

# Special Edition Foreword

By Megan Mitchell, National Children's Commissioner



**It is more than 23 years since Australia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. During this time we have seen an alarming escalation in disasters and their impacts across our nation and the world, both natural and at the hands of human beings.**

We have recently witnessed the fires in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney which claimed the homes, bedrooms, backyards, possessions and pets of hundreds of families. This created confusion, grief and upheaval for many children and young people and from which they are still recovering today.

A growing body of research is recognising the particular and traumatic impact such phenomena can have on children and young people, in the moment, in the immediate aftermath and sometimes well down the track. And, as we know, the mayhem that follows an emergency can often mean that the needs of children are overlooked.

The Convention recognises a number of important and special rights that children hold, some that have particular relevance in the contexts of emergencies. These include rights to be safe and be cared for, to be heard and to have a say in decisions that affect them. The breadth of articles in this edition of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* goes a long way to help deepen our understanding of the importance of taking a child rights approach to disaster management.

It is pleasing to see the value of the United Nations Child Friendly Space initiative highlighted - implemented following the earthquake in Turkey in 1999 and, since, widely used by many humanitarian agencies, including in Australia to provide children with safe spaces and supervised activities during and after disasters.

Also covered are the rights of children to information and to be involved in decision-making through child-centred approaches to disaster risk reduction, especially in relation to fires and extreme weather events. And we know children can be highly capable in emergency contexts. Who could fail to be impressed by the actions of 11-year-old Lily Talbot, home alone amidst the fires in Western Sydney in September 2013, when she calmly called 000 to get help for her dad who had been knocked semi-conscious by an anxious horse.

At the same time we need to be conscious that the young brain experiences critical periods of growth and development which can be severely impeded by trauma. In adolescence the pre-frontal cortex is under rapid development which means many young people struggle to control their impulses and emotions, especially in the face of significant stress. So while we can generally rely on children to be informed and take appropriate action, they will no doubt need extra guidance, comfort and support during a disaster, and some will require sustained therapeutic interventions to fully recover. The main message is that we need to be cognisant of both the capabilities *and* vulnerabilities of our youngest citizens in preventing, preparing for and responding to emergencies.

While there is still a way to go before we genuinely put children at the centre of our thinking in emergencies and disasters, I commend the Australian Emergency Management Institute's decision to devote this entire edition to the needs and interests of children. This will make a major contribution to the growing body of evidence and good practice, as well as helping to ensure that a child-centred conversation about the rights of children in disasters and emergencies continues.

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