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Being a parent after a disaster: The new normal after the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires

Authors:

Lauren Kosta^{1*}, Louise Harms¹, Lisa Gibbs², David Rose¹

Affiliations:

¹ Department of Social Work, Melbourne School of Health Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Australia

² Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, The University of Melbourne, Australia

Correspondence to be sent to: Dr Lauren Kosta, Department of Social Work, The University of Melbourne, Parkville 3010, Australia.

E-mail: lauren.kosta@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

This article explores parental experiences over nearly 7 years that followed catastrophic Australian bushfires in 2009. Principles of pragmatism and the constructionist tradition guided the use of semi-structured interviews with parents (19 mothers, 3 fathers) and inductive thematic analysis to distil what participants said about the trauma, loss, and disruption caused by the fires, and ways in which they responded as parents.

Changes described in their parenting role and family life were themed as 'losing normal' which encompassed managing additional exposures, losing fun, and living at their capacity. Parents then evinced the struggle of settling and seeking to regain a sense of normal. This theme highlighted tensions, pressures and expectations they faced (their own and external) in trying to get back to normal, along with extended recovery timeframes. Participants valued strategies to provide stability, familiarity, and manage their own emotions.

The analysis highlights the influence of the parental role on an experience of trauma, the range of losses, and the extended experience of disaster recovery for parents. Insights for social work practice are discussed, including the potential to inform expectations of recovery timeframes and supporting parents and their families to reconstruct their sense of normal in their new, post-disaster context.

Key words:

bushfires, disaster, family, parenting, recovery, wildfires

Manuscript

Background

In the summer of 2009 catastrophic bushfires swept through the Australian state of Victoria, the worst of which are considered to have occurred on February 7th—a day now known as Black Saturday. Black Saturday was the result of both natural and human causes and it embodied what many consider to be defining features of disasters: entire communities were simultaneously exposed to widespread disruption and loss and, as a result, individuals experienced numerous adversities concurrently (Norris *et al.*, 2002; Bonanno *et al.*, 2010). Over 400 people were injured, and 173 people lost their lives. More than 3,500 buildings were destroyed, of which over 2,000 were houses leaving thousands of people displaced. Livestock and livelihoods were also lost, and the estimated economic cost of the fires exceeded \$4 billion (Teague *et al.*, 2010). With disasters such as Black Saturday, family units are often collectively exposed to the destruction and the impact it has on family life in the aftermath. However, there is little available research on the traumas that families experience during and the changes they encounter following disasters (Pujadas Botey and Kulig, 2014). Similarly, families do not feature prominently in disaster planning and response frameworks at international and national (Australian) levels (Harms *et al.*, 2021).

Working with families is a significant aspect of social work responses post-disaster. For example, following Black Saturday, social workers worked with families in roles including bushfire case-managers, community-based counsellors, community development workers in local government and community agencies, and emergency housing (Hickson and Lehmann, 2013). Social work case-management with families has also been described following Hurricane Katrina (Bliss and Meehan, 2008), and the significance of families has been highlighted in a Chinese post-disaster psychosocial social work model (Sim and Dominelli, 2017).

Working with families inherently involves working with parents. Pujadas Botey and Kulig (2014), in exploring family functioning with parents and children following Canadian wildfires, found that parents play a significant role in family recovery and their experiences are also uniquely shaped by their parental position. Similarly, a study of family adjustment to displacement following Hurricane Katrina in the United States showed that parents and children may be occupied in different ways at times as they adapt (Peek *et al.*, 2011).

These differences between parents and children highlight the role of parenting. Social workers who worked with families following the 2013 flood in southern Alberta, Canada, raised parenting as an area for attention in responding to disaster-related loss and grief (Fulton and Drolet, 2018). In post-disaster literature, parents are recognised as critically important to children's wellbeing and recovery (e.g., Noffsinger *et al.*, 2012). As such, post-disaster research conducted with parents has largely been either to report on children's outcomes or to examine the ways parents directly (e.g., through parenting practices) or indirectly (e.g., due to their own mental health) influence their children's recovery (Cobham *et al.*, 2016; Kosta, 2018). However, studies have also found, for example, 3.5-4.5 years following Hurricane Katrina, nearly 30% of 532 mothers displayed general psychological distress and 33% showed symptoms consistent with PTSD (Paxson *et al.*, 2012). Thus, understanding lived experiences of parents can provide a valuable perspective on family life and parents' own experiences of trauma and loss and the parental role within that context.

