

**Child Protection Employees' observations of  
Foster Children's experiences of loss following Bushfires**

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September 2020

*This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the Honours degree of  
Bachelor of Psychological Science (Honours)*

Word Count: 9,495

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## **Abstract**

Due to the common occurrence of bushfires in Australia, research has previously been conducted on this natural disaster and its long-term consequences on individuals, families and communities. Children are particularly vulnerable and can experience side-effects such as depression, anxiety and self-destructive behaviours. Despite there being a large existing body of research on the consequences of this natural disaster, research has not been conducted on foster children and their experiences of loss following bushfires. Foster children are not exempt from the adverse side-effects of bushfires and may be at an added risk for psychological distress due to their previous experiences of trauma. This growing and vulnerable population should be represented in the literature. The present study aimed to explore the views of Child Protection employees on foster children's experiences of loss following bushfires. An interview guide was developed and the observations of seven Child Protection employees were obtained. Participants were questioned about foster children's behaviour and mental health during the evacuation and recovery periods of the 2019 Adelaide Hills and Kangaroo Island Bushfires. A thematic analysis was used to generate six themes from the data, which were 'organisation', 'concern for loved ones and irreplaceable possessions', 'sense of adventure', 're-living the bushfire event', 'anxiety' and 'resilience'. The results suggest that whilst foster children did exhibit concern and some symptoms of anxiety, overall they demonstrated resilience and benefited from their carers' organisation. The findings may have implications on the procedures undertaken by Child Protection agencies following bushfires.

## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree of diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published except where due reference is made. I give permission for the digital version of this thesis to be made available on the web, via the University of Adelaide's digital thesis repository, the Library Search and through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the School to restrict access for a period of time.

September 2020

## **Contribution Statement**

At the commencement of this research project, my supervisor and I narrowed down the focus of this study and decided on the appropriate research methodology. I conducted the literature search before constructing the research objectives. My supervisor and I collaborated to develop the interview guide and ethics application for approval. First, I sought participants and conducted three phone and face-to-face interviews. My supervisor and I then prepared a variation to the ethics application to attract more participants through a varied data collection method. I subsequently recruited and collected data through written responses from participants over email. I then completed the thematic analysis for all three phone and face-to-face interviews and the four written responses. My supervisor cross-checked the codes and themes generated from the transcripts to ensure consistency, trustworthiness and to consider any personal biases. I have written all the aspects of the thesis, including the introduction, method, results and discussion sections.



## Acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to commence by saying, 2020 was certainly a year unlike no other. As a result, I would like to acknowledge my fellow peers for the amazing work they have completed in an unprecedented and ever-changing environment. Well done.

I have been fortunate to have had many people supporting me during this process. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Deborah Turnbull, for trusting me with this project and allowing me to research a topic that is close to my heart. I have appreciated your endless wisdom, kindness and enthusiasm to help during this momentous process.

I would like to thank the Department for Child Protection and my participants for being so accommodating and sharing their experiences on such a sensitive topic. In the future, I hope to continue to support the important work that they do.

Lastly I would like to acknowledge my family for their endless support and understanding. They have sacrificed a lot of their time to allow me to focus on my Honours degree this year and every other year of ongoing study. I simply would not have been able to complete this thesis and continue to work, without their support in the other busy areas of my life. I would like to extend a massive thank you to these important people as I am so very grateful.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The immediate impact of bushfires is visibly devastating, with survivors losing homes, animals and livelihoods. However, the indirect repercussions of bushfires on people's mental health, sleep, education and relationships can be even more damaging. Experiencing bushfires is a part of living in Australia, with families every year, all around the country, suffering the loss and grief that comes with being affected by this natural disaster. As a result, research has been conducted on the adverse and long-term effects of bushfires on individuals, families and communities. Children are particularly vulnerable and can experience significant, adverse side-effects such as depression, anxiety, difficulty sleeping and self-destructive behaviours (Valent, 1984). Despite there being a large existing body of research on the consequences of this natural disaster, research has not been conducted on foster children and their experiences of loss following bushfires.

In June 2019, there were 45,800 children in out-of-home care in Australia, with the number having increased by 48 percent from 1999 to 2019 (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2020). The term 'foster children' will be used in this study to describe children who have been removed from their biological parents due to child protection concerns and have been placed with a carer. These children have likely experienced neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse along with the trauma that comes from being separated from their parents (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2020). The term 'foster carers' will be used to define the foster children's primary caregivers.

Foster children are not exempt from experiencing further trauma through bushfires, especially in a country that is so prone to such a disaster. These children may even be at an added risk for mental distress due to their previous experiences of trauma and loss. Alternatively, the rigorous lives they have endured from a young age may have better equipped these

children to cope with a devastating event such as a bushfire. Foster children may be more resilient to the adverse side-effects that are commonly seen in children's behaviours and mental health after experiencing a bushfire.

## **1.2 Existing Literature**

Previously, research has been conducted on children's reactions in the aftermath of a bushfire. One study described children's behaviours as 'of necessity' and coloured by their parents' emotional troubles (Valent, 1984). Their passive survival strategies involved a need to be close to their protective adults, with children taking cues from those closest to them. After the Ash Wednesday bushfires, 23% of children in the affected communities were found to have mental health issues (Valent, 1984). A more recent South Australian study reported similar findings, with bushfire survivors experiencing symptoms of a psychiatric disorder. 27% of children reported moderate to severe levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, with younger children particularly at risk (Yelland et al., 2010). In the aftermath of a bushfire, young children have been found to present with behaviours such as separation anxiety, nightmares and fears of recurrence. In comparison, adolescents were found to be more likely to display risk-taking, aggressive behaviours and incoherent thinking (Fullerton & Ursano, 2005).

Research has identified what variables can influence children's reactions to traumatic events such as bushfires. These variables include family separation, prior exposure to trauma and developmental level (Gordon & Wraith, 1993). A meta-analysis conducted in 2010 found that children's long-term adjustment after bushfires is influenced more by their caregivers' reactions than their direct exposure to the event. In comparison to nuclear families, single parent families are at a higher risk of impairment following a natural disaster (Caruana,

2010). It has been argued that disrupted family functioning, such as the separation from parents in the immediate aftermath of a bushfire, is more detrimental to a child's behaviour and psychological health than their direct exposure to the event (McFarlane, 1987).

### **1.3 Attachment**

Previous research has shown that the way in which children cope with the trauma and loss of a bushfire is very much dependent on their parents' behaviour and emotional state. In the case of foster children who are not living with their biological parents, different dynamics may occur between these children and their foster carers depending on their attachment.

Early incidents of trauma such as abuse or neglect, the initial removal from their primary caregivers, and subsequent changes in foster care placements have all been shown to have an effect on a child's type of attachment (Miranda, Molla & Tadros, 2019). Foster children may exhibit insecure attachment styles and feel no sense of control or security. As a result, foster children often seek to regain control over their environment (Hughes, 2004) and this may prove difficult during the aftermath of a bushfire.

Insecure attachment styles have been shown to correlate with an increased risk of psychological distress (Miranda, Molla & Tadros, 2019). Research has shown that foster children are two to five times more likely to experience mental health issues than children in the general population (Sawyer et al., 2007). As a result, foster children may be at an increased risk of psychological distress following a bushfire than their in-home care counterparts. Prior research has already shown the impact of bushfires on children's mental health. However, foster children may be even more vulnerable to the side-effects of a bushfire experience due to their likely previous incidences of trauma and insecure attachment styles.

### **1.4 Resilience**

Resilience can be defined as a process of positive adaption following adversity in life (Schofield & Beek, 2005). It is believed that children who display resilience are those who

receive cognitive stimulation and emotional support from a key adult figure (Sattler & Font, 2018). Due to previous experiences of trauma and adopting insecure attachments styles, foster children often utilise defensive survival strategies to overcome adversity. However, research suggests that foster children can make positive progress in this area through sensitive parenting. This includes the carers' ability to be receptive to the child's thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Schofield & Beek, 2005). It appears likely that the relationship between a foster child and their foster carer will be a pivotal factor in the child's ability to overcome the tribulations of a bushfire experience.

