

# Emergency management planning for children and young people

Planning guide for local government







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# Introduction

This guide aims to help local government emergency managers to plan for the needs of children and young people.

It provides practical advice on key things that should be included in local area emergency management plans.

Planning for the unique needs of children and young people should be a key part of the planning process. This guide will help emergency management planning in Australia to keep pace with best practice in this area.

By including children and young people, emergency management planners will ensure their plans reflect the needs of communities affected by disasters.

## **When reviewing emergency management plans, it is important to consider the following:**

- Though all people are affected by an emergency, children and young people are uniquely vulnerable and require targeted and specialised interventions to help ensure the best opportunity to achieve a successful recovery.
- Children are not 'little adults' and should not be managed in the same way as adults.
- There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to emergency management planning for children and young people. Instead, emergency management plans must consider the developmental stage of those affected.
- There is a lack of advocacy for children and young people in the emergency management sector.
- Children and young people can contribute to the emergency management planning process, and should be encouraged to do so.

## Background

Children have unique vulnerabilities when compared with the adult population and must be considered as a special group. The needs of children are often overlooked because childhood is not always seen as a separate and distinct stage of growth (Allen et al. 2007).

The expectation during emergencies is that there should be no difference in the care provided for adults and children (Ginker et al. 2006). However, children have distinct vulnerabilities in emergency and disaster situations, including unique physiological, psychological and developmental needs (Allen et al. 2007).

Children rely on the care of adults; the level of care they need will depend on their stage in life. A newborn depends entirely on adults for its very survival, while an adolescent will be less reliant on adults for physical care but may need increased emotional support. When an emergency occurs, children and young people may become more vulnerable if the adults who support them have also been affected by the emergency.

The National Commission on Children and Disasters in the United States coined the term 'benign neglect' to describe the current practice of overlooking the distinct needs of children and young people in emergency management planning. We encounter the same situation here in Australia.

Children should be recognised as a distinct vulnerable group and this is reflected in the literature on disaster management (Allen et al. 2007; Ginker et al. 2006; Blaschke et al. 2003; FEMA 2009; Anderson 2005; Peek 2008; Gurwitch 2004; FEMA 2010).

Following Hurricane Katrina, the United States Federal Government acknowledged there is a gap in planning for the needs of children during disasters, and passed the *Kids in Disasters Wellbeing, Safety, and Health Act 2007*. This Act enabled the establishment of the National Commission on Children and Disasters which reported to the President and Congress in 2010 (FEMA 2009; FEMA 2010). This experience in the United States is relevant to the Australian context.

Children may also be disadvantaged as they cannot influence decisions that impact on them. They have no voting rights and a diminished legal status until they turn 18, and they have not traditionally been consulted during emergency management planning.



## Part 1: Best practice



## Include children and young people in your emergency plan

**All emergency management plans should include children and young people as a distinct group. Plans should address the unique needs of children and young people.**

Generally the needs of children and young people have not been recognised in emergency management plans in Australia, nor in most parts of the developed world.

When children and young people are mentioned, they are often included within broader vulnerable populations. This means that despite their distinct needs, children are grouped with the aged, people with a disability and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Including children and young people as singular groups in emergency management plans will ensure that actions and activities can be developed to address their specific needs.

It will also ensure that appropriate personnel and organisations with experience in working with children and young people are involved in preparing plans, and are invited onto planning committees.

## Engage with child and youth experts to update and review the plan

**Child and youth practitioners should be involved in reviewing emergency management plans. If they cannot be included as regular members of the planning committee, then a subcommittee should be formed to ensure the plan remains child-focused.**

Emergency management plans are usually reviewed and updated by people with a role in emergency management.

These personnel do not necessarily have expertise in paediatric and youth disciplines.

To address this, emergency management planning teams should engage with experts in these fields, either as employees of local government or as members of the community.

### **Those with specific expertise include:**

- youth workers
- psychologists
- maternal and child health nurses
- teachers
- childcare workers.

Child experts can make a significant contribution to the planning process as they have a sound knowledge of developmental issues that are distinctive to childhood. This will ensure that plans include activities that are appropriate for children and young people at different stages of development.

The following sections outline some things that could be included in plans. Individual plans should be reviewed with a focus on local needs and the services or activities that can be delivered within each municipality.

## Engage with young people in emergency management planning

**Establish a process to consult with young people on local government emergency management plans. This should be done on a regular cycle.**

Young people are a precious and often underused resource in every community; this is especially true for all stages of emergency management.