One study with parents after Hurricane Andrew in the United States found the essence of parenting after a disaster to be *struggling to rebuild family life* (Coffman, 1996). Within this struggle were themes of *thankful for what we have; overwhelmed by damages and demands; limited by after-effects; responsible for children's well-being; balancing needs and roles; constantly changing amidst uncertainty; and finding meaning and growing stronger*. Norwegian parents who survived the South East Asian Tsunami in 2004 showed their efforts to help their children cope involved heightened awareness and monitoring of their children's reactions, and aiming to prevent or reduce negative

psychological reactions to the trauma through re-establishing a sense of safety, resuming normal roles and routines, and talking to their children (Hafstad *et al.*, 2012).

These studies represent some of the limited research into parental perspectives after different disasters internationally (Kosta, 2018). To the authors' knowledge, no such studies have captured perspectives of Australian parents in relation to post-disaster family life and parenting or investigated longer-term parenting experiences beyond the first two years post-disaster.

Current study

The aim of our study was to enhance understandings of the nature of parenting after disasters through the contribution of Australian parents' voices over an extended period post-disaster. We began with the research question: What has been the experience of parenting since the Black Saturday bushfires? In this paper we examine what parents said about their experience during the fires and of family life and parenting over the years that followed.

Study design

This was an exploratory research study using qualitative methods to capture lived experiences in rich detail and draw insights for social work practice. It was theoretically influenced by principles of pragmatism and the constructionist tradition. Acknowledging objective and subjective realities, the reality of interest in this study, or the 'meaningful' reality (Crotty, 1998) for addressing the study aims, is the lived experience of parents themselves. Combining these theoretical influences means remaining cognisant of the researchers' involvement in eliciting and analysing these experiences, while also aiming for accurate descriptions of participant accounts (Padgett, 1998; Morris, 2006). Thus, data were condensed with the intent of privileging and remaining as close as possible to meaning offered by the participants, while also contributing interpretations of patterns across the data.

Ethical approval for this research was granted by The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 1443474). Participants provided written informed consent which acknowledged considerations such as potential for their identities to be recognized by community members familiar with their circumstances, based on characteristics of their experiences evident in direct quotations, though efforts were made to limit this risk to confidentiality.

Recruitment

Recruitment occurred between May 2015 to May 2016, with a break during peak fire season. Several strategies were used to purposively sample parents who had been living in an area affected by the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday fires and who had at least one dependent child (under the age of 16) at the time of the fires. 'Parent' was broadly defined to include mothers, fathers, or caregivers such as step-parents, foster parents, or other kinship carers identifying as primary carers. Sample size was guided by the aim for variation (on demographic features and aspects of the phenomenon) as well as the depth and richness of discussion, and amount of data generated (Sandelowski, 2000).

Email invitations were sent to participants of a large existing study, *Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery*, who had volunteered to be contacted about opportunities to participate in future research and indicated they were caring for children. *Beyond Bushfires* utilised a saturation sampling approach (Gibbs *et al.*, 2013), recruiting people who originated from 25 communities across Victoria, including people who had relocated after the bushfires. An e-newsletter and social media channels including Facebook and Twitter developed for *Beyond Bushfires* promoted the present study as well, as it was open to participants who had not been involved in *Beyond Bushfires*. Snowball sampling occurred, an advertisement placed in a local newsletter, and, unsolicited by the researchers, the study was promoted by community members on social media.