Evidence certainly suggests that foster children are less likely to demonstrate resilience due to their lives being commonly absent from many protective factors. A key element that has been shown to promote self-efficacy and ego resiliency is healthy brain development (Schofield & Beek, 2005). However, such development appears less likely among children in care. Often foster children have experienced early life adversities such as foetal alcohol syndrome, neglect, poverty and a lack of cognitive stimulation (Healey & Fisher, 2011). Another protective factor that is identified in the literature is mastery or efficacy. This is strengthened through children experiencing success in influencing their environment and coming to believe they are worthy and also able to achieve their goals. Unfortunately, foster children who have been maltreated often develop a victim belief where they are convinced that they do not deserve success (Vandervort, Henry & Sloane, 2012). Consequently, this is problematic in developing resilience. Self-regulation has also been identified as a protective factor for resilience. Again this is an area that foster children do not commonly rate well in. The inability to self-regulate one's emotions is the most common consequence of ongoing exposure to trauma (Vandervort, Henry & Sloane, 2012). The literature suggests that foster children do not have the means to be resilient in the face of adversity and this may prove to be problematic through bushfire evacuation and recovery periods.

## 1.5 Context for Current Study

During the month of December 2019, bushfires devastated many parts of South Australia including the Adelaide Hills and Kangaroo Island. Three people lost their lives as 196 homes, 68,000 livestock and 280,000 hectares were burnt in the fire (South Australian Independent Bushfire Review Team, 2020). Thousands of people were forced to evacuate their homes, including foster carers and foster children. This period of time proved to be challenging for the Department for Child Protection staff who worked to ensure the safe evacuation and later recovery of the families they case manage.

This study will examine Child Protection employees observations of foster children who have experienced loss following bushfires. This research project will aim to extend on previous literature and also cover areas of research that have previously been neglected. Firstly, the researcher will explore foster children's behaviour during the threat of a bushfire. There was a clear focus in the literature on children's behaviour during the aftermath of a bushfire, however less consideration has been given to their actions during the initial evacuation period. Foster children's behaviour and mental health after a bushfire is another key focus of this research study as negative side-effects are continuously recognised in previous literature. The relationship between a child and their caregiver has been shown to play a pivotal role in how a child copes with a traumatic event. As a result, this study will also explore foster children's relationship with their foster carers. Finally, foster children's understanding of bushfires and its impact on their foster family and wider community will be examined for the first time. The focus will be to explore participants' experiences with foster children who were effected by the recent bushfires and to obtain their thoughts on the children's behaviour and mental wellbeing.

## **1.6 Research Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this research project is to explore the views of Child Protection employees on foster children's experiences of loss following bushfires. A set of research objectives will be used to guide the participants' questioning. After considering the existing literature on children's behaviour and psychological wellbeing after bushfires, the following research objectives were developed: (1) Explore foster children's behaviour during the threat of a bushfire; (2) Explore foster children's behaviour and mental health after a bushfire; (3) Explore foster children's relationship with their foster carers after a bushfire; (4) Explore foster children's level of understanding in relation to the bushfire experience.

## Chapter 2: Method

### 2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were front line Department for Child Protection staff who were working in non-metropolitan regions. Front line employees are the staff out working in the field and interacting directly with the foster children, foster carers and families. The participants for this study consisted of Senior Social Workers, a Social Worker and a Case Manager, with their job title dependant on their level of university education and experience in the field. A total of 7 Child Protection employees were interviewed, with their years of experience working in the department ranging from 1 to 30 years ( $M = 18.71$ ). All of the participants reported that they had experience working with foster children following a bushfire. The number of foster children that each employee spoke about ranged between 2 and 8 children, with the experiences of 26 foster children in total represented in the interview transcripts. Table 1 shows the basic demographic details for each participant.



**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years of Ex- perience</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Number of foster children discussed in interview</b>
1	Female	25	Senior Social Worker	4
2	Female	12	Senior Social Worker	2
3	Female	26	Senior Social Worker	3
4	Female	15	Senior Social Worker	4
5	Male	30	Senior Social Worker	8
6	Female	1	Case Manager	2
7	Female	22	Social Worker	3

## **2.2 Ethics**

This study was approved by the ethics subcommittee in the School of Psychology at The University of Adelaide (Approval Number 20/45). The researcher developed an information sheet which was provided to potential participants to ensure informed consent. The information sheet outlined the nature and aims of the study whilst also providing contact details for support systems such as Lifeline. Participants were required to sign a consent form before being interviewed. Participants were debriefed after providing their responses and encouraged to reach out to the researcher if they had any questions or to seek help through one of the contacts provided if necessary. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher provided pseudonyms for the names of participants, foster children and foster carers', and redacted any identifying information.

## **2.3 Procedure**

A semi-structured interview was the chosen data collection method for this study. Karen Barriball and Alison While's 1994 discussion paper on semi-structured interviews was utilised during the development of the interview schedule. A semi-structured design was chosen to allow the researcher to explore individuals' attitudes, perceptions and opinions on a complex and sensitive topic. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview provides the researcher with the opportunity to probe participants for more information and clarification. Probing is an invaluable tool to explore sensitive issues and can also assist the participant to recall information (Barriball & While, 1994). This is particularly important in this study as participants are asked to recount certain events and answer questions which require memory.

Whilst developing the interview schedule, a focus was put on eliciting individuals' ideas, perceptions and experiences. Keeping the schedule standardised was also important to

allow for comparability between participants during the analysis. The researcher's extensive review of previous literature was used to identify key themes worth exploring and areas that have previously been ignored. Internal testing of the interview schedule involved editing by the researcher's supervisor and preliminary testing on colleagues in the academic psychology field to identify any ambiguous or leading questions. The interview schedule was then pilot tested on an employee of the Department for Child Protection to assess whether the questions would elicit perceptions and recall previous experiences.

Child Protection employees that were known to the researcher through her Case Support Worker role in the department, were contacted via email to seek their interest in participating in this study. The employees were provided with an information form which outlined the nature of the study and any potential risks. Employees that were interested in participating in the study, contacted the researcher directly to register their interest. Passive snowball sampling was utilised to obtain more participants. At the completion of an interview, participants were provided with recruitment information that they could pass on to other colleagues. The researcher asked the participants to share her contact details with people they believed had experience relating to the nature of this study and would be interested in participating. These potential participants were then able to contact the researcher voluntarily if they wanted to be interviewed.

Once participants read the information sheet and registered their interest to take part in the study, a time was arranged for the interview to occur. Interviews took place either face to face at a Department for Child Protection office or over the phone. The length of the interviews ranged between 13 and 32 minutes ( $M = 23$ ). The audio from all of the interviews was recorded to ensure that an identical replication of each interview was available to facilitate the analysis.

After the researcher had completed three interviews, there was decline in participant availability. Child Protection employees would come forward and express their desire to take part but then also communicate their concerns about a formal interview and their limited free time. The COVID-19 pandemic only created more issues with restrictions around attendance and social distancing at offices. As a result, the researcher sought approval from her supervisor and subsequently asked the Ethics Committee for a variation to the ethics application. For the final four participants, the researcher emailed the interview guide and allowed the participants to reply with written responses to the questions.

Effort was given to follow a quality process, with reference to the Quality Assessment and Strengthening Protocol (2013). Quality assessment and strengthening is defined as a process of assessment by an external person or team (Reynolds et al., 2013). The thematic map was provided to the researcher's supervisor who assessed the interpretations of the data. The researcher consulted with her supervisor on her decision-making and interpretation process in developing the thematic map. To ensure 'good practice', the collection and assessment of the data was conducted in an ethical and systematic manner, with an audit trail also completed.

