

**PROFESSOR ALEXANDER MCFARLANE SPEAKS ABOUT LEARNINGS FROM ASH WEDNESDAY AND THE RECENT NATURAL DISASTERS IN VICTORIA AND QUEENSLAND.** Part 1

**It is now a month after the devastating firestorm in Victoria and six weeks after the floods in Queensland. From your research, what would you expect to see in children, adolescents and their families?**

What we observed in the study I did of 800 primary school kids after the Ash Wednesday fires was quite interesting, because children if anything were quiet. They weren't as playful – they didn't appear to be unusually anxious. So in fact, the parents generally thought that the kids were getting on fine. However, what that pattern of behaviour really suggests is that the children have really become quite watchful and stay close to their parents. Their apparent good behaviour is really more a sign of their anxiety and their unwillingness to try and challenge their environment, which is an important part of kids growing up.

**So, in this one to three month phase of recovery after the trauma of a natural disaster, a quiet child may not be an unaffected child?**

No, because what we did was to follow these children over a two year period and what we found was, that with time, the kids became: more restless and distractible; unable to settle; preoccupied with the fire and what they've been through; were seen as behaving badly on occasions; being more irritable; and difficult to manage. So, there's almost as if there's a slow trajectory where their difficulties become a problem with time.

**Is that specific to children or do we see a similar traumatic response in adolescents?**

Adolescents are a slightly different kettle of fish, but it is likely that the same kind of patterns will emerge. But, I think that what happens with adolescents is that they tend to be going through that phase of attempting to establish their own identity and develop a sense of their independence. When some catastrophe like this happens, they withdraw back into a position of looking to their parents for guidance. But then, they can start reacting against that in the months and years that follow, and actually take excessive risks, in a sense to try to re-establish their individuality. For adolescents disasters are particularly difficult because as an adult: we have our careers; we have our relationships; we have our families. If you were to use the metaphor of a railway – the train gets derailed off the track, but as adults the track is there and the carriage can be put back on the track. For an adolescent, they are actually building the line in front of them as they go, and the train is following, and then, the whole thing gets cut off when a disaster happens.

**In the recent bushfires some children have had their parents with them throughout whilst others have had their parents in the CFA away fighting the fires. Will we expect two different reactions from these two different groups of kids?**

It's not quite as straight forward as that - there can be a number of scenarios. On the one hand I think that it's generally better for kids to be close by / with their parents, particularly in the days and weeks that follow. But, if they see their parents terrified and out of control, that can be very disruptive for the child. Equally, if the parent is in the Country Fire Authority, and not there, there can be a sense of fear – because

children often respond to their fears in fantasy not in reality. For example, if the parent's not there, kids may believe their parent is dead. It is actually very difficult. We found after the Ash Wednesday bushfires that if the children were separated from their parents in the days that followed the fire they were the ones who did particularly badly, because there is all of this talk about death and suffering and if the parent isn't there, the children really feel terribly distressed and worried. So, I think it's probably best that the children be with their parents, despite the parents need to focus on the immediate practical tasks at hand.

We observed after the fires that one way the parents' anxiety gets played out is by becoming much more overprotective of the kids that they were before the fires. As a consequence they were less likely to let the kids get out into the world and explore, and the children pick up on the parents' anxiety – particularly if the parent is also irritable, which is often the case if the parent is depressed or suffering a posttraumatic reaction. That combination of irritability in the parents and over protection is something that the kids really react to and has an adverse effect on their state of mind. That's why, when people see children, they need to very carefully look at the parents. Conceptually children really don't understand what disasters mean and what they are. The parents have to interpret for the child. If the parent is conveying the general message, that the world is a terribly dangerous place, then that's what developmentally impacts upon the child.

Another thing that needs to be watched in children is the emergence of separation anxiety, because the fears of loss and the experience of loss will manifest themselves in the child's sense of independence. And, I've seen people now as adults who've got terrible separation anxieties, arising from what happened in the bushfires.

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