'SA looks very nice now. I would like it to stay like that for [the] future. This is very important because when I was little I used to always go to the hills with my family on walks and bike rides. I want others to have the same opportunities as me.'

Demonstrating strong leadership

Because young people today view the world quite differently to previous generations, they have different expectations of leadership. They want leaders who listen to them and who consider their ideas. They want a future where their contributions are validated, and where the value that their perspectives and lived experience has is considered and reflected in the emergency management plans made. They want their interests, expectations and ideas to be embraced, and for their emerging capacity for leadership to be nurtured.

Young people frequently express concern that although they are often best placed to identify their own needs, they are rarely asked to do so. Similarly, although they have ideas and opinions about what will improve their situation, these ideas and opinions are rarely sought. On the rare occasions when they are sought, they are often overlooked.

Emergency management staff and volunteers can often underestimate the competencies of children and young people, particularly during and following a crisis situation. They tend to rely heavily on adult representations and assumptions, rather than sourcing children and young people's perspectives and experiences direct.

At the core of valuing and respecting children and young people is acknowledging and legitimising the view that they are critical stakeholders who have a right to have input into decisions that impact on their lives.

Understanding play and wellbeing

Play is critical to young people's health and wellbeing. Young people have a developmental need to play. They also have a right to play, and as the adults in their lives we are required to uphold this right by addressing any barriers to play that they face.

Whether in response to, or as part of a recovery phase, adults have an obligation to ensure they rebuild youth-friendly infrastructure and provide the opportunities children and young people need to fulfil their right to play.

Rather than make assumptions about what this should or could look like, children and young people should be consulted. They will benefit from opportunities that encourage them to

be directly involved in determining what they would like built or rebuilt, as well as how they would like to be supported and enabled to participate in play activities more. It is through play in its various forms that children and young people engage with their peers, neighbourhoods, cities, towns and with the world around them.

Children and young people want to be able to do their favourite things in their own local communities. They say they feel happiest when they are doing the things they like to do in the ways they want to, where they want to.

Child and Youth Friendly Emergency Response and Recovery

	Impact of disaster on children and young people	Supporting children and young people to feel welcome and included
In the immediate response phase following an emergency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– general fear and confusion– physical and or mental discomfort or pain from an injury or shock– separation from family members– concern about family members– worry about pets– worries about wild life and nature– leaving favourite possessions behind and realising their potential loss– leaving trophies, trinkets and achievements behind– worrying about extended family members and friends– worry about what their day-to-day lives will be like– worry about their home– worry about their school– worry about their playgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– ensure child play areas in relief spaces are suitable for all ages– provide table top and online games– provide art and craft activities– establish a teenagers' retreat space away from younger children and adults– make phone and iPad chargers available– provide indicators of diversity and acceptance in flags, symbols and interactions– provide snacks and food options that reflect cultural diversity and age preferences– provide information packs that explain the recovery process and tailor them to age groups– establish wifi hot spots– coordinate donations from brand name shoe and clothing manufacturers
Looking at recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– concern about ongoing education and play opportunities– visible signs of damage to schools– and damage to parks/playgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– organise community events specially designed for young people including: music/concerts, community gaming, play spaces and sports
Scaffolding wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– loss of part-time jobs and income– loss of housing and personal space– loss of cultural activities– loss of connection to friends– financial strain on families– harsh parenting– a change of school– stress, anxiety and fear and/or disaster trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– re-establish part-time jobs– re-establish cultural activities– support connection to friends– talk to parents about the impact on children– discuss impact of stress on parenting– connect those who need it with health services that support stress, anxiety and fear and/or disaster trauma

Supporting children and young people to be hopeful and useful

- provide regular updates specific to children and young people
- ask for any information they may have about family members, neighbours
- reassure children and young people that professional emergency management personnel are being involved
- ask older children who are coping well to reassure younger siblings and other children
- explain to children and young people how important communication is and who they can talk to

Supporting children and young people to have a say

- explain what to do and who to approach if something bothers them
- make sure they know who their trusted adult is
- ask them how they think the Emergency Relief space could be made better from their point of view and if anything is concerning them
- provide noticeboards and suggestion sheets in community venues and relief centres that are aimed directly at children and young people

- provide opportunities for young people to volunteer
- prioritise the rebuilding of sport and recreation activities for all ages: preschool / primary / secondary
- quickly establish school/learning alternatives

- encourage mental health check-ins and provide psychological first aid for children and young people
- establish child and youth led/focused recovery committees
- establish online and offline ways for young people to share their recovery stories

- build in capacity for children and young people to be involved in rebuilding local school cultures, including providing new student responsibilities that can help children and young people recover more quickly
- foster opportunities for children and young people to become ongoing volunteers in emergency management arenas

- monitor recovery of children and young people over time
- involve children in discussions about commemorating days or building memorials
- re-affirm established emergency management drills or protocols
- involve young people in decision-making committees

What children and young people have said are foundations for success:

- feeling **known**
- feeling **valued**
- having a **voice**
- having a **purpose**
- having **capacity** to make a difference.

What children and young people have said are foundations for their engagement:

- I want to **engage on issues** that I care about
- I want to **express my personal values** in the community issues I engage with
- I want the opportunity to **use my voice** and be heard
- I want to be **supported to achieve**
- I want to **make an impact** now and in the future.

What adults can do to support children and young people:

- be **welcoming**
- be **inclusive**
- give them **a say**
- allow them to be **useful**
- be **future** focused.

Who are we?

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act').

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people. This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular, children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda, including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.



*'Decision makers should involve young people in decisions.
Celebrate the diversity and intelligence of young people.'*