## **2.4 Analysis**

A thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the information obtained in the interviews. This type of analysis was chosen because it can summarise key features of a large body of data, generate unanticipated insights and allows for the social and psychological interpretation of data. Furthermore, it has been shown to be useful in producing qualitative analyses suited to informing policy development, which is relevant in this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Findings from this research project will be offered to the Department for Child Protection for their consideration.

The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-steps thematic analysis procedure during the study's analysis phase. The first step involved transcribing the interviews,

reading and writing down initial notes. Once the audio recordings had been transcribed into written accounts, the researcher read each transcript multiple times to start recognising patterns and themes. Any reference to a participant's name, office, a child's name or address were redacted from the interview transcripts. These verbatim accounts of the verbal data were checked back against the original audio recordings to ensure their accuracy.

The second step in the analysis phase involved generating initial codes. Codes are the features in a transcript that appear interesting or refer to the most basic level of the raw data that relates to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher coded the interesting features of each interview, whilst keeping in mind the study's research objectives.

Once a significant list of different codes had been identified across the interview transcripts, the researcher began her analysis of the broader level of themes. This third step involved consideration into how different codes can combine to construct an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher developed a basic thematic map and commenced the consideration of relationships between codes and themes.

The fourth step involved reviewing and refining the themes. First the researcher read all of the collated extracts for each theme and decided whether they formed a clear pattern. If the candidate themes did not form a coherent model, then consideration was given as to whether the theme was problematic or some of its extracts did not fit within the theme. The theme was either reworked or a more suitable home was found for the extracts that did not currently fit within the existing theme. Next the researcher considered the validity of the different themes in relation to the data set. Now that the original thematic map had been updated, it was examined to see whether it accurately reflected the meanings evident in the interview transcripts. The researcher read all of the interview transcripts again to ensure that the thematic map was an accurate representation of the whole data set.

The next phase of analysis involved defining and naming themes. For each theme, the researcher wrote a detailed analysis which identified the narrative that each theme described. Consideration was given into how the narrative for each theme fitted into the broader story of foster children's experiences of loss after a bushfire and in relation to the study's research objectives. Concise names were developed for all of the individual themes.

The sixth step in the thematic analysis process, involved the final analysis and write-up of the report. The researcher worked to create a coherent and logical description of the themes that are evident throughout the interview transcripts. The researcher used data extracts or real examples to support the prevalence of each theme. As a result, the researcher was able to make an argument in relation to each research objective.

## **Chapter 3: Results**

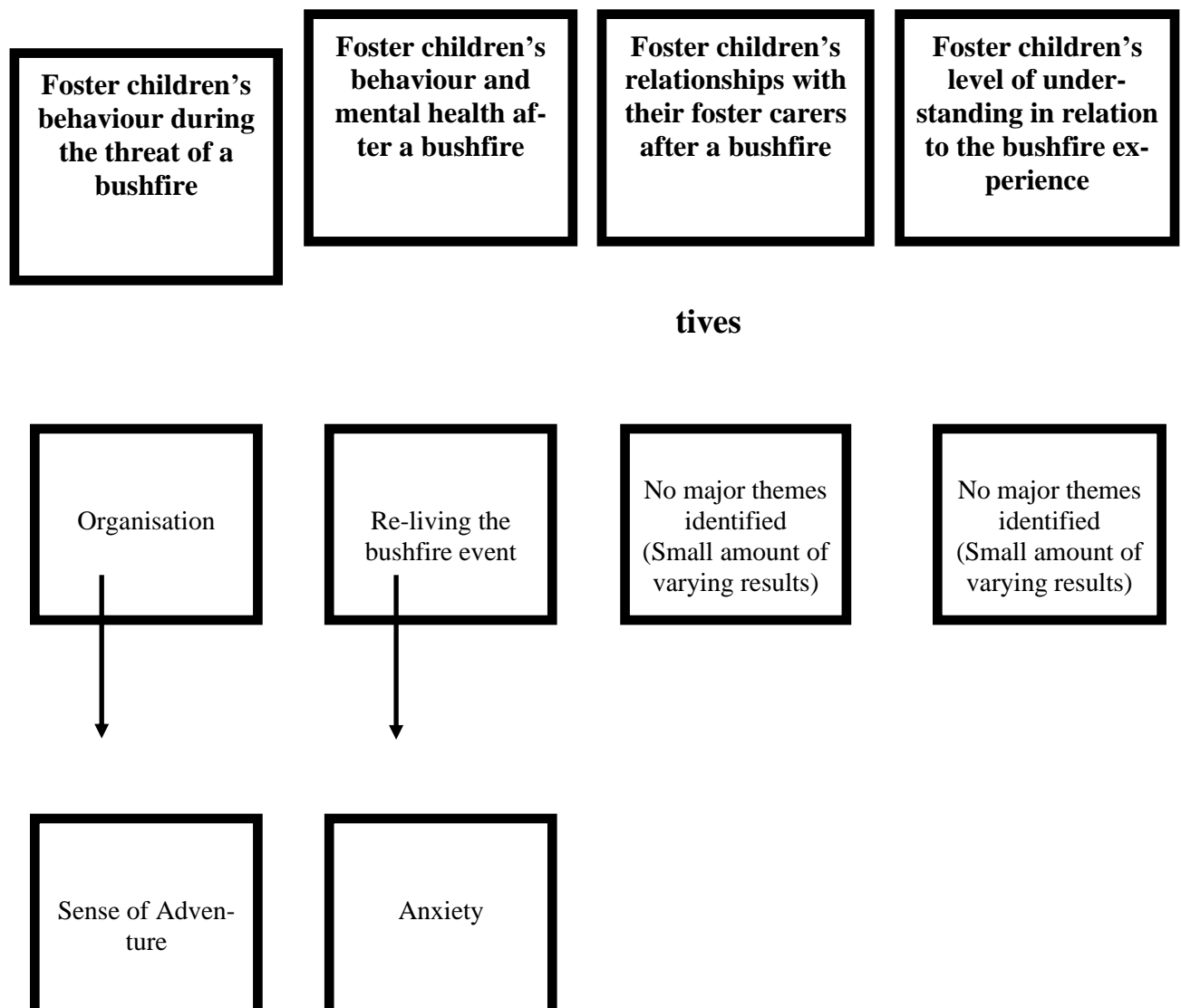
### **3.1 Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Process**

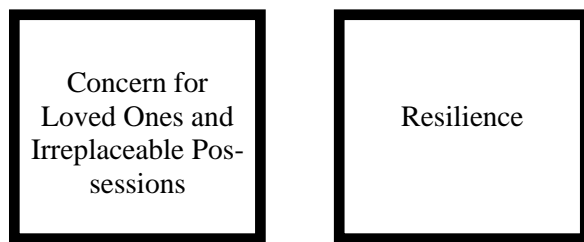
This study explored the views of Child Protection employees on foster children's experiences of loss following bushfires. Participants did not provide a large quantity of responses, however the quality of the feedback was evident with relevant and succinct answers provided. Attempts were made via prompts during the interviews to obtain more elaborate answers, however brief and to the point feedback was given. The sample size was dictated by the availability of participants. Despite a smaller number than initially desired, there was no new information surfacing after the first five participants' responses. Therefore, it can be confidently assumed that data saturation was achieved.

A thematic analysis of the data resulted in the identification of six major themes; organisation, sense of adventure, concern for loved ones and irreplaceable possessions, re-living the bushfire event, anxiety and resilience. The themes can be divided between two of the study's research objectives. These include foster children's behaviour during the threat of a bushfire and foster children's behaviour and mental health in the aftermath of a bushfire. No

major themes were identified in relation to changes in foster children's relationship with their foster carers after a bushfire. A small amount of slightly differing results were obtained in respect to this research objective and therefore no major themes were recognised. Despite obtaining six themes that did not relate directly to the changes in this relationship, the importance of the relationship between foster child and foster carer was made evident within all of the six themes. No noticeable themes were identified for the research objective, foster children's level of understanding in relation to the bushfire experience. This was also due to only a small amount of varying data being collected for this research objective. The thematic map gives a visual illustration of the research objectives and themes in a relatively chronological order.

