

# Children and Youth

An untapped resource in the development of resilient communities

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## Children are often overlooked

In social science disaster research, the topic of children and disasters has received less attention than it might deserve. Very little research has examined how children understand, communicate about, and respond to natural hazards. As a result, prevention and preparedness programs have not been able to accommodate the unique perspectives and abilities of children. Excluding children from the research agenda means that their unique strengths and capacities for promoting disaster prevention in is often overlooked.

## Children's capacities for action

One explanation for this lack of attention is that children are often assumed to be passive victims of disasters with only a limited capacity to participate in action and decision-making. These assumptions are being challenged by a new wave of research showing that children have an important role to play in all stages of the disaster cycle from risk reduction to emergency response and recovery. New research shows that involving children in planning and prevention has benefits for them, their families and their communities.

## Investing in children's bushfire education

Australia lacks a national approach to, or policy for, bushfire education in schools. However, the new research highlighting children's capacities provides support for more investment in school-based bushfire education. Teaching children is never a simple process. They have their own ideas about how the world works and these ideas interact with any new information they receive, creating the potential for miscommunication. This research is investigating children's ideas about bushfire risk so that education can be tailored to accommodate them.



## How do children think about bushfire risk?

For this research, we asked 250 children in high risk areas across Victoria and Tasmania about the causality and prevention of bushfire disasters. We asked them what can be done to reduce bushfire risk around the home. They were also asked about what to do if a bushfire threatens. Children's answers to these questions highlighted a very limited understanding about bushfire risk. Most children believe there is nothing you can do to prevent your house from burning down in a bushfire. Unless the wind changes or the firebrigade shows up, "you're stuffed" (11 year old, Huonville). They perceive the fire front as an all-powerful force: "The fire is powerful enough to absorb through brick walls.... the fire's gonna be more powerfuller and burn the house down" (7 year old, Warrandyte). This is just one of the many misconceptions that would need to be addressed before a more accurate understanding of causality and prevention can be developed.