

DISASTERS

In the Australian context, children are affected by disasters such as floods, bushfires, cyclones and droughts. The destruction and disruption to place (homes, schools, communities) bring with them multiple traumas, stressors and losses. For many, there are experiences of lengthy dislocation and re-establishment. These situations are not single-incident traumas and often lead to ongoing chronic stress situations for children and their families. Parents and other adults are adversely affected by what has occurred, with known long-term impacts on all aspects of well-being (Bryant et al., 2018).

To illustrate some of the impacts of a disaster on children, Lauren Kosta, a social work academic at The University of Melbourne, talks about her research in the aftermath of the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires in 2009. Lauren conducted a doctoral study that focused on parenting after a disaster, and in the case scenario below she highlights how Andrew, aged nine, has particular experiences of the fires and how his developmental stage and coping capacity can be thought about.

PRACTICE IN CONTEXT

Dr Lauren Kosta, social work academic, University of Melbourne

Andrew was nine when the bushfire came through his community; his sister, Jenny, was fourteen. Before the fires, Andrew had really enjoyed school. He had friends, two best friends in particular, who would often come home with him to play in the garden with the fort that Kate and Sean were proud to have built for their children. When the fires came, they felt prepared. Kate grabbed Andrew and Jenny and drove to Sean's parent's place a couple towns over, where they waited out the fires in safety. They did not even see the flames. Sean stayed to defend their home as they had practised.

The fires were more intense than anyone expected. No one in their immediate or extended family lost their lives, but two of Sean's close friends died. They had been defending their home not too far from where Sean was that day. Sean had managed to save their house, but the land around was scorched, the trees were black, and where it had once been thick bush, you could see way across to their neighbours. One of the hardest things Kate had to do was tell her children about the people they knew who had died, including children who had attended summer camps with hers. Many of the buildings and business in their community were destroyed, including Andrew's school. The school in the next town over though was still standing. The Department of Education re-opened it as soon as possible, and it was not long before Kate could get the kids back to the structure and routine of attending classes.

Kate noticed some changes in Andrew after the fires. He seemed to be afraid of the dark again, and though he used to be okay with the door open and a nightlight in the hall, she now often stayed a good part of the night in his room because he

would wake up with nightmares. Every now and again she found his sheets tucked in a corner in the closet – he had wet the bed but did not want to tell her. At times, Andrew would react quite emotionally to things that seemed pretty insignificant but overall he had actually become quiet and withdrawn. He even stopped wanting to go to school.

I asked about Andrew's friends: were they at the new school too? Several of his friends had moved to the city because they had lost their homes, or their families felt they needed a new start. One of his best friends did go to the same school, but Andrew had stopped spending time with him. Kate mentioned Andrew had been coming home upset because he did not understand why Jack never wanted to play the way they used to. Jack had lost his father in the fires. Kate thought if Andrew made new friends that would help. She was frustrated because she wanted to invite other kids back to the house, but for a while it was not safe while they cleared the land and made repairs. Even after those early days, their yard, which had once provided seemingly endless adventure, was bleak and boring.

As we were talking, I noticed that Kate had switched from talking about 'we' (she and Sean) when discussing parenting and was using 'I' much more. I asked what Sean thought about how Andrew was going. Kate hesitated and then explained she wasn't really sure. Before the fires, they had been a team; Sean had been very involved in parenting. Now it was different. Sean was having a really hard time coping after the fires. Kate was worried he was depressed and tried to support him in any way she could. At times, things that Andrew seemed to need were particularly difficult for Sean. For example, for a while Andrew asked a lot of questions about what the fires were like. Sean could not face thinking about it, let alone whether or how to explain it to his son.

A developmental perspective is clearly important for understanding what Andrew was going through and what Kate and Sean were facing as his parents. As social workers we need to know what behaviours would be expected of a child this age and what (like bed wetting in Andrew's case) could be a reaction to trauma. It also helps to be able to explain this to parents. Kate spoke about how much it had helped when a support worker had visited her community and told her some of the reactions she could expect, and who she could talk to if she was concerned.

Another thing that stood out to me were the ripple effects of the disaster through Andrew's relational and social dimensions. After a disaster, particularly where there are lives lost, recognition of grief and relevant support can tend to focus on people whose family members have died. Yet in Andrew's experience, he lost relationships as people moved or were dealing with grief themselves, and his ability to make new ones was also impacted by the changes to place and the environment at the new school. All of this occurred for Andrew at a life stage where we are learning to navigate relationships ourselves.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What are some of the key middle childhood developmental tasks that Andrew is engaged in?
- 2 How might we understand his responses in the context of a multidimensional approach?
- 3 What protective elements do you see in the coping or adaptive strategies employed by Andrew and his parents?