

Putting research into practice: Developing bushfire safety messages for children

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Teaching children about natural hazards is not straightforward. This is because children are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with information. Rather, they approach any learning experience with their own conceptions *and* misconceptions about how the world works. Extensive research in educational psychology tells us that if we don't consider and accommodate these misconceptions when we start giving new information, it can either be interpreted incorrectly or ignored altogether. To avoid these pitfalls, this research has sought to understand how children perceive bushfire risk so that we can design bushfire education that better accommodates their perspectives.

This research, which involved detailed analysis of interviews with 250 children from high bushfire risk areas, has been adopted by AFAC to develop television safety messages for children. Following the Black Saturday bushfires, AFAC partnered with 3D animation company Ettomogah entertainment to develop Li'l Safety Club - a children's bushfire education campaign for television, radio, and internet. This research provided an evidence base for the development of ten 30 second safety messages that were screened across all free to air channels across South Eastern Australia during children's viewing time over the 2009/2010 bushfire season.

The Li'l Safety Club messages follow a formula of: 1) dispelling a misconception; 2) providing information in children's words; and 3) finishing with a call to action: either encouraging children to undertake preparedness activities within their grasp or encouraging them to talk to their parents about preparing. Most importantly, the messages don't make assumptions about what kids will or won't understand. It draws on child-centered research to ensure that messages are designed with children's perspectives in mind. Whilst much more work is needed to ensure that Australian children receive effective, evidence based bushfire education, the Li'l Safety Club messages are an important first step.

If you were thinking about committing suicide then you'd just stay in the house...but most probably, you'd evacuate.

Macedon, Grade 3

When we see a fire we all run out to the letterbox.

Macedon, Prep

We'd be trying to fight the fire while we could and just getting some extra stuff out and that kind of thing but when it got close you'd kind of know to go.

Huonville, Grade 6



Run to a bath and just turn on the water and sit in it so then if the fire comes the water would kind of like put it out.

Macedon, Grade 1

Well, near my house there's a small river going past, so that would probably stop it if it came from that way.

Warrandyte, Grade 5

You could build the tiniest mud wall in front of your house or you could build a brick wall cos the fire doesn't really get though brick walls that much.

Bothwell, Grade 3