

Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre: A decade on

In February 2009, the Black Saturday bushfires burnt the Kinglake Ranges to the ground. More than ten years on, the community is still coming to terms with the devastation caused by the fires.

Three years ago, Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre established a bush kinder program following some critical reflection as to why they were seeing extreme behaviours from children at all levels across the centre. Anxiety and stressed children were common, and centre educators believed this was linked to ongoing trauma from witnessing the devastation caused by the bushfires. Children in the Kinglake Ranges were also significantly behind in terms of school readiness compared to national averages. Sue Bullock, director of the service, and her colleague Linda Price joined the service some years after the initial bushfires. Linda offers some of their experiences here.



Some people would see a bush kinder program as counter-intuitive in terms of the trauma experienced by this community – what benefits have children derived from the introduction of this program?

I can appreciate how this may appear to be counter intuitive and indeed moving ahead with a bush kinder program in bushfire affected areas without direct consultation and consideration of the children, families and broader community could potentially result in a negative effect. The key here is to ensure the timing is right and the families and community have the chance to build these programs alongside the service. We began our program 8 years after the fires.

We have been absolutely astounded by the growth in the children who attend the bush kinder program over the past three years. We have watched the children grow in resilience, their play becomes more complex and this in turn transfers into more detailed drawing, higher general levels of literacy and general knowledge. Prior to 2017 the AEDC (Australian Early Development Census) data indicated children from our community were behind the state and national average across all developmental domains measured. In 2018, this same census placed children from our community above state and national averages and in some instances, significantly above these averages.

The children's love and connection for the land is very strong and their hands-on learning about First Peoples cultures is a joy to witness. This has been a real learning journey for children, families and Educators alike. Via the Taungurung language app and language

resources we are actively learning the Taungurung language and this is now being embedded into all levels of our service. Families are mentioning how children are coming home from bush kinder and teaching their families what they have learnt including Taungurung and Wurundjeri language. The ripple effect into our community is notable and we feel that we are achieving the cultural inclusion and respect for diversity that we were hoping for.

The general level of mental health in our kinder children has significantly improved since developing the bush kinder program. It is important to note that we as a team have also undertaken a significant amount of professional learning to gain a better understanding of neuroscience, self regulation, co regulation and adopting a guidance approach to behaviour rather than 'behaviour management'. In turn, we believe this has a knock on effect for all the children at our centre as our older children are setting the example and teaching the younger ones how to use loose parts, how to try again, how to use creative thinking to solve problems etc.

What we didn't expect was the positive health benefits for ourselves as teachers. The team who are regularly involved with bush kinder have commented on how our resilience has improved, our mood has lifted, our ability to deal with the unexpected has improved, and how our improved mental health has enabled us to be more present and supportive for children undergoing strong emotions.

How did the community react to the program?



Most parents had not heard of the bush kinder concept before. We adopted a pilot program with an opt-in or opt-out option. We developed the program in consultation with Parks Victoria and maintain a strong working relationship with them. This has been critical in providing the security for the community in terms of safety aspects surrounding the environment. We held information sessions with parents and involved them in the decisions around how the program might work and took on considerations around safety etc which we had not covered. We have also undergone bushfire training with the CFA as a general team (for KRCC), with specific consideration around a situation arising while attending bush kinder.

The result is that the community is incredibly supportive of this program. There is often much discussion on the community Facebook groups around the activities of the bush kinder children and parent feedback has been very supportive. We have had feedback from one of our Primary Schools about the level of resilience and overall 'school readiness' they have noticed in their prep children who have been involved with the bush kinder program.

What do you see as being key aspects of the way that the program is working?

The community consultation approach we took to developing the program is key. Our strong working relationship with Parks Victoria has been critical to developing our program. When considering locations, we had to consider many aspects of environmental safety, which others may not need to. In a bush fire affected area, the stability of the trees is critical – many have compromised root systems (due to smouldering from the fires), and there is a lot of dead wood around. In high winds and rainy situations this can cause a very serious safety risks as whole trees can topple. Also, we need to ensure that we are being sustainable custodians of the parklands and supporting regeneration of the environment. The relationship with Parks Victoria has given us the confidence to choose suitable locations, have trees checked, report maintenance issues etc. Most importantly the Parks Team have come out to our sessions, worked with the children, taught us all about looking after our parklands and helped to instill a love of the land. In turn, the children have passed on their learning about bush tucker and bush medicine to our Rangers and forged community connections that they otherwise would not have.

It is important to note here that we have also adopted a guidance approach, applied our new understandings of neuroscience and trauma and provided long uninterrupted periods of time for children to play. These aspects have been key in the success of the program from a mental health perspective. If we had simply taken children out bush with our 'old' approaches this program would not have worked.

Many children around Australia will be feeling more anxious as a result of the fires, the changes in air quality, coverage on TV etc. In Kinglake, there may be families that are re-traumatised as a result of the coverage of the fires. What kinds of things might be important in the short term for educators to consider in working with families?

I have given considerable thought to this over the past month. When we begin our program each year, we actually begin behind the centre in a piece of unused land. From there, when the children are ready, we move into the parklands (thick bush). This year in particular, we will be considering this move in conjunction with parent input and further consultation with Parks Vic, who we are in contact with every week. There is no set timing for our move into the parklands so we move when the time is right. Each year is different and we are always sensitive to the general feel of the community.

2019 marked the 10 years anniversary of Black Saturday and as a leadership team, we had many discussions about taking the children into the parklands. Had the weather been very hot and windy, or had there been other bush fires around, perhaps we may have stayed "at home" kinder that week. This year will be similar – we always consider the general feel of the community and our families and shape our program with this in mind.

This summer, many children and families right across Australia may have experienced trauma from these devastating fires. Many were holidaying in the area and have been caught up in the disaster. Of course many others live in fire-affected areas, many lost their homes and still others would have lost loved ones. I would appeal to all people working

with children and their families to please seek first to understand behaviour and not to judge it. Understand what has happened in each child's/ family's lives as this could give some clues as to unusual behaviour you might be observing. Talk with families to understand if they had experienced the fires. Seek help to understand trauma and how it may look. Reach out to allied health partners and Maternal and Child health providers to create support for families. Find grants to pay for these services – there will be grants around! Experiencing traumatic events can affect the way the brain is wired and teachers, educators and all people working with families can make a difference.

A great book to read is "The body keeps the score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma" by Bessel Van Der Kolt.

In what ways can people work with positivity and optimism in the face of this kind of trauma?



We are in a unique position to actively teach and learn together about the regeneration of the Australian bushland after fire. We had a visit from Dixons Creek Primary School in 2018 because of their book "[Parent Trees are talking](#)" which helped us talk with the children about Wurundjeri perspectives of managing the land with fire so it is healthy. We used this opportunity to explore the parklands and identify the damage

caused by the fires, and how the trees and bush regenerated. We spoke about good smoke (white, cool low smoke) and bad smoke (black damaging hot fire) and how Australia's First Peoples have used good smoke to look after the land, to keep it healthy, and prevent damaging bushfires. We noted the black scars on the trees from the bush fires and the children have learnt not to scratch the bark on the trees, as it is needed to stay healthy after a fire.

We noticed how there is a natural element of dieback, which has accelerated due to drought in 2018/19. We noted how dry the land is (was) and the children began to make connections between lack of rain and lack of water for the trees and animals and the ongoing risk of bush fire.

This year I suspect there will be a lot of talk around the impact fire has on wildlife and there is an opportunity here for children to learn more about the interconnectedness of humans, animals and the environment. I'm hoping we might kick start the year with a project around this inquiry.