It is not common practice when reviewing emergency management plans to ask young people what they think and how they would like to contribute.

However, young people make up a significant segment of the population and are equally affected by emergency events. Young people currently lack formal avenues to advocate for their needs to be included in emergency management plans and activities.

Most young people do not have formal training and are often faced with no clear role to play or tasks to perform. This is largely due to a lack of meaningful engagement with young people during emergency management planning.

Consider establishing a youth subcommittee of the emergency management planning committee.

This gives young people an opportunity to engage with emergency management planners, and create an avenue for them to advocate for their needs.

Ideally this subcommittee would report to the emergency management committee at each meeting.

### Case study: Planning

The Macedon Ranges Shire Council Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee endorsed a youth consultation on its emergency plan in 2012.

The youth team at the shire was consulted and its expertise and connections to local young people were harnessed. This team advised that a workshop format would work best. Details were posted on a Facebook page, set up as an information source by the youth team for other young people in the shire. This allowed young people to nominate to participate.

The youth team also made contact with the five local secondary schools in the shire to seek nominations from the school principals and senior-year coordinators.

Fourteen young people aged between 16 and 23 attended the consultation on the first day of their September school holidays. (This demonstrates that young people really want to contribute, even when it means giving up their precious leisure and study time!)

### Participants focused on things that could be included in the plan, such as:

- using social media — possibly a Facebook page with a number of administrators who could keep it up-to-date with emergency management information
- young people can help with doing the work — do not underestimate the abilities of young people in the community, and make a plan to harness this energy
- personal support training for young people to encourage peer support when emergencies occur
- establishing a formal committee to involve young people in emergency recovery planning
- youth-specific issues relating to evacuation centre planning, including art supplies and spaces for teenagers to chill out and access technology.

After the workshop, several participants reported back to the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee and the formation of a youth subcommittee was endorsed.

This subcommittee will comprise young people, emergency services organisations and other agencies. A young person from this subcommittee will report to the main committee at each meeting.

**Figure 1: Participants in the Macedon Ranges youth consultation**





## Part 2: Practical planning guidance notes



## Evacuation centres

### **Evacuation centre plans should make specific provision for accommodating babies, children and young people.**

Evacuation or relief centres must be able to accommodate the needs of children and young people before and after an emergency.

A failure to plan for this group may have significant consequences, especially for the very young.

Plans should draw on the knowledge of child experts to ensure centres cater for all stages of development.

### **As a minimum, the following areas should be included in evacuation centre plans and checklists:**

#### **Infants, less than 12-months old**

Nutrition is a basic need, and age-appropriate food must be considered, including:

- support for breastfeeding mothers
- supplies for bottle-fed babies
- appropriate solid food for babies.

Appropriately sized nappies and baby-change supplies should be provided (Gribble and Berry 2011).

Sleeping requirements for babies should be considered.

#### **Pre schoolers and primary-school children**

Include age-appropriate food:

- Be mindful of allergies and always check with a carer before giving food to children.
- Consider a way to identify children with food allergies.

Include a play area with age-appropriate toys, activities and supervision.

#### **Families with young children**

The physical location of families with young children in evacuation centres should take into account close proximity to bathrooms and lighting at night, to ensure the safest environment for young children.

#### **Adolescents**

Consider including age-appropriate information, an area to be with peers, age-appropriate activities and access to technology.

#### **Medical needs**

Medical needs should also be considered, especially for children and young people who require regular medication or who have chronic health needs.

Provision should be made for the specific supplies that may be required.



It may not be viable to actually store all supplies, but compiling a list in the planning phase will make the task of gathering supplies from a local chemist much easier when a centre is activated.

It is also important to be prepared if babies or children become ill at a relief centre. Local paediatric medical services should be identified in evacuation centre plans, and these support services should be engaged and consulted during the planning process.

### Psychological needs

Children and young people will have their own unique psychological needs during any disaster or emergency, and these needs should not be overlooked by those responsible for their health and welfare.

The provision of personal support and psychological first aid are integral to existing plans, but few plans specifically address the needs of children and young people.

It is important to consider this group and be able to provide psychological support for young people.

This may be achieved by planning for child-friendly spaces or by including local youth workers as part of the emergency management plan.

### Child-friendly spaces

Setting up child-friendly spaces in evacuation centres has benefits beyond giving children a play space. They help to alleviate chaos, provide respite for parents and provide a link to early recovery activities for children.

