

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



New project to examine psychological impact of January bushfires on children

A new psychology research project at UTAS aims to understand how the January Tasmanian bushfires have impacted children psychologically.

The project, titled *Examining positive and negative consequences of child exposure to natural disasters: The case of the 2013 Tasmanian bushfires*, is looking for child and parent participants to each complete a short survey.

Researchers are interested in investigating factors that predict positive and negative change in both children and their parents after the bushfires.

The research will be conducted by School of Psychology Honours student Ashlee Flakemore and academic Dr Kimberly Norris.

Dr Norris said there is a big demand in the psychological literature for such work, but to date no-one has simultaneously examined the positive *and* negative effects of exposure to natural disasters in children.

“Traumatic experiences are extremely emotional, and normal social and cognitive functioning can be negatively impacted by feelings of despair, anxiety, fear and sadness.

“Such symptoms can be debilitating and persist and intensify over time, leading to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

“Because children are highly vulnerable, it is important to understand the risk and protective factors that influence the development of PTSD in children.

“Understanding these factors is particularly important in order to help identify strategies to build resilience in these vulnerable children, thereby helping to protect against disorders such as PTSD.

“The findings of this research may help to identify children who could be more vulnerable to distress following bushfires, and to help develop strategies to improve resilience in children following natural disasters,” Dr Norris said.

Ms Flakemore said previous research has indicated that parents’ reactions to traumatic events can also have a big impact on children, making it important to hear from parents as well.

“We invite all parents and their children aged 9-18 years to complete our online questionnaires asking about their feelings and behaviours after the bushfires,” she said.

To participate in the study: Child participants must be aged 9-18 years to complete an online survey. (The survey is also available in hard copy by request.) The survey for children takes around 20 minutes, and the parents’ survey takes around 30 minutes. Everyone who completes the survey goes into the draw to win one of eight \$25 gift vouchers. All responses are confidential.

Interested participants: Please email student researcher Ashlee Flakemore ashleef@utas.edu.au or research supervisor Dr Kimberley Norris Kimberley.Norris@utas.edu.au; phone (03) 6226 7199. Potential participants are also welcome to ask questions about the surveys.

Information Released by:

The UTAS Communications and Media Office

Phone: (03) 6226 2691 or 0447 537 375

Email: Media.Office@utas.edu.au