### Research Objec-





**Figure 1**

*Thematic Map illustrating research objectives and corresponding themes.*

### **3.2 Foster Children’s Behaviour during the threat of a Bushfire**

#### **3.2.1 Organisation**

Foster carers’ level of organisation or preparedness for the bushfire was identified as a prominent theme throughout the evacuation period. Child Protection employees spoke about foster carers having a bushfire evacuation plan in place and how carers living in non-suburban areas had been encouraged to be prepared. As the Adelaide Hills bushfire was shortly before Christmas, some carers had prioritised packing the children’s presents so they could open them on Christmas Day.

When questioned about the bushfire evacuation period, participants spoke about the foster children helping their foster carer to evacuate. Participant 1 said “each of the kids packed a bag” (line 11) and also highlighted that the carer “was very organised” (line 24) with the car packed and ready to leave. Participant 5 recognised that the foster carer “had a good plan” (line 11) and knew where they were going after evacuating their home. The importance of being well organised was highlighted by participant 6:

*“Their carer was well organised and evacuated early with the kids. The carer took them shopping as an exciting distraction. They then went and stayed at a family friends house for the night. The carer said the kids appeared to be*



*quite relaxed considering the circumstances. The carer was able to provide them with a sense of certainty amongst the chaos” (lines 8-11).*

Participant 7 had a similar opinion, stating that “their carer was able to organise the children well and keep them calm whilst they packed and got ready to evacuate” (lines 10-11). Carers having a plan and calmly executing it appeared to have a positive influence on the children.

### **3.2.2 Sense of Adventure**

For some foster children, the bushfire evacuation provided them with a sense of adventure. Foster carers transported the children to stay with friends or family as the threat of the bushfire increased. Some foster carers had to resort to a camping like stay at a relatives property, which brought its own entertainment for the children. Child Protection employees also spoke about the distractions that foster carers used to shelter the children from the terrifying events unfolding. These distractions included games, shopping and manicures.

Participant 2 recognised that the foster children were “excited by all the fuss” (line 51). Similarly, participant 3 stated that the foster children “were actually excited by the whole adventure” (lines 7-8). The foster carer had made the evacuation into an exciting camping trip with the children’s behaviours positively heightened. Participant 5 also recognised this, with foster carers turning the tense evacuation period “into an adventure” (line 8) as they travelled away from their home to new surroundings.

Participant 1 spoke about distracting the children with shopping and gifts to keep their minds away from the bushfire threat:

*“Carer asked me to come and spend sometime with the kids so she could have time to herself to organise some things. I took the girls shopping and we got our nails done.*

*It was a nice distraction for them I think” (lines 28-29).*

Similarly, participant 6 stated that “the carer took [the foster children] shopping as an exciting distraction” (line 9). The children could be distracted from their thoughts around the bushfire event through fun camping and shopping trips amongst other exciting adventures.

### 3.2.3 Concern for loved ones and irreplaceable possessions

Foster children’s concern for loved ones and irreplaceable possessions was evident during the threat of the bushfire. Foster carers were forced to evacuate quickly with the children, leaving toys, photos and beloved pets behind. Some foster fathers chose to stay and defend their home which meant their foster children were forced to evacuate without them. Participant 1 recounted a families evacuation story:

*“Half an hour before the fire hit their home... they left with the dogs, cats but had to leave their horses and other animals behind. Their foster dad also stayed behind to defend the home. So they were worried about that”* (lines 10-13).

Participant 1 also alluded to how the foster children were worried and “sad about their photos and certain toys and presents they had received that couldn’t be replaced” (lines 46-47). Participant 2 recounted a similar evacuation story:

*“The carer [name] and the kids evacuated but her partner stayed to defend the house and so she was really worried and obviously the kids were really worried about um [foster dad’s name] staying back. And that not knowing because communications... telephones lines were cut”* (lines 4-6).

Participant 4 also spoke about the foster children’s concern for loved ones during the evacuation period with the children “worried about their friends” (line 3). Similarly, participant 7 recognised the children’s concern for loved ones:

*“The children were a bit worried, alert and tense during this period. The children had to leave their animals and some family behind which made them worried and scared.*

*However these feelings appeared to subside once reunited with these loved ones” (lines 8-10).*

Feeling concerned about the safety of family members, friends and animals appeared to be a prominent theme amongst the children during the evacuation period. However, these emotions did not appear to completely consume the children’s behaviours and they subsided once their loved ones’ safety was confirmed.

### **3.3 Foster Children’s Behaviour and Mental Health after a Bushfire**

#### **3.3.1 Re-living the bushfire event**

Foster children re-living the bushfire event through conversations, story telling and nightmares was common during the aftermath of the bushfire event. The bushfire experience became a main talking point for foster children at home and at school. Child Protection employees noted that the foster children discussed the bushfire continuously and in detail for a couple of weeks after the event. These conversations were often recapped in a positive light, and from the perspective of young foster children who had been sheltered by their carers. Alternatively, two foster children from the data experienced disturbed sleep for a couple of weeks following the bushfire event. Their interrupted sleep included nightmares of their alarming experience and difficulty falling asleep due to being preoccupied with negative thoughts.

According to participant 1 the foster children “were talking about it a lot” (line 31), with the bushfire event a reoccurring topic in their conversations. Similarly, participant 3 discussed the children’s story telling:

*“They were fine I think. The little boy he um... when I went to see them later... he was telling stories about how close the fire had got.... And how bad it was... but then his sister would tell him no... he was exaggerating”* (lines 16-18).

Participant 3 recognised that the bushfire experience was also a major talking point for the children at school as “they were excited to talk about it and like chat about it with their friends” (line 22). Participant 4 has a similar experience with the foster children “keen to look at the burnt-out area and talk about the fires” (lines 7-8). Alternatively, participant 2 spoke about one young girl who “was having some trouble with her sleep originally like for the first few weeks after it happened” (lines 28-29). Participant 7 also recognised that one of the foster children had nightmares following the bushfire and “was not able to settle down to sleep” (line 28). Re-living the bushfire event in conversations with their social worker, foster family and friends at school was prominent amongst the foster children. Re-living the event through negatives responses such as nightmares was also apparent in two of the foster children featured in this study.

### **3.3.2 Anxiety**

Symptoms of anxiety such as fear, hyper-vigilance, restlessness and negative thoughts were visible in some of the foster children’s behaviours. In these cases, the foster children often presented as alert and tense despite the immediate threat of the bushfire having passed. Child Protection employees reported an excessive amount of questioning from the foster children, asking their carers and social workers about the dangers of the bushfire event and uncertainty of the recovery period.

Participant 2 acknowledged the symptoms of anxiety that some of the foster children were experiencing by stating “the children have shown some anxiety the last few weeks around the fires” (lines 42 and 43). Participant 2 elaborated by saying that one of the foster children “would ask like a week after it happened ‘is this going to happen again?’ Like she

was really on edge. Like hyper-vigilant about the fire coming back. So that was like for a few weeks” (lines 22-24). The child’s anxiety around the bushfire event was evident with participant 2 stating that “every time they had to drive to school they would drive through the burnt out areas and she would be like ‘is the fire going to come back?’” (lines 29-30). When asked to define what they meant by ‘on-edge’, participant 2 stated “not sleeping as soundly... asking lots of questions... like alert” (line 49). This foster child was provided counselling through their primary school once she returned.