Participants received a \$50 AUD gift voucher in recognition of time spent and to help offset any costs that may have been incurred such as travel or arranging childcare.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to explore issues raised by participants while still maintaining a level of focus on the overarching research questions (Daly, 2007). After an introduction by the interviewer and the completion of a brief demographic questionnaire, the interviews began with asking the participants to describe their families. This was followed by enquiring as to what it had been like to be a parent since the Black Saturday bushfires. Subsequent questions drew on an interview guide to cover: What parenting challenges were faced? Were there positive aspects of the experience? Were there things they had done to help their children cope? What had they found supportive (formal and informal)? And, what was helpful or unhelpful along the way? Finally, parents were asked to reflect on what they thought the experience had been like for other parents, whether there was any advice they would offer to parents in similar situations, and whether anything had surprised them about their experience. At each interview, a follow-up contact (by participant's preference of phone or email) was arranged for the next week, to debrief about their experience of participating in the research (including possible distress), offering the opportunity for questions, and to discuss assistance with accessing support services if needed.

The interviews occurred, on average, 6 years 10 months after Black Saturday. The average duration of the interviews was 72 minutes (range 34-106 minutes). With one exception, all interviews were conducted face-to-face in private meeting rooms at public venues in participants' communities. One interview was conducted via telephone at the request of the participant after rescheduling. All were done as individual interviews, though participants from the same family were offered the option of joint interviews if that would have been their preference.

The initial two interviews were conducted jointly by two of the researchers (LK and LG); subsequent interviews were conducted by LK who maintained a research journal to capture reflections immediately after interviews and debriefing conversations with the other authors. All interviews were audio-recorded, with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim by LK as a measure to increase

familiarisation with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). NVivo10 software (QSR International, 2012) was used to facilitate the organization of data, maintain an audit trail, and record associated memos and annotations.

Data and analysis

The data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The recursive analytic processes involved: familiarisation with the data; coding – drawing upon techniques including descriptive, in vivo, process, emotion coding, which helped to explore patterns in the data (Saldaña, 2013); developing, reviewing, and refining themes; and then representing the themes with the written report. Coding and initial development of themes was conducted by LK. Each of the authors, LH, LG, DR, read at least four different transcripts, and were involved in discussions about theme development and LK's reflective practice.

Findings

Participants

Twenty-two parents (19 mothers and 3 fathers, from 20 families) participated in this study. Participants ranged in age from 38 to 63, with a mean age of 47 years. Twenty-one participants were born in Australia; one was born overseas but had lived in Australia most of their life. Fourteen participants had a tertiary degree or diploma, five had technical diplomas or certificates, and three had high-school education between years 9 to 12. At the time of the interviews 12 participants were employed part-time, five were employed full-time, five had home duties and were not in paid-employment. Seventeen participants were married or in de facto relationships and five identified as single parents. Several relationships had changed since the fires: one, a single parent at the time of the fires, had remarried; three who were married had since separated.

At the time of the fires, seven participants had one child, 13 had two children, and two participants had three or more children. Across the 20 participating families, children's ages ranged from 0-18, and included infants (five), toddlers (five), children (eight), pre-adolescents (nine), adolescents (nine), and one young adult. Since the fires, six participants reported having another child(ren).

All but one family had remained residing in fire-affected communities, though not always the one they had been living in at the time of the fires.

Experiences of Black Saturday

During the fires, nearly half the participants were separated from immediate family members. Decisions to evacuate and separate were often tied to family considerations such as mothers taking their children to safety while the father defended the house, or a child sent to a neighbour's house while their mother prepared their property. The decisions that they made at the time proved difficult for many to reconcile in the aftermath. One mother, despite her husband's ongoing insistence that she had been protecting their children, felt:

I...genuinely believe that it [‘the trauma of Black Saturday’] has lessened my ability to parent because of my feelings of not being in control and that particular experience I was open to, you know, losing...everything. And I fled and left my husband there.... (Mother 15)

The impact of the unknown for parents and children who were separated was a salient concern:

...she thought she was gonna die, she knew that I was dead. [...] Just don't--, don't not be with your kids. Because I think for me, um I do believe that that's done real damage to me and I think that that's done real damage to her... (Mother 7)

Many people were trapped by the unexpectedly rapid progression and severity of the fires on Black Saturday, as well as failings in formal communications of warnings. However, for some who stayed, the decisions they made on the day still equated to a sense of responsibility:

...the fire had come through and the house was burning and there was no water, (inhale) and the thought was: well, I've-- I've killed my family. [...] you know I'd made choices that had led to them being in danger... (Father 2)

These and other examples shared by parents showed how their decisions and experiences on the day had ongoing ramifications for them and their families in terms of mental health and wellbeing.

