

# Partnerships and practice guidance - supporting the workforce to respond to the unique needs of infants and children in disasters

2 September 2024

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Minds.**

National  
Workforce  
Centre for Child  
Mental Health







# Acknowledgement of Country

We recognise the land on which we meet today and pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Peoples, their ancestors, the elders past, present and future from the different First Nations across this Country.

We acknowledge the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community for the wellbeing of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

# Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health

**Strengthen child mental health literacy *in relation to disasters***

**Integrate child mental health responsibilities into service and support networks for children, caregivers and families *in the context of disasters***

**Expand specialist mental health workforce capability to deliver prevention and early intervention support to infants and children *in the context of disasters***












A young girl with brown hair, wearing a pink shirt, is smiling broadly while climbing a blue rope structure. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green and orange elements.

**Children's mental health and development is shaped by the environments in which they live, learn and play.**





“

**“Knowing what to do and say when infants, children, families and communities face disastrous events can make the difference between lifelong adversity and development being derailed, and the adversity being experienced as challenging, stressful and frightening but an experience from which the infant, child and family can recover and move forward healthily.**

**It is vital that we understand, plan and respond to the needs of our youngest community members.’**

— Michelle Roberts, Psychologist & Child Disaster Consultant

**Importance of a systemic approach to child mental health following a disaster**



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**Meaningful  
collaboration  
across all layers  
of the system is  
essential**





## Infants and children are often overlooked at a policy level

- Concerns across the sector due to inadequate consideration of infants and children in disaster planning.
- National Infant & Child Disaster Mental Health Advisory Committee (NICDAC) was formed with ACATLGN to address this gap at a policy level.
- The committee supports the National Workforce Centre (NWC) with strategies for children in disasters.
- NICDAC brings together sector researchers, practitioners, and leaders.
- It focuses on system-level responses, workforce needs, policy guidance, and implementing NWC initiatives.

Policy and Programs

Organisations

Practice Leaders

Practitioners

Families



## Leaders need a guiding framework

- Consultation with sector leaders revealed a need for organisational guidance on addressing infants' and children's needs in disasters.
- Ongoing collaboration highlighted the need for key actions to help guide child focused disaster planning, response, and recovery.
- NICDAC further highlighted the need for a strategic framework to guide system responses.
- Feedback from leaders, emphasised the importance of providing accessible, evidence-based information for leaders.

Policy and Programs

Organisations

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Families



## There is a major gap in workforce skills and confidence

- National Workforce Survey revealed a major gap in skills and confidence for responding to children's needs in disasters.
- Survey distributed widely through Emerging Minds and over 100 stakeholders and organisations across Australia
- Doubled responses compared to 2020-21, with most being new respondents
- Over 3000 workers completed competency and disaster-specific questions
- 59% were aware of Emerging Minds beforehand, allowing for comparison of competency levels

Policy and Programs

Organisations

Practice Leaders

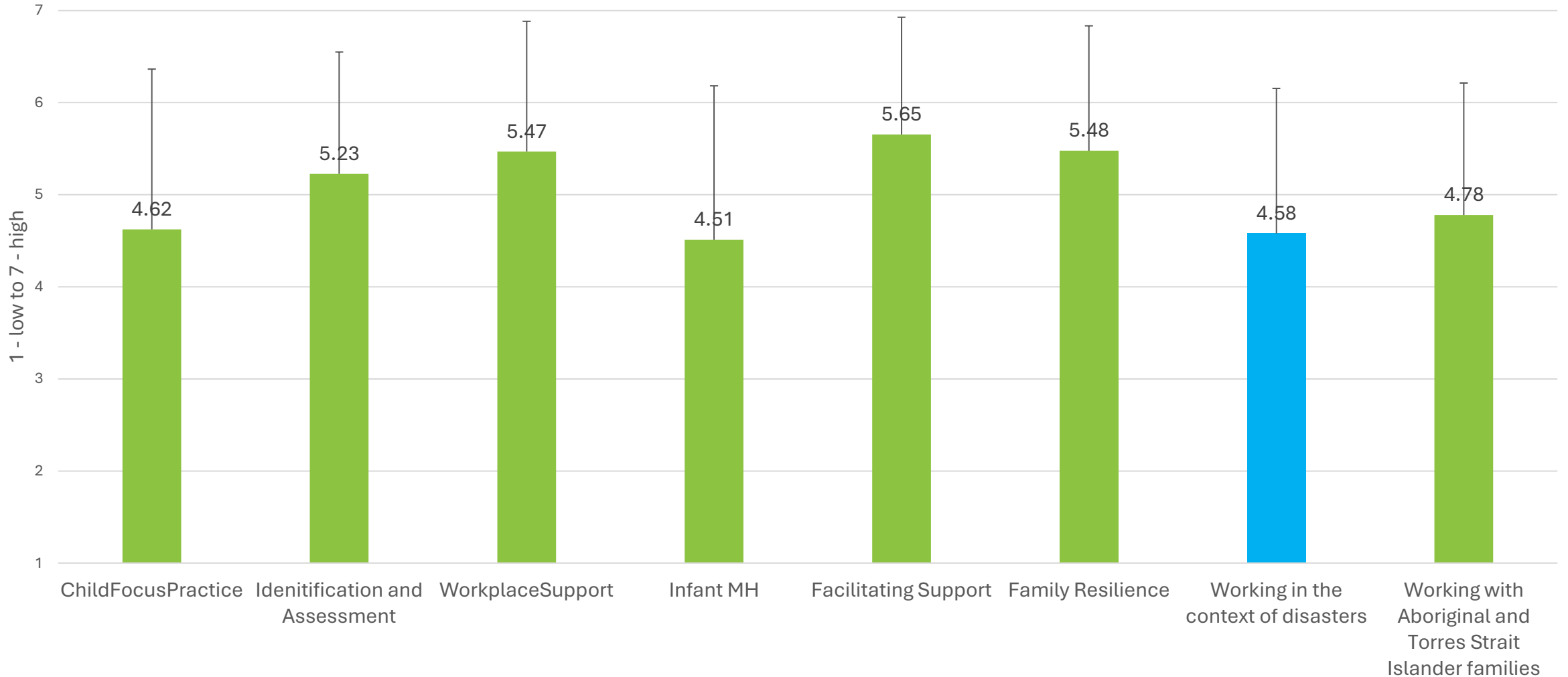
Practitioners

Families

# Generalist child mental health competency means scores

Answered by all respondents

Scores of 6-7 = high competence | 5-6 = moderate competence | 4 and below = low competence





## Co-designing with families is an essential part of the solution

- Families' insights have been essential for crafting solutions that address real challenges effectively.
- Parents and carers have identified a gap in approaches which address working with parents and the family as a whole.
- The Child and Family Partners Disaster Advisory Network was established to gain a deeper understanding of families' needs.

Policy and Programs

Organisations