Participant 7 described the foster children’s behaviour as “tense and alert” (line 27) during the aftermath of the bushfire. According to participant 7 these different demeanours the children had adopted only lasted for a week after the bushfire. Counselling was also provided to these children through their primary school. Similarly, participant 1 acknowledged that when a family of four foster children "went back to school the school organised a counsellor for them” (lines 39-40) but they had only displayed minimal symptoms of anxiety. Participants held positive opinions of the different schools' responses to the bushfire event. Many of the Adelaide Hills and Kangaroo Island schools provided support to their students through counselling services.

### **3.3.3 Resilience**

It was evident throughout the data that the vast majority of the foster children were able to show elements of resilience during difficult circumstances. Foster children were often described as fine or coping well, and only minimal changes in behaviour were reported by the majority of participants. Foster children were able to demonstrate positivity and control their emotions during and after the bushfire event.

According to participant 1, the foster children “were quite positive. Telling me about how they were going to rebuild and get to design their own bedrooms” (lines 31-33). They

were able to uphold a positive outlook on the current difficult circumstances and look forward to the future as well. The foster children were able to demonstrate their ability to self-regulate their emotions and consider the feelings of others. Participant 1 recounted the following:

*“when I took them back to their house... I got quite emotional because it was just so devastating and they were actually comforting me going its going to be okay. Like we’re okay. Yeah they didn’t cry or anything like that”* (lines 33-35).

Participant 1 did acknowledge that the children “were sad” (line 37) but considering the circumstances “they were coping with it all quite well” (line 37). When asked to describe the foster children, participant 1 stated “resilient. Very resilient” (line 84). Participant 3 provided a similar story, recounting that the foster children “were fine. It wasn’t that big of a deal for them” (lines 24-25). Using the statement “they sort of went with it” (line 10), participant 3 acknowledged the children’s ability to go through the motions and survive in the circumstances they had been dealt with. When asked to describe the foster children, participant 3 gave a similar response to participant 1, stating “pretty resilient” (lines 32-33). Participant 6 praised the foster children’s behaviour following the bushfires:

*“They handled it really well with the kids really showing resilience during the fallout of the fires. Many presented unfazed during the aftermath of the fire and many were eager to help their carers and talk about the event. It helped that they had a strong relationship with their foster carers”* (lines 35-38).

Participant 6 also recounted that the children were “happy and smiley kids” (line 15) when she met with them shortly after the ordeal.

### **3.4 Foster Children’s relationships with their Foster Carers after a bushfire**

There appeared to be a consensus amongst participants that the relationships between foster children and their foster carers did not negatively change after the bushfire experience.

When questioned about the foster children's relationship with their foster carer, participants would either answer that their relationship was the same as before or they were closer after the event. When prompted about the strength of the relationship, participant 1 answered "yes they are all quite close" (line 60). Participant 3 acknowledged the importance of the relationship between child and carer when she stated "yeah the kids rely on her a lot obviously. She was able to keep them calm and make more of an adventure out of the day away from home" (lines 28-29). Participant 6 also commented on the foster children's close relationship with their foster carers and how it "probably was strengthened by the whole thing and their carer providing them with a sense of certainty" (line 36-37 ). Participant 4 stated that their relationship did not change, whilst participants 5 and 7 spoke about the foster children always having a good relationship with their foster carers.

### **3.5 Foster Children's level of understanding in relation to the bushfire experience**

Participants were asked how well the foster children understood the effects of the bushfire and its level of impact on the wider community. There was a variety of answers given to this question ranging from the children having little idea about the effects of the bushfire, to having a very sound understanding. Participant 1 answered "quite well I think. They have to drive past lots of burnt land to get to their house and kids at their school were also affected so I think they understand" (lines 63-64). Participant 1 also acknowledged that the foster children's age and maturity may have contributed to their level of understanding when she stated "they are older too, not really young so that helps" (line 65). Other participants also spoke about the foster children's understanding in terms of their friends sharing similar experiences. When questioned about their understanding, participant 2 answered "yeah and like they had lots of friends I think that were also affected. That had the same um experiences" (line 36).

In contrast, it appeared children who had been well sheltered from the devastation of the bushfire were less likely to be able to comprehend the seriousness of the event and its widespread consequences. This was evident when participant 3 stated “well, they obviously didn’t lose their home or have the fire come really close so that helped. But I think they probably didn’t understand how serious it was in other areas” (lines 31-32). Participants 4 and 5 also spoke about the foster children’s carers sheltering them from the visual aftermath of the bushfire and therefore they were not as informed on the true consequences of the event. It appeared that the children’s level of understanding was influenced by a number of factors including age, how much they were sheltered by their carers and the proximity of the bushfire.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**



#### **4.1 Overview**

This study explored the views of Child Protection employees on foster children's experiences during the evacuation and subsequent aftermath of a bushfire. The themes evident during the evacuation period, were organisation and foster carer's preparedness, a sense of adventure, and concern for loved ones and irreplaceable possessions. After the immediate threat had surpassed, the themes present were re-living the bushfire event, anxiety and resilience. Some of the themes like concern for loved ones and anxiety, have also been evident throughout previous literature. However, themes such as resilience were not strongly identified in previous research as a likely quality for foster children to demonstrate.

#### **4.2 Organisation and the influence of Foster Carers' behaviours on Foster Children**

The family's organisation and carer's preparedness during the impending threat of the bushfire were identified as a major theme amongst the data. Child Protection employees recounted that the foster carers had prepared a bushfire plan and were able to calmly execute their plan during the evacuation period. This provided the foster children with a sense of certainty amongst the chaos of a bushfire evacuation. As the threat of the bushfire increased, foster carers ensured that their car was packed ready to leave and encouraged the foster children to organise themselves in preparation to evacuate. Research has shown that during a stressful event, children take cues from the people closest to them, with their behaviours coloured by their parents' actions and emotional state (Valent, 1984). Therefore, having foster carer's who are organised, proactive and calm during a stressful situation, sets a positive example for the foster children they are caring for. It would be reasonable to conclude that the carers had a positive influence on the foster children, with the young people demonstrating minimal concerning or disruptive behaviours throughout the impending threat of the bushfire.

### **4.3 A Sense of Adventure amongst Foster Children's Behaviours during the Evacuation**

During the evacuation period, there was a sense of adventure amongst the activities carried out and the foster children's subsequent behaviours. According to Child Protection employees, children were behaving as though they were going on an exciting adventure. The foster children were eager to evacuate to family and friends homes or travel to go camping. According to participants, foster children were excited by all of the attention.

Minimal research is available to support these findings. However, a recent study indicated that exposure to natural disasters can promote maladaptive behaviours. In children, tantrums are an example of a maladaptive behaviour that can be used to avoid directly confronting the discomfort of a new situation or environment (Self-Brown et al., 2017). Whilst children in this study did not throw tantrums during the evacuation period, they did become positively heightened and express unexpected emotions such as excitement. It appears that the expression of heightened emotions, whether they be negative or positive, is common amongst children after exposure to a natural disaster.

Minimal research has been conducted on children's behaviour during the evacuation period of a bushfire event. Furthermore, many studies have not focused on the positive behaviours carried out and have been written in a somewhat negative light. During a stressful event, previous research does suggest that children's actions are of necessity and that they embrace passive survival strategies (Valent, 1984). In this research study, the foster children's behaviours are not described as 'of necessity' or simply surviving. These differing results could indicate that the children were distracted or well sheltered from the real dangers of the bushfire. Conversely, the focus on feeling excited and upholding a positive mindset may be these foster children's survival strategy. The true nature of this heightened behaviour should be explored further in future studies.