Participants descriptions of the years following the fires showed their experience of losing normal, with examples of ways in which this occurred, and subsequently the struggling to regain a sense of normal and help their families settle. These themes are presented in further detail below.

Losing normal

All participants made comparisons to life before and after the fires. Many spoke broadly of how the fires changed “everything” or that they were “life changing.” To illustrate:

We didn't lose our home, but we lost really good friends, we lost our town, we lost everything. (Mother 3)

Nearly half of these parents lost their homes in the fires, which was accompanied by displacement experiences of living for years in what was intended to be temporary accommodation. Others faced significant property damage, and for some the deaths of their animals. At least half of the parents discussed themselves or their children having known people who had died in the fires.

In talking about the scale of trauma, loss and death, parents showed their frame of reference for “normal” had shifted as they made comparisons to “normal” people, “normal” parenting, or compared their children’s behaviours to what might be “normal.” As this mother noted:

It would not be normal, except for when we're talking in war zones, but in Australia, to have to go through so much grief and so much death all at once. (Mother 2)

Participants described (a) their parenting as being essentially the same though more difficult since the fires; (b) what they had to do as parents may not have changed but they themselves had, in turn influencing their parenting; or, (c) they encountered new parenting situations that they felt they would not have faced had the fires not occurred. Descriptions of these changes illustrated the influences of parent's own, their partner's, or their child(ren)'s reactions to trauma and loss, or the demands of the post-disaster environment.

So it was really quite...difficult to maintain a normal parenting style, because the whole framework of our life had been destroyed. (Mother 11)

For some, usual difficulties of parenting seemed to be amplified:

...it's really tiring being a parent at the best of times. When you're struggling, when you've got, you know, emotional issues and...triggers everywhere, that just come out of nowhere,...it's really tough... (Mother 11)

Several parents reported ways in which parenting had become a more "deliberate," conscious effort to be "effective." For instance, partners needing to talk more explicitly about what was "important to them" as parents:

So we actually had to make...time, and make the effort to actually put that out. [...] I don't know how—obviously, how other people parent, but, often it's an organic process and you don't necessarily talk about things. (Mother 11)

While a few parents did not consider parenting to have changed significantly, there were several who described the changes as fundamentally altering parenting and their experience of it. These parents often appeared surprised or distressed by the changes and often also expressed feelings of helplessness, sadness, and loss.

Many participants took care to stipulate that there were diverse experiences. Several explained this acknowledgement was part of being non-judgemental, which they valued in relation to parenting. It

often also appeared to be a ranking of difficulties; their perception that other people had faced greater challenges or additional losses which created different contexts for parenting.

Managing additional exposure

Parents found themselves trying to manage their children's further exposure to loss and trauma in the aftermath. For example, changes in the physical environment, as one mother explained:

When we moved back in everyone was sleeping in our room for a while...because the bush, it had just all gone. Like before where it was thick bush...it was so open and from my daughter's room you could see into our neighbours' place where their house had burnt down and they actually hadn't survived. (Mother 4)

Participants also expressed concerns about social changes at a community level, including expressions of anger, disagreements and "division" particularly during rebuilding and recovery efforts. Several described their community as "vulnerable," "reactive," and "traumatized," and made observations of increased alcohol and drug use and relationship breakdowns.

Losing fun

Losing a sense of fun was something participants observed for both children and themselves as adults. To illustrate:

'Cause sometimes, you didn't feel like having fun, you thought the last thing on earth was ever going to happen again was that you were going to have fun.
(Mother 11)

The relevance of place with respect to play and social opportunities was an aspect of this experience of loss for children but also for participants as it undid deliberate efforts they had made to create engaging play spaces or to live in a rural area offering particular childhood experiences. One mother explained how the changed physical environment affected social experiences:

It was a total loss property so there was-- it was like a moonscape, there was nothing left at all. [...] 'Cause see when we were living in-- after the fires, living in the shed, the boys didn't want to bring their friends home. Because, it wasn't an ideal place. And it wasn't particularly pretty. And all outside was boring.

