

Bushfire and Children's Mental Health

Bushfires: How a little start-up is encouraging children to share their experience and heal the emotional wounds through art.

Saci Books, a little Sydney based publishing company that is passionate about giving voice to kids, has opened up space on their website and social media accounts for children to express what the bushfires mean to them.

Máira Metelo, the founder of Saci Books strongly believes children must be heard. "I want children to have a voice, I want them to know that age doesn't define the quality of their ideas." She speaks with merit, her eldest son wrote a book when he was only 4 years old, she noticed that her son's story had such incredible thinking patterns regarding complex topics like empathy and the environment that she did not flinch and decided to publish it. "I couldn't let this one fade in time or build up on the pile of drawings and stories at our house". Just over one year after being published, the book sells well and it gets great response from parents, educators and, most importantly, from other children.

"Bushfires Through My Heart" is the name of Maira Metelo's new project and it is getting a heartwarming response from parents, teachers, psychologists and also the little ones. The project encourages children to send writings, poems, drawings, songs, videos and paintings that express what the bushfire means to them. She asks parents not to force the children to produce anything, "The most important thing is that it must come from their little hearts. The idea so far is to keep children's stories on social media, blog and on their website. However, she hopes those stories will make it big into a hardcover book later in the year and donate the proceeds to libraries and schools affected by the fires.

The Australian bushfires this summer have caused unprecedented destruction and loss. It has left an entire nation afraid of losing all the land they have to live and produce food. They saw their fauna and flora burn with potential some extinction. Anxiety, stress, fear have walked hand in hand with gratitude to the kind and generous spirit that every day Australians and the international community has shown. However, that is not enough to heal from the loss of loved ones, from seeing fires burn your house down, from having to leave everything behind to flee from danger, see koalas burnt on the side of the road, to not be able to breathe.

How will these wounds be healed? Máira thought that the best way she could help this crisis was focusing on the emotional health of the children who are dealing with it for the past 2 months and will continue to do for the next few years.

"I see so many people donating money and goods, so many people who live close to the fire volunteering and risking their lives that I thought the best way for me to help with my skills was through focusing on the emotional health of these children "

Máira has partnered with Marcela Nolasco, the founder clinical family psychologist from Little Steps Psychology in the Northern Beaches. Marcela is also using her skills and experience to assist in the recovery and wellbeing of children and families affected by the fires. Marcela recommends that offering children a safe space to play and to express their ideas through artistic mediums is a very effective way to help them heal from trauma and adversity.

"Children will be pleased to see they are not alone in their fears, in their gratitude to the fire fighters and people who helped. They will also see that their dreams and aspirations are very similar to other children's. Creating a sense of belonging and mutual understanding can be very healing to those little hearts who had gone through crisis." explains Marcela.

People in the urban centres are also affected, of course to a much lesser extent but the smoke, the fear for the country, the sadness for all that is happening has tarnished everyone.

The Internet has the incredible power to connect people by spreading the word beyond their local area. "We are based in Sydney and have received a lot of urban children poems and writings but we have also reached people from the affected towns in NSW and a few from Victoria and Queensland. We want to use this tool [the internet] to make sure that this initiative reaches all communities."

The project can be accessed by the Saci Book website (<https://sacibooks.com/bushfires-through-my-heart/>) Facebook (/sacibooks) or Instagram @saci.books

You can find details of the medicare bulk-billed session on Little Steps website (www.littlestepspsychology.com.au/bushfire-counselling-relief-nsw/)

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