#### **4.4 Foster Children's Concern for Loved Ones and their Attachment with Foster Carers**

Concern for loved ones and irreplaceable possessions was evident amongst the foster children during the bushfire evacuation. Foster children were forced to leave animals, special belongings, and sometimes one of their foster carers behind as they fled to safety. Child Protection employees reported that the children were worried about their loved ones' safety but were not consumed with fear. Previous research has shown that children who are separated from their parents during a bushfire event are more prone to problematic behaviours and mental health issues. Furthermore, the separation from parents has shown to have a larger negative influence on children's behaviours than their direct exposure to the event (McFarlane, 1987). This supports the stress and worry that the foster children were experiencing when separated from their carers. The children's concern also suggests that they have an attachment with their carers.

Early incidents of trauma have been shown to have an effect on a child's attachment style (Miranda, Molla & Tadros, 2019). The literature suggests that foster children may exhibit insecure attachments, feel no sense of control and therefore seek to regain control over their environment (Hughes, 2004). This would have been difficult during the uncertainty of a bushfire evacuation. Besides concern and worry, Child Protection employees did not report overly concerning behaviours. The children were not consumed with fear and did not act out to take control of their environment. The findings suggest that the foster children have a secure attachment with their foster carers. Previous research has shown that children who hold secure attachments have confidence that certain people will be available to meet their needs and are comfortable seeking support from others (Ponizovsky et al., 2013). This is particularly important during a stressful event like a bushfire evacuation.

The children's attachment style with their carers and subsequent behaviours would have likely been benefitted by the fact that the children have all been with their carers for a

considerable amount of time. All of the foster children in this study are on long term court orders, under the Guardianship of the Chief Executive until they reach 18 years of age. This means that the department is no longer attempting to reunify the children with their parents and the children will be in foster care for the rest of their childhood years. It also means that many of the foster children have likely been with their foster carers for a few years and have established a secure attachment. Future research should study foster children who have recently been removed from their parents and placed with their foster carers to see if the attachment styles and subsequent behaviours are different as a result.

#### **4.5 Re-living the Bushfire event as a Positive Healing Strategy or Negative Side-effect**

During the aftermath of the bushfire, Child Protection employees reported that foster children were continuing to re-live their bushfire event. Foster children were frequently talking about their experience, with the bushfire a main topic of conversation. Re-living the bushfire event occurred in a positive manner, through talking about the event and telling stories to friends, social workers and family. The children were eager and willing to share their feelings and experiences. This finding has not been acknowledged in previous studies on children after bushfires, however this may be due to the literature having a negative orientation. Regardless, the literature does state that children's long term adjustment after bushfires is influenced more by their caregivers reactions than their direct exposure to the event (Caruana, 2010). This suggests that the foster carers' positive mindsets and willingness to talk about the experience, encouraged foster children to discuss their thoughts and feelings. Arguably, the carers actions played a pivotal role in the children's grief process. Discussing the event with their foster carers may have had a therapeutic affect on the foster children who were able to quickly process their grief and move forward with their lives.

Similarly, foster children's eagerness to re-live the bushfire event through conversations and story telling, may have acted as a type of coping strategy for these children. Previous research has shown that children who demonstrate avoidant or negative coping strategies, such as social withdrawal and resignation, are more likely to experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after a traumatic event (Marsac et al., 2013). Alternatively, the foster children in this study adopted active coping strategies, working through their stressors in conversations with foster carers and Child Protection employees.

Negatively re-living the bushfire experience through nightmares and consuming, negative thoughts was less common amongst the foster children. A negative side-effect for two of the foster children was nightmares about the experience, which lasted for up to two weeks after the event. This is consistent with previous research which found young children were likely to experience nightmares after a bushfire (Fullerton & Ursano, 2005). The two foster children were both under ten years old, however there were numerous other children the same age that did not experience nightmares. Furthermore, there were foster children living in the same placements as these two children who did not have difficulty sleeping.

The foster children's early upbringing and previous incidences of trauma may have had an effect on the children's responses to the bushfire. In hindsight, the researcher should have further prompted the participants to discuss why the two foster children behaved differently and if they believed it was due to previous incidences of trauma.

The two foster children also talked about the bushfire frequently and constantly asked questions about the event. However in comparison to the other foster children, these discussions and questions were delivered in a more anxious manner. Child Protection employees reported that this was evident when speaking with the two foster children, as their main talking points revolved around the negative consequences of the event and their concern for the

bushfire's potential return. Despite the more anxious manner in which these children presented their stories, they were still adopting active coping strategies which involve seeking understanding, along with problem and emotion focused support (Landolt, Vollrath & Ribi, 2007). These foster children were appealing for support, identifying their concerns and searching for clarity when re-living their bushfire experience.

There is no obvious environmental indicators or attachment related reasons as to why two foster children suffered from nightmares and the other children did not. Furthermore when prompted, Child Protection employees relayed that the children's behaviours were different to before the bushfire, and the children did not have a history of mental health issues. As a result, it likely comes down to individual differences and varying preferred coping strategies. All of the foster children identified their stressors in conversations about the event, however only two of the children intently sought understanding and support from their foster carers. Furthermore, all of the foster children were able to demonstrate wishful thinking or positive cognitive restructuring, with the exemption of two children. Future research should involve consultations with the foster children to decipher their coping strategies and to explore the variance between children.

#### **4.6 Foster Children's Symptoms of Anxiety during the Aftermath of the Bushfire**

The two foster children who experienced difficulty sleeping after the bushfire, also demonstrated other symptoms of anxiety such as hyper-vigilance, restlessness and negative thoughts. In previous literature, up to a third of children reported moderate to severe levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after a bushfire (Yelland et al., 2010). Child Protection employees reported that the two foster children were frequently questioning their carers on the bushfire and asking about its potential return. This is consistent with previous findings on children experiencing fears of reoccurrence (Fullerton & Ursano, 2005).

Symptoms of anxiety were not only exclusive to the two children experiencing nightmares, with Child Protection employees reporting that some of the other foster children also demonstrated anxiety related behaviours. Foster children were described as alert and tense during the aftermath of the bushfire. However, these emotions quickly subsided and so did any anxiety around recurrence of the event.

The foster children in this study demonstrated significantly less symptoms of anxiety, for a reduced period of time and severity in comparison to other studies on children after bushfires. Previous literature indicates that children exposed to a significant natural disaster commonly report sufficient symptoms to establish a classification of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Caruana, 2010). According to the DSM-5, a PTSD diagnosis includes four symptoms; negative alterations in cognition and mood, hyper-arousal, intrusion, and avoidance. Furthermore, the symptoms must represent a notable change in the child's behaviour, cause significant distress and impair the child's functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Whilst the foster children in this study exhibited some symptoms of anxiety, they did not endure overtime, overwhelm the children with distress, or influence their functioning at home or school.

Previous research has shown that foster children are two to five times more likely to experience mental health issues in their lifetime (Sawyer et al., 2007). As a result, foster children were expected to fair even worse than the rest of the population in regards to their mental health after a bushfire. In comparison to the suggestions of previous research, the foster children in this study suffered minimal symptoms of anxiety and no formal mental health diagnoses were made. Whilst they experienced some heightened emotions, these did not endure or become overly consuming for the children. Despite literature suggesting otherwise, foster children were not more vulnerable to the psychological side-effects of a bushfire than their in-home-care counterparts. Comparisons cannot be made to other studies with foster children,

as this study is the first of its kind. Further research is required to solidify these findings, however this study suggests that foster children have the ability to demonstrate resilience after a bushfire event.

#### **4.7 Foster Children demonstrating Resilience during the Aftermath of the Bushfire**

According to Child Protection employees, foster children were able to self-regulate their emotions, uphold a positive mindset and cope with the trials and tribulations of the bushfire event. Foster children did not excessively cry or act out during the aftermath of the bushfire. In previous literature, self-regulation has been recognised as an indicator of resilience. However, foster children are not expected to rate well in this area as the inability to self-regulate one's emotions is the most common consequence of ongoing exposure to trauma (Vandervort, Henry & Sloane, 2012). Previous research indicates that maltreated children have severely compromised problem-solving abilities. They are prone to 'fight or flight' behaviours, which inhibit normal brain functioning by disrupting communication between the two hemispheres (Baltman & Paradis, 2012). In contrast, Child Protection employees reported that whilst the foster children were sad about the visible consequences of the bushfire, the children did not remain heightened or become increasingly upset. The literature does suggest that foster children are able to improve their ability to self-regulate their emotions through trauma-focused treatments and therapy (Vandervort, Henry & Sloane, 2012). In considering the findings of previous research, the foster children in this study have likely received trauma-informed care and have improved their ability to regulate their emotions as a result.