(Mother 13)

This reflects how 'fun' was an additional loss for families because of the emotional impact of the bushfires and changes in places, spaces and opportunities for fun in the aftermath.

Living at capacity

Over half the parents raised the issue of being at, close to, or exceeding "capacity," since the bushfires. This was related to the number of demands in the post-disaster environment and the effort involved in meeting these demands. One mother, for example, illustrated the cumulative experience of demands:

It was hard enough, you know to...be a parent, still work...(inhale) and get out of bed. *(Mother 12)*

Another mother, who described family life as complicated prior to the fires (given alcohol and drug use and an abusive partner), explained the essence of post-fire parenting for her was that it was "messy," as:

On one hand we had lots of help and services, and on the other hand, all of our regular help and services...didn't exist anymore and/or they were all wrapped up in the emergency stuff. *(Mother 14)*

Some participants discussed having a lower threshold for what felt stressful or feeling as though they had lower capacity to manage pre-existing family challenges (such as managing medical appointments for a child with a disability) or future adversities as a result of having gone through the fires.

A number of participants from two-parent households illustrated a shared capacity, describing the benefit of “taking turns” with their partner and being able to “break-down.” Some spoke about the need to be the functioning parent while their partner struggled with the trauma or, being the parent who needed significant support from their partner. For example:

At times I think his capacity to parent was minimized, because... he was just so hurt and traumatized and that-- you know not-- having really full-on conversations that sometimes were in front of her which I think we could have um definitely done differently, but when you're so upset and traumatized, you just can't.... (Mother 1)

Dividing roles appeared to be how some parents negotiated their combined capacity (e.g., one focused on rebuilding while the other focused on parenting). By contrast, two single mothers reported feeling overwhelmed by being the only parent available to respond to their child. Two mothers, who identified as being in abusive relationships, discussed feeling unsupported by their partners in parenting generally.

The struggle of settling: Seeking normal

Half of the participants spoke about regaining a sense of normality in the aftermath of the fires. Several qualified that returning to normal had been an initial expectation that had not eventuated. For example:

...when you get into it [the new house] and that's when everything will be okay and it-- and then I can stop. And then all of this, everything will just go away, and I'll just be back to normal and everything will be fine. And then you get in there and you have zero connection with the place. It was like moving into a hotel. And it just-- it means nothing, it means nothing. (Mother 7)

A number of participants similarly questioned how to conceptualize normal, reflecting a tension in attempts to “get back” to normal. What appears implicit in these parents’ descriptions, another mother articulated; that the nuance of normality was a more recent realization:

...you’re trying to get to normal again. Which, will never be, I understand that now, but that’s what you’re grappling to do. You are grappling to get everything back to normal. (Mother 6)

Many participants identified having had an internal drive and sense of urgency around the need to achieve normal. For others the urgency came from external, often unwelcome, expectations about recovery which infringed on personal pacing:

I think, particularly after the fires, in lots of ways we as a community... weren’t allowed to grieve properly like...[...] ’cause it was always “No you’ve got to get on with it, get back to normal.” (Mother 2)

Some parents described pressure experienced while receiving support from extended family relationships. For example:

So [maternal] grandmother was furious at [my partner]...for taking a weekend away. And got into a massive fight with her about how we were staying in her house, and how this was difficult for her and how [my partner] should be priori-- shouldn’t be spending a weekend away, she should be spending a weekend looking for somewhere else to live. (Father 2)

Other identified pressures included structural demands such as timelines around accessing funding, insurance, or participating in the class action lawsuit.

