

ABA awarded federal funding to address the ‘benign neglect’ of infants in natural emergencies

As families around the world celebrate World Breastfeeding Week, the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) is launching a \$685,000 emergency preparedness program to support the critical needs of babies and young children during natural disasters.

The *Community Protection for Infants and Young Children in Bushfire Emergencies Project*ⁱ has received ground-breaking funding from the Australian Government, to understand and reduce the negative impact of emergencies on the health and wellbeing of infants and young children and their caregivers in Australia.

While emergency preparedness is heavily invested in across Australia, until now, children have been largely overlooked. A 2013 report by Save the Childrenⁱⁱ warned that children had been subjected to ‘benign neglect’ in disaster preparation. It concluded that ‘there is no standard practice with regard to planning for the unique needs of children’ in emergencies. When it comes to the very youngest, a 2019 audit of Australian emergencies plansⁱⁱⁱ identified a ‘dearth of planning at all levels of government for the needs of infants and young children’.

Ms Naomi Hull, Senior Manager, Breastfeeding Information and Research, Australian Breastfeeding Association, applauded the Australian Government for recognising the urgent need for planning for infants and young children in emergencies, via the *Community Protection for Infants and Young Children in Bushfire Emergencies Project*. The project received funding from the Australian Government under the Preparing Australian Communities grant program and is the first of its kind in Australia and only the second worldwide.

‘This landmark funding will provide a strong evidence-led base for ABA to develop emergency response training for the protection of babies and young children, in and around natural emergencies. They are society’s most vulnerable, and after the horror experiences of the Black Summer Bushfires, where babies were the last to be evacuated from Mallacoota, it is vital that future emergency planning prioritises solutions for their most basic human needs’, said Naomi Hull.

‘With nearly 60 years of experience supporting mothers and families with infants and young children, including during natural disasters, ABA is ideally placed to undertake this important work. Project research will be undertaken nationally, with emergency planning resources and modules to be developed and implemented within NSW’s Eurobodalla Shire. This will be a very practical, and game-changing program for emergency responders in Australia.’

The research component of the project, the *Babies and Young Children in the Black Summer (BiBS) Study*, is being undertaken in collaboration with Western Sydney University and will capture the experiences of families with children 0 to 4 years across Australia during the Black Summer Bushfires of 2019-20.

ABA Project Lead, Dr Karleen Gribble, said, ‘Emergency planning for young children in Australia has been hampered by a lack of knowledge of how to provide support to the very young. The BiBS Study will develop a desperately needed evidence base to enable emergency planning to protect babies and young children and their caregivers in natural disasters.’

The Black Summer Bushfires of 2019-20 were a natural disaster of unprecedented scale and extent. Bushfires occurred in every state and territory and 80% of the population of Australia was directly or indirectly impacted by fire or smoke^{iv}.

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Over the Black Summer, lack of planning adversely impacted families with young children. Lack of advice on resources needed to evacuate with a baby was noted as being in stark comparison to guidance on how to evacuate with a pet. Poor evacuation centre facilities resulted in caregivers who were bottle-feeding needing to wash bottles in toilet sinks, and some families left centres because of concerns about child safety with animals there. The young children of Mallacoota in Victoria were the last to be evacuated from the choking smoke because they could not climb Navy ship ladders.^v

Amongst the regions worst impacted over the Black Summer was NSW's Eurobodalla Shire, where the project has strong local support. 'The Australian Breastfeeding Association will work with the community to apply the knowledge gained from the national research to develop emergency responder training, to support the needs of babies and young children. Eurobodalla will become a model for local governments and community organisations across Australia to ensure that the children of the future are protected in disasters', explains Ms Hull.

Local GP, and ABA's Eurobodalla Group Leader, Dr Michelle Hamrosi, is delighted that families and community organisations in Eurobodalla Shire will be the first to implement comprehensive planning for young children in natural disasters and that their experience will assist other communities.

'The summer of 2019-20 was terribly difficult for so many families in Eurobodalla. Involvement in the project will bring something positive from that experience. Looking to the future, our children and families will be better protected if another bushfire comes, and so will families across Australia.'

Further details on the project can be found at
https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/protecting_infants_in_emergencies.

For a full list of local events happening for World Breastfeeding Week go to
<https://aba.asn.au/WBW2022Events>.

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For media enquiries please call the Australian Breastfeeding Association's 24/7 media line: 03 9686 6096 or marketing@breastfeeding.asn.au

ⁱ ABA project webpage: https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/protecting_infants_in_emergencies

ⁱⁱ Davie, S. (2013). *Don't leave me alone: Protecting children in Australian disasters and emergencies*. Save the Children. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/dont-leave-me-alone-protecting-children-australian-disasters-and-emergencies/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Gribble, K., Peterson, M. & Brown, D. Emergency preparedness for infant and young child feeding in emergencies (IYCF-E): an Australian audit of emergency plans and guidance. *BMC Public Health*, 19, 1278 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7528-0>

^{iv} Commonwealth of Australia. (2020). *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report*. <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/royal-commission-national-natural-disaster-arrangements-report>

^v Topsfield, J. (2020). *Families stuck in Mallacoota after Navy ships discouraged children under 5*. The Age. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/families-stuck-in-mallacoota-after-navy-ships-discouraged-children-under-5-20200104-p53otm.html>