According to Child Protection employees, the foster children were able to maintain an optimistic mindset, see the positives in having to rebuild and appreciate their fortunes. Foster children have likely experienced early life adversities such as neglect, poverty and abuse



(Healey & Fisher, 2011). Despite their suggested upbringings, the foster children in this study were described as positive, reassuring and hopeful.

Previous literature on the topic of resilience has been particularly damning towards foster children. Researchers have insisted that foster children are highly unlikely to demonstrate resilience due to early experiences of trauma and the subsequent absence from protective factors such as healthy brain development and self-regulation (Vandervort, Henry & Sloane, 2012). However, Child Protection employees commonly described the foster children as ‘resilient’, or demonstrating positive adaptation following adversity in life (Schofield & Beek, 2005). Their ability to adapt to the fast-changing environment of the bushfire event, to remain positive and quickly recover in the aftermath, are all qualities encapsulated by the definition of resilience. The department’s focus on delivering quality, trauma-informed care has likely improved the outcomes for these children (Vandervort, Henry & Sloane, 2012).

A component of delivering trauma-informed care is demonstrating sensitive parenting. Research suggests that foster children can improve their capacity to overcome adversity through their carers adopting this parenting style (Schofield & Beek, 2005). The foster children’s ability to cope exceedingly well and to overcome adversity, suggests that the foster carers were able to demonstrate a style of sensitive parenting. Being perceptive to the children’s feelings, offering support and being a calming influence during the turmoil of the bushfire, likely played a major role in the foster children’s ability to positively ‘bounce-back’ from this traumatic event.

#### **4.8 Strengths**

This research study was the first to explore foster children’s experiences of loss following a natural disaster. An abundance of research has been conducted on children in general, and the physical and psychological side-effects of a bushfire. However, despite foster children being a growing and vulnerable population, research has not been conducted on their

experiences during and after a bushfire event. Furthermore, the majority of previous research focuses on children's physical and psychological health during the aftermath of a bushfire, with few studies exploring children's experiences during an evacuation period. Research on resilience and attachment theory indicated that this population of children would be extremely vulnerable to the side-effects of a natural disaster. To ensure that this vulnerable population of children are represented in the literature, this study focused solely on foster children and covered their experiences during the evacuation and subsequent recovery period of a bushfire.

Another strength of this study was its data collection method. A semi-structured interview was developed through reference to previous literature. This method allowed for the collection of open-ended data, and the exploration of participants' thoughts and feelings on the chosen research subject. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, participants were given the option to provide written feedback to a set of questions. This was useful for acquiring more detailed and thoughtful responses. The participants were all educated professional who knew the foster children well and had observed their behaviours.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the chosen themes and to reduce the impact of individual biases, the researcher's supervisor cross-checked the codes and subsequent themes generated from the transcripts. Furthermore, the researcher maintained an audit trail, which aided the researcher's reflective practice and increased sincerity.

#### **4.9 Limitations and Future Research**

A potential limitation of this study is the fact that the researcher was known to the participants through her job in the Department for Child Protection. At times the participants appeared to leave out information or skip over certain areas of their response. This was likely because they assumed the researcher would already know the information. The researcher tried to overcome this through prompting the participants to expand or explain in more detail.

However, an emphasis should have been made at the outset for the participants to treat the researcher like she had not had any experience in Child Protection. This may have encouraged for more elaborate responses.

Self-reflexivity is important in qualitative research, to acknowledge the potential impact of the researcher's preconceptions and biases. As the researcher is employed by the department, she likely held preconceptions on what the results of the study would entail. The researcher was surprised by the negativity of previous literature on foster children and resilience. Therefore, consideration was given not to allow previous experiences to influence the researcher's data interpretations. Consultations with the researcher's supervisor in regards to the data coding and themes, helped to ensure that the researcher's preconceptions were not influencing her interpretations.

Another weakness is the limited transferability of the study's findings. The foster children were all living in rural areas of South Australia, with the focus on one bushfire season. Not all of the children lost their home, land or belongings, with many just evacuating and returning to undisturbed properties. As a result, the findings may be less applicable to other samples.

Future research should aim to interview more participants and learn the experiences of a larger quantity of foster children. Due to this research study being a honours thesis and subject to time restraints, the decision was made to interview only Child Protection employees. However in the future and with more time, ethics approval should be sought to interview foster children themselves to obtain their personal insights and feelings firsthand.

Future research should also look into the experiences of foster children who have only recently been removed from their biological parents. The foster children in this study were all on long-term guardianship orders and had been with their foster carers for an extended period of time. Researching children on short-term court orders would help to determine whether

foster children's ability to demonstrate resilience is influenced by the type of attachment they have with their carers.

Future research should also explore the themes in this study that differed from previous literature. There are avenues to be explored within the theme named 'sense of adventure', which was not found in negatively toned previous research. Furthermore, previous literature had dismissed 'resilience' as a likely trait for foster children to exhibit. The findings of this study call for future exploration into this area of research.

#### **4.10 Implications**

The findings of this study demonstrate how important the relationship is between foster carer and foster child during a bushfire. The department should continue to invest in this relationship for better outcomes during a stressful event. The findings emphasise the importance of being prepared and having a bushfire plan, and therefore this should be continually enforced.

Child Protection employees revealed that there were no established protocols for workers when dealing with foster children having to evacuate and recover from a bushfire. The findings of this study can aid the department in developing effective strategies for bushfire emergencies. This should be a priority in a bushfire prevalent country like Australia.

The findings also have implications on theorising about resilience in foster children. They highlight the need for future research that encapsulates the abilities of all children in out-of-home care. This would avoid foster children being confined to a label like traumatised youth who are highly unlikely to demonstrate resilience.

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

This qualitative study was the first to research the experiences of foster children during and after a bushfire event. The findings of this study contribute to the significant gap in

the literature, which is scarce on children's behaviours during the evacuation period and completely excludes all foster children's experiences. Previous research on the topic of resilience, was very negative towards foster children and their ability to overcome adversity. On paper, foster children did not have the proven qualities that were required for resilience. As a result, researchers were almost dismissive of this trait being demonstrated by traumatised youth. Child Protection employees did not appear surprised by the foster children's ability to adapt to the changing environment of the bushfire and to overcome their grief. The findings of this study challenge previous literature and suggest that more research needs to be done on the topic of resilience to accurately encapsulate all foster children's experiences. This population of children are perhaps more unpredictable and variable than the literature suggests. This study also supported previous research in highlighting the importance of trauma-informed care and sensitive parenting. Sadly, this population of children continues to grow and therefore it is becoming increasingly important that their experiences are represented in the literature (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2020). As another bushfire season looms in Australia, hopefully the findings of this study can be used to establish effective departmental procedures that will benefit foster children.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**PROJECT TITLE:** Child Protection employees observations of foster children's experiences of loss following bushfires.

**UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE - ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL NUMBER:** 20/45

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Professor Deborah Turnbull

**STUDENT RESEARCHER:** Ashleigh Shearer

**STUDENT'S DEGREE:** Honours in Psychological Science

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

#### *What is the project about?*

The research project aims to explore the views of child protection employees on foster children's experiences of general loss following bushfires. Interviews will be used to explore child protection employees' observations about foster children's behaviour, mental health and relationship with carers after a bushfire, along with how they understood the bushfire tragedy and its influence on the wider community. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be useful in improving government and other organisations' procedures.