Many participants also felt pressure in relation to decision making. For instance:

*"I find it so hard to make decisions, now." [...] 'cause could it be the wrong one.
'Cause we made so many decisions right after the fires, and...they were actually
really, really important decisions. It wasn't just like...so even just like choosing paint
[...] It was just, everything was a decision. Like, were we going to build? Where were
we going to build? Were we going to sell the block? Where are we gonna raise our
children? Do we want to even go back to that community? (Mother 8)*

Other parents also cautioned against making big decisions too quickly which they had felt pressured to do.

Settling takes time

Participants had expectations of *when* things would be normal or settled. This was evident in their surprise or disbelief at how long it had taken to feel normal or that the challenges their families and communities experienced were ongoing. Some reflected that it may have been useful to them to have a better understanding of how long this could take.

Most described times they felt settled, saw signs of recovery or improvement, and many found it to have taken at least several years. Nearly a third spoke of having spent months or years in "survival mode." Even though there were turning points, nearly three quarters reported ways in which they, their families, or people in the community were still experiencing effects of trauma:

*...we're getting people presenting even now, who were engaging with our art
classes who are, like back on the continuum of right back at day dot of not being
able to even talk about it, and it's there's no---...there's no timeline to recovery.*

(Mother 7)

Being in survival mode had seen them occupied with the immediate practical demands of recovery. Several parents said how they had found it important to "take time away" from the post-disaster environment with their family to support their recovery. Participants' expectations of recovery

appeared to influence how they managed time and what they prioritized. One mother recalled her husband's resolve to take a family trip. Though initially a source of conflict for them, he convinced her that it was going to take until their eldest son was five years older "before we get anywhere near where we were." She now valued both having taken the trip and her husband's perspective on the length of time recovery would take.

Feeling settled: Stability and familiarity

Many participants spoke about the influence of stability (or concerns about instability) and familiarity on their own and their children's recovery. Some spoke of striving for consistency between aspects of pre and post fire life, and this came into, for example, decisions about whether to relocate (out of fire affected communities) or move their children to a new school.

Several parents identified routines as an important part of their ability to provide stability and familiarity. One father valued continuing special activities he had done with his children before the fires, hoping to address what he described with the analogy of being "homesick" for a "time when things were good". Another mother replaced lost belongings with near identical items to achieve familiarity. One mother explained what had eventually made their new house into a home:

I'm broken here, I don't know how to come back. [...] I thought: well, what is it? Why am I hating it so much? And it was because it's got no connection with memory, so then I went in and got a whole heap of different digital photos and printed them all out... (Mother 7)

These strategies of reclaiming familiar activities and objects provided ways to reconnect with aspects of their family lives before the fires.

Managing their own emotions

One way participants worked to help settle their families over the years since the fires was by actively managing their own emotions. Over half of the participants mentioned this with many considering it to be important for their children's—and in some cases their partner's—wellbeing.

So parenting the boys was very...I don't know...just a constant battle to keep on top of your own emotions in order to support them...and get them through it, you know? Emotionally and mentally. (Mother 13)

Participants considered managing their own emotions as important for providing stability, role modelling constructive coping, and because complex or particularly negative adult emotions were seen as something from which children needed to be protected. This was evident in parents' expressions of concern over their children's exposure to their own complex emotions or emotional reactivity, as well as the strong trauma reactions of other adults in the community (including behaviours like drug and alcohol use).

Several parents discussed concerns related to their or their partner's emotional reactivity (as a trauma reaction) in relation to the "vibe" or "atmosphere" in the family home. For example, one mother drew a connection between adults' emotional reactivity and children's feelings of safety and stability:

And then the kids have to deal with that inconsistency, which...I don't think is very helpful at all. How's that provide a stable, family...environment for them to shine and be the wonderful little people that they are. How do they feel safe, are they-- are they checking to see, "Oh shit what mood's mummy in or daddy in today? Can I be playful?" (Mother 6)

Some participants spoke about the need to address, "deal with" or "work on," their own emotional and psychological experiences. However, this was not always considered feasible, particularly in the early stages. Suppressing their own emotions was often out of necessity. For instance:

*...you sort of shut down your emotions to a certain degree, because if-- if you don't-
- if you allow the emotions in then you can't function, you just can't function.*

(Mother 7)

Many parents described this effort to control the expression of their emotions. Some spoke of deliberately presenting a version of their self as coping, or not showing the full extent of their emotions. This included compartmentalising emotions by “supressing” or “shelving” them, as well as “pretending,” or “fake it until you make it.” In considering this necessity, one mother suggested:

Just acknowledging that...we know you're wearing a mask. We know that it's tough. [...] Whatever you need, we're here. We know inside you is a woman, or a man, who, is still a woman or a man who has gone through a terrible experience; who is breaking inside...but today you're [a] parent. You're Dad, you're Mum.

