

## **New Research from the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) and Western Sydney University (WSU) shines a light on the vulnerability of mothers and their babies in disasters**

Launching online tonight, the report, 'Want to help the children? Help the parents': Challenges and solutions from the Babies and Young Children in the Black Summer (BiBS) Study' presents research exploring the Black Summer experiences of parents of very young children and the emergency responders who helped them.

In total, 256 parents of children from newborn to four years old at the time of the Black Summer Bushfires and 63 emergency responders who supported families were surveyed or interviewed for the Babies and Young Children in the Black Summer (BiBS) Study.

ABA's Breastfeeding Information and Research Manager, Naomi Hull, said that ABA conducted the research knowing that Australia lacked proper emergency planning to meet the needs of families with very young children. She said, 'The BiBS Study has confirmed this gap in disaster support for parents with babies and toddlers across emergency preparedness, emergency response and disaster recovery.'

'We found that resources to support families with very young children to prepare for evacuation were lacking and that unprepared parents evacuated later than they wanted to because of the time it took to gather items for their child.'

'Women were disproportionately impacted. Mothers often evacuated with their babies and toddlers on their own to large evacuation centres where they struggled to care for their children amongst the overcrowding, strangers and animals. Resources for caring for very young children in evacuation venues were often absent.'

Ms Hull explained that ensuring that babies were safely fed was a common source of stress and difficulty for parents, saying, 'While breastfeeding women expressed gratitude for being able to feed and comfort their babies through the disaster, they also experienced challenges and help was often not available. Similarly, formula feeding parents were commonly not able to access necessary resources like infant formula and hot water during and after the disaster.'

Ms Hull described how in recovery, support for children focused on those preschool or school aged, overlooking the needs of the youngest children despite their vulnerability.

ABA's lead researcher for the study and WSU academic, Dr Karleen Gribble, explained, 'There was a general expectation that parents would look after their children'. She said, 'It is true that parents are very motivated to protect their children. We found that mothers in particular prioritised their children over their own needs during the Black Summer Bushfires. However, this does not mean that they did not need help.'

'Some mothers were so focused on keeping their children safe that they did not eat or drink properly and two of the five pregnant women we interviewed fainted while queuing during the bushfires. Mothers needed help but many did not get the support they needed.'

While gaps in emergency response were identified, ways forward to provide better support for families with very young children were also uncovered by the study. These included: targeted emergency preparedness materials for families with very young children, a separate area for families with very young children in evacuation centres, and providing supported environments for mothers with babies and toddlers to gather together during emergency recovery.

Dr Gribble said, 'There is an urgent need to improve our emergency response to better meet the needs of very young children and their caregivers, and this research provides a road map to improve future emergency response'.

To read the Study report, [click here](#).

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