Child-friendly spaces provide a safe and fun area for children to play, socialise and undertake normal activities during an emergency. They help to meet the physical and psychological needs of children and families.

Planning for child-friendly spaces should be incorporated into all local government evacuation centre plans drawing on council staff with expertise in children's services.

Red Cross and non-government organisations such as Save the Children can also provide help with this planning and assistance with mobile play buses if available.

## Unaccompanied children

### **Evacuation centre plans should clearly outline actions that staff should undertake when unaccompanied children are present.**

Unaccompanied children should be rapidly identified and their urgent needs met in the immediate aftermath of an emergency or disaster.

There is always the potential for unaccompanied children to present after an emergency or disaster, so this situation should be considered in planning, and included in all emergency management plans.

The priority is to identify and protect unaccompanied children and promptly reunite them with their legal guardians.

Current plans leave us ill-prepared to handle disasters that result in significant numbers of unaccompanied children. Staff and volunteers working in evacuation centres must be alert for unaccompanied children.

#### **The relief centre checklist for unaccompanied children should include:**

- Ask the child if they are alone. If possible, find out the name and contact details of their next of kin.
- A staff member with a Working with Children Check should supervise the child.
- Tell police there is an unaccompanied child in the evacuation centre.
- Seek advice from your regional child protection service or the after-hours emergency service if outside of business hours.
- Ensure that contact lists have current child protection service phone numbers.
- Do not release a child to the care of an adult other than the legal guardian without appropriate checks by police or child protection agencies.

## Reunification of families

### **Emergency management plans should outline a family reunification process.**

If children have been separated from their families, they must be reunited with their primary carers as quickly as possible.

Reunification should occur in a supported and calm environment. If possible, it should happen in a private space, so as not to upset children who may still be waiting to join their families.

Emergency management plans should identify staff or agencies that can assist with personal support to facilitate reunification.

Local childcare centres, kindergartens and schools may have reunification plans if an emergency occurs. Consulting with staff from these facilities can help to inform municipal emergency management plans.

**Remember:** do not release a child to the care of an adult other than the legal guardian, without appropriate checks undertaken by police or child protection agencies.

## Children and young people with disabilities

### **Emergency management plans should consider the needs of children with disabilities.**

The needs of children and young people with disabilities should be considered in evacuation centre planning.

Some children may need aids to assist with activities of daily living. During the evacuation centre registration process, families and careers should be asked about any needs that children and young people have.

Simple questions about requirements such as glasses, hearing or mobility aids will help to identify special needs from the outset. This will ensure equipment or replacement aids can be found as quickly as possible.

Children and young people with intellectual disabilities should also be considered when developing plans. Evacuation centres can be very upsetting places for some children with disabilities.

Alternate accommodation for families with children with disabilities may need to be found, if the evacuation centre cannot meet their needs.

## Early recovery and longer-term recovery

### **Emergency recovery plans must contain specific actions and activities that are targeted to the unique needs of children and young people.**

Recovery planning should make specific reference to children and young people. It is vital to plan activities for children and young people.

One key principle is that recovery is best achieved when the affected community is able to exercise a high degree of self-determination. This presents some challenges when dealing with children and young people in the emergency management environment.

Engaging young people in the planning process is one way to deal with these challenges.

Children and young people should be involved in decisions that will affect them. If young people have a say in the activities that are planned for them during an emergency, they will be more likely to participate.

To better involve children and young people, consider establishing a youth community recovery committee or youth-led recovery initiatives.

### **Case study: Christchurch Student Volunteer Army**

University students in Christchurch organised the Student Volunteer Army following the devastating Canterbury earthquakes in 2010 and 2011.

These students harnessed social media to create an instant volunteer army to help with non-lifesaving but nevertheless essential recovery tasks such as cleaning up soil-liquefaction residue on the city's streets.

The student army also helped distribute chemical toilets and emergency information pamphlets, and worked on public information call centres. These young adults were highly visible and featured in many of the news reports about the earthquake and its aftermath.

This spontaneous group allowed thousands of students and residents of Christchurch to contribute their time and energy to helping those most in need. At the peak of the recovery effort, there were 13,000 students volunteering per week.

The student army is now an established organisation ready to assist with other volunteering tasks in Christchurch. It is an incorporated society registered with the charities commission, governed by an elected committee.

For more information, visit the website: <[www.sva.org.nz](http://www.sva.org.nz)>

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