(Mother 12)

Thus, being seen in that effort and for their own experiences matters. For some, managing their own emotions was a struggle that continued for several years or persisted at the time of the interviews.

New lessons and opportunities

For some participants there were positive outcomes. They described lessons they aimed to impart:

And I think we really did want [our eldest son] to see that you can rebuild...you can rebuild your life like no matter how...hard something gets, you can actually move on and from things. (Mother 8)

These reported positive outcomes included the chance to instil in their children an understanding that recovery from significant adversity is possible, to role model constructive coping efforts, and speak to their children about complex emotions (in relation to their children's own emotions or explaining their reactions as adults) which they may not have otherwise done.

Discussion

This study illustrated how the parental role can impact parents' experiences of a disaster and ways it can influence their experience of recovery. Their accounts of the fires, offered nearly seven years on, included profoundly confronting experiences of losing a sense of control, helplessness, and fear; trauma as it intersected with parenthood. Parental decisions related to evacuating are consistent with those found in other literature (e.g., Brodar *et al.*, 2020; Proudley, 2008), reinforcing the need for family disaster preparedness planning. This study captured distress experienced when separating, even when agreed upon; this knowledge may help social workers add depth to conversations about what to consider when planning with families. Furthermore, for some parents the trauma of the fires leads to a shattering of assumptions about being a parent (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) through stark confrontation with the reality that they may not be able to protect their children or partners during the disaster or may struggle to support them in the aftermath.

Parents' efforts to manage their emotions out of a desire to prioritize their children's needs has been found in other studies as well (Peek and Fothergill, 2008; Lowe *et al.*, 2011) suggesting it may be a common experience. This could be a barrier to accessing support, but also indicates an opportunity for social workers to help with strategies that may enable parents to process their emotions and regulate them when needed. Acknowledging this experience and normalizing the tensions and difficulties can assist parents with a sense of coherence (Walsh, 2015). These findings also suggest it is important to be mindful of the impact of parenting when working with adults around the trauma of disasters.

Our findings show that one way the multiple losses can be experienced is as the loss of one's normal family life. The finding that participants were driven to 'get back' to normal is highly consistent with experiences 4-7 months following bushfires (Pujadas Botey and Kulig, 2014), and 2-3 months post-hurricane (Coffman, 1996). Pujadas Botey and Kulig's (2014) findings and the longer-term perspective

of the present study show that restoring exactly what existed pre-fire may be an unrealistic expectation for some, and parents may not have considered this. Rather, as Walsh (2015) identified, we may need to support people in “envisioning a new sense of normality” (p. 239). One starting point could be preparing parents that there may be a new normal (rather than a return to what was), and that it may take several years to feel settled in it.

This and previous research have shown that particularly in the early years following a disaster, parents’ focus is occupied by the demands of rebuilding family life (Coffman, 1996; Peek *et al.*, 2011; Pujadas Botey and Kulig, 2014). These descriptions have shown that there are both internal and external pressures motivating parents to focus on restoration. Furthermore, each of these studies has also shown how such demands can affect parents’ capacity. Preparing parents with understandings of how long rebuilding and recovery can take, may make the idea of taking a break seem more appropriate. Importantly these findings show that the similar concerns raised by social workers and in research on children’s wellbeing post-disaster—for example, around parents being occupied by demands and unavailable to support their children or struggling with their own emotions and psychological reactions (e.g., Cobham *et al.*, 2016; Fulton and Drolet, 2018)—are shared by parents (consistent with Hafstad *et al.*, 2012). Acknowledging parents have these concerns themselves following disasters could be a way for social workers to raise these issues in a non-judgemental manner, one that is less about an assessment of their parenting and recognizes the role of context. In doing so it may offer a way to partner with parents in finding solutions that work for them and their families.