#### *Who is undertaking the project?*

This project is being conducted by student researcher, Ashleigh Shearer who is also an employee at the Department for Child Protection. This research will form the basis of her degree in Honours in Psychological Science at the University of Adelaide under the supervision of Professor Deborah Turnbull.

#### *Why am I being invited to participate?*

You are being invited as you are an employee of the Department for Child Protection or you are employed in a role that provides you with experience about foster children during bushfires.

#### *What am I being invited to do?*

You are being invited to take part in an interview conducted by the student researcher. The interview will focus on foster children's experiences of loss following bushfires. You will be asked to talk about your knowledge and experiences in this area and particularly the children's behaviour, mental health, relationships and how well they comprehended the bushfires' impact on their foster family and the wider community. The audio from the interview will be recorded on the student researcher's phone and laptop. The interview will take place either face-to-face in a location agreed upon by yourself and the researcher, or over the phone.

#### *How much time will my involvement in the project take?*

There is no strict time frame on the interview. However, it is estimated to take around 30 to 45 minutes to complete.



***Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?***

Participating in an interview will not pose any risk to your physical safety. However, as the topic of discussion may be emotionally triggering, a side effect of participating could be psychological distress. If you do experience any anxiety or negative thoughts following the interview it is recommended that you contact Lifeline on 131114 or visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) for further help and information.

***What are the potential benefits of the research project?***

This research project has the potential to positively influence organisational procedures and the way in which people help children in care following a natural disaster. The goal is to identify key information that may be beneficial for the Department for Child Protection to know about children in care following natural disasters and assist them in creating relating policies and procedures.

***Can I withdraw from the project?***

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time. Even once the interview has commenced, you can leave at any time and withdraw yourself from the project if you wish.

***What will happen to my information?***

Your name will be removed from any interview transcripts that are produced. In the report, pseudonyms will be used to keep your name confidential. While all efforts will be made to remove any information that might identify you, as the sample size is small, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. However, it can be guaranteed that the utmost care will be taken to ensure that no personally identifying details are revealed.

With permission, the interviews will be recorded on the researcher's phone and laptop. The interview recordings will be kept on a password protected laptop and backed up regularly onto a secure university hard drive to ensure participants privacy. The student researcher will provide her supervisor with redacted digital copies of the interview transcripts, that the supervisor can store on her secure university drive. The student researcher will also hold copies of the research data for their own use. The researcher will retain the interview transcripts and primary materials for the recommended 5 year period to allow other researchers and interested parties to make reference to them. Only the project's researchers will have access to the transcripts unless other researchers request to use them for a related research project

The information gained through the interviews will be used as a part of the student researcher's Honours Thesis and may be published in a journal. A summary of the results of this study will be made available to you via email if you indicate to the researchers that you would like to receive a summary. Your information will only be used as described in this participant information sheet and it will only be disclosed according to the consent provided, except as required by law.

***Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?***

Please contact the Principal Supervisor, Professor Deborah Turnbull via the email [deborah.turnbull@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:deborah.turnbull@adelaide.edu.au). Alternatively, you can contact the student researcher, Ashleigh Shearer via the email [ashleigh.shearer@student.adelaide.edu.au](mailto:ashleigh.shearer@student.adelaide.edu.au).

***What if I have a complaint or any concerns?***

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Adelaide (approval number H-2019-xxx). This research project will be conducted according to the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (Updated 2018). If you have questions or problems associated with the practical aspects of your participation in the project, or wish to raise a concern or complaint about the project, then you should consult the Principal Supervisor. If you wish to speak with an independent person regarding concerns or a complaint, the University's policy on research involving human participants, or your rights as a participant, please contact the Human Research Ethics Committee's Secretariat on:

Phone: +61 8 8313 6028

Email: [hrec@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:hrec@adelaide.edu.au)

Post: Level 4, Rundle Mall Plaza, 50 Rundle Mall, ADELAIDE SA 5000

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

***If I want to participate, what do I do?***

If you would like to be a part of this research project, please sign the consent form and return it to the student researcher. The researcher will contact you via email or phone to organise a suitable time and place for the interview to occur.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Deborah Turnbull and Ashleigh Shearer

## Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

### Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

#### CONSENT FORM

1. I have read the attached Information Sheet and agree to take part in the following research project:

<b>Title:</b>	<b><i>Child Protection employees observations of foster children's experiences of loss following bushfires.</i></b>
<b>Ethics Approval Number:</b>	<b>20/45</b>

2. I have had the project, so far as it affects me, and the potential risks and burdens fully explained to my satisfaction by the research worker. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions I may have about the project and my participation. My consent is given freely.
3. Although I understand the purpose of the research project, it has also been explained that my involvement may not be of any benefit to me.
4. I agree to participate in the activities outlined in the participant information sheet.
5. I agree to be:  
Audio recorded  Yes  No
6. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time.
7. I have been informed that the information gained in the project may be published in a thesis or journal article.
8. I have been informed that while I will not be named in the published materials, it may not be possible to guarantee my anonymity given the nature of the study and small number of participants involved.
9. I agree to my information being used for future research purposes as follows:  
 Research undertaken by these same researcher(s)    Yes No  
 Research undertaken by any researcher(s)            Yes No
10. I hereby provide 'extended' consent for the use of my data in future research projects that are:

- (i) an extension of, or closely related to, the original project: Yes No
- (ii) in the same general area of research (for example, genealogical, ethnographical, epidemiological, or chronic illness research): Yes No

11. I understand my information will only be disclosed according to the consent provided, except where disclosure is required by law.

12. I am aware that I should keep a copy of this Consent Form, when completed, and the attached Information Sheet.

**Participant to complete:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher/Witness to complete:**

I have described the nature of the research to \_\_\_\_\_  
*(print name of participant)*

and in my opinion she/he understood the explanation.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 3: Interview Schedule

For this research project we are particularly interested in foster children's experiences of loss following bushfires...

- *Have you ever case managed or had experience with a foster child who has been affected by a bushfire?*

- *Can you tell me about the different types of behaviours that the children demonstrated during the imminent threat of the bushfire?*

Potential prompts = how did they first find out about the bushfire? / were they acting differently to normal? / were they scared or relaxed? / were they aggressive or reserved?

- *Can you tell me about the different types of responses that the children demonstrated after the bushfire?*

Potential prompts = what kinds of emotions did they express? / did they act out or misbehave? / how did they grieve? / did they talk about the bushfire a lot or avoid the topic?

- *How did they behave at school once they returned?*
- *Did any of the children have trouble sleeping?*
- *Do you think any of the children's behaviour was influenced by their foster carers behaviour?*
- *How long did the children demonstrate these different behaviours?*
- *Did any of the children appear to grieve or miss something like a toy or a particular routine?*
- *Can you tell me about any symptoms of psychological distress or anxiety that the children may have exhibited?*

Potential prompts = Did they have any pre-existing mental health issues? / did they appear depressed, anxious, nervous or sad?

- *Did any mental health services get offered to any of the children?*
- *Did any of the children access a counsellor or psychologist?*

- *Can you tell me about the children's relationships with their foster carers after the bushfire experience?*

Potential prompts = Was their relationship with their carer the same as before the fire? / were they closer to their carer or more distant? / did they confide in their carer?

- *How well do you think the children understood the effects of the bushfire and its level of impact on the wider community?*

Potential prompts = Did they appear to understand what had happened? / did they ask lots of questions? / how was the widespread effect of the bushfires explained to them? / did they draw pictures relating to the bushfire?

- *What do you think about the department's procedure for when foster children's homes are being threatened by bushfires?*

Potential prompts = is there good guidelines in place to step workers through the process? / have the procedures been reviewed since the last bushfire tragedy?

- *Is there anything you believe could be changed to better assist foster children during or after a bushfire?*