

Big Situations – Stories for Reflection

Natural Disasters - Bushfire



This story refers to a bushfire and may raise big feelings. Before you read this, make sure this is the right time for you, and that you can access support for yourself if you need it. Should any of the information in this document cause distress for you, it may be helpful to contact Lifeline on 13 11 14, Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636 or the Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800.

Read this story to help you be better prepared to respond to the impact of a bushfire, or if you have already encountered a situation like this and you want to hear about other educators' experiences. This is a fictional story informed by real experiences. If you are facing a situation like this now, you can find [Tips for responding now](#) and resources to support children, parents and educators in the [Big Situations](#) section of the NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency website.

Smoke is all around us

We knew a fire in our area was possible, because there were fires everywhere and the smoke was a big issue. All the adults were talking about the smoke, and the children were uptight, because they couldn't play outside, and because everyone was on edge. We had to be extra aware of children with medical issues like asthma. We double checked our incident procedures, and ran through them with families, so they knew what would happen if we were evacuated. We had some families who were health and emergency workers who we knew might not be able to pick up their children.

As part of preparations, we encouraged parents of children with additional needs to think about what they may need if evacuated from their homes. Afterwards one of the mothers thanked us for that. She'd had a bag ready, with her child's medication and special food. It was there for her to grab as they rushed out the door. The evacuation centre was unlikely to be able to provide what he needed.

The children were talking a lot about the smoke and fires each day as they arrived. One of the children had watched an ABC Playschool episode where they talked about putting your belongings in your pillowcase. He found a pillowcase from a doll's bed, and started putting things in it, so we talked about how families were preparing, and all the people who were helping to keep them safe. If the children heard planes overhead, or sirens, we would talk about how they were working to keep everyone safe. We also talked about safe places that people go to if there is a fire. We talked to families about the conversations we were having each day and posted some helpful resources on our Facebook page. We tried to keep our routine as normal as possible, even though we couldn't go outside. We organised activities that the children would enjoy and this helped us to stay calm and focused.

The day the fire came through, we were following the Rural Fire Service website, and hearing from friends in the area. When we started to get worried, we asked families who could get to us safely to pick up their children, and we made sure all families knew our plans. It started to get dark even though it was the middle of the day, and we figured it was time to go to the evacuation centre, which was the community centre at the local oval. We rang the Rural Fire Service to say we were ready to bring the children over, but they explained that they'd send Fire Trucks over, to escort us.

In my mind I'd thought we'd be getting the children to play games in a corner, but I didn't realise how loud the fire would be, how dark it was outside, and how much was happening around us. All we could do was make sure we had the children sitting with us, and we just hung on and reassured them. By the end of the day, we were exhausted, but it felt good when parents came to the evacuation centre to pick up their children safely.

We were fortunate that the service was okay. However, we had a team member and some families who lost their homes. That was really hard. The children were affected in different ways, and some took longer to settle than others. It was very stressful for families who were temporarily housed in caravans for a long time. The team member who lost her home had to move her family in with her parents. She didn't want to take time off and we found ways to do things with her outside of work, so she had some down time, because she really needed it.

We put out information about support services and meetings in the community and encouraged families to use them. There were some children who struggled more than others especially with sleep issues and anxiety, and we worked with their parents to get them help from available services.

A lot of people from all over the place wanted to help by donating things for families. Unfortunately, a lot of what was donated wasn't what was needed. We tried to stay out of that and focus on our role as educators. For a long time, you could see children react when it was a windy day, or when a plane was overhead, but not so much now.

After our experience we realised how important our relationship with the Rural Fire Service was. They come to visit each year, so the children are used to their uniform, and know about their role. We've also done some professional development about children and trauma. We know that we'll have fires again, and we need to be prepared.

Things to think about:

- ▶ Considering the diverse needs and ages of all children at your service...
 - what would educators need to do to be prepared for a critical incident like this?
 - what preparations or planning might educators need to put in place to help children cope with a critical incident like this?
- ▶ This story is about a bushfire, but communities also face emergencies like cyclones, storms, floods and droughts. What emergencies do you need to prepare for in your role as an educator?
- ▶ Think about your service's location. How might your experiences be similar or different to those in the story if you experienced an emergency?
- ▶ What could you do to prepare your team to implement your emergency procedures with limited warning?
- ▶ What do you think parents would need to know in an incident like this? What would children need to know?
- ▶ How can your service and team support colleagues who are personally affected by a big situation?
- ▶ How can policies and procedures support your responses and planning? Do you need to develop or review any policies or procedures?
- ▶ Who would you need to notify if a situation like this happened at your service?

The following resources can help you be better prepared for critical incidents:

- ▶ [National Mental Health Education Initiative](#) (Be You)

Access professional learning modules for educators or to get the most benefit from Be You, sign up your service to create a learning community and access a Be You consultant from Early Childhood Australia.

- ▶ [Community Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) (Emerging Minds)

Access short courses and resources to help educators support children following a disaster or community trauma.

Note: See additional resources on the [Natural Disasters](#) and [Critical Incidents](#) pages of the Big Situations online resource

Please remember:

An Inclusion Professional can support educators to proactively prepare to have the skills and confidence to respond to big situations that may occur. This preparation could include support to use the [Big Situations](#) resource and may involve strategic inclusion planning. It should be noted that big situations often require support from experts that sit outside the role and expertise of the Inclusion Professional. Inclusion Professionals can help you connect with external organisations and agencies as needed.

Disclaimer:

This is a fictional story informed by real experiences to support you to reflect and plan for the future. If you would like support or have any feedback on this resource please [contact us](#).