Stability and familiarity were core to feeling settled for participants in this study, so it may be useful for social workers to assist parents to identify meaningful elements of their family’s sense of ‘normal’ rather than trying to restore normality as exactly what existed previously. Restoration of previous ‘normal’ may be feasible for some, depending on the extent of the disruption of the disaster (e.g., Hafstad *et al.*, 2012). However, negotiating a new normal (contrasted with “restoring”) was a common experience among parents whose children were present for the 2011 mass shooting in Utøya Norway

(Røkholt *et al.*, 2016), so likely also relates to the degree of trauma and loss reactions of individuals. Strategies identified in the current study to restore a sense of normality included establishing routines, reprinting digital photos, replacing items, carrying forward special traditions. The theme of familiarity highlighted how separate and 'new' family life felt after the fires, and the significance of integrating the pre and post fire identities.

The experience of losing and seeking normal due to disruption and trauma may be relative to whether parents felt their family life was stable before the fires. Though there were some parents in this study who identified complex family circumstances pre-bushfire whose experiences supported these themes, it may be useful to further explore post-disaster experiences of existing clients of social work services. However, the fact that these participants were not necessarily engaged with services also reflects an element of social work practice post-disaster: the trauma of a disaster can bring people into contact with social workers for the first time through case management services or in their first experience of help-seeking (Hickson and Lehman, 2013).

Considering the diversity of post-disaster parenting experiences captured in this study, broadly speaking, shows three domains of influence which may be present and significant for parents and their children in different degrees (see Figure 1). This can encourage social workers to be mindful of the experiences of trauma for parents that intersect with what their children are going through, as well as ways in which they are otherwise affected by their own trauma of the disaster.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1. Influences on parental post-disaster experiences

Limitations and future directions for research

The findings of this study are bounded by limitations inherent in the methodology which has enabled rich depth of exploration. Self-selecting samples capture experiences of individuals who are motivated to participate. In this case, it is possible that people who chose to participate in this study were those for whom their parental identity is an important part of self.

The study successfully obtained perspectives across diverse aspects such as disaster exposure and family structure, however it bears mention that it is not exhaustive in the parenting contexts represented. For example, the study did not include any of the families who lost a child(ren) in the fires and are parenting surviving children, or those who are caregivers of children orphaned in the fires (Teague *et al.*, 2010). While the present study did not include experiences of people bereft of immediate family members, it did highlight ways in which other types of losses were present in post-disaster experiences which are often overlooked (Harms *et al.*, 2015).

All participants but one had been born in Australia which is common for rural areas (such as those affected by Black Saturday) but is not reflective of the broader Australian population. Furthermore, none of the participants identified (in this study) as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Thus, the experiences of Indigenous Australian parents as well as other culturally and linguistically diverse parents remain a gap for future research.

This study included the perspectives of three fathers and 19 mothers in its exploration of parenting. A gendered analysis was not the aim of this study, and, relative to variance of other sample characteristics (e.g., number and ages of children), gender is not remarkable. However, existing literature has highlighted the intersection of parenting and gender following disasters (see for example, Peek and Fothergill, 2008). Therefore, future efforts to draw out whether there are different experiences for mothers and fathers, and diverse parenting relationships, may be beneficial, particularly if it indicates different types of support are needed.

Conclusion

This study has documented the nature of the trauma and loss experienced by Australian parents in relation to the Black Saturday fires. The insights from these lived experiences contribute to developing understandings of parenting and family life post-disasters. These perspectives are of use when engaging with parents following disasters and can guide support offered by social workers and other

professionals in future. Several dimensions of losing and restoring family life were identified. The findings suggest value in opportunities to acknowledge the demands of re-establishing family life and how that influences the experience of parenting, informing expectations around timeframes and tensions in trying to get back what was, as well as strategies to assist with settling into a sense of normal in their new, post-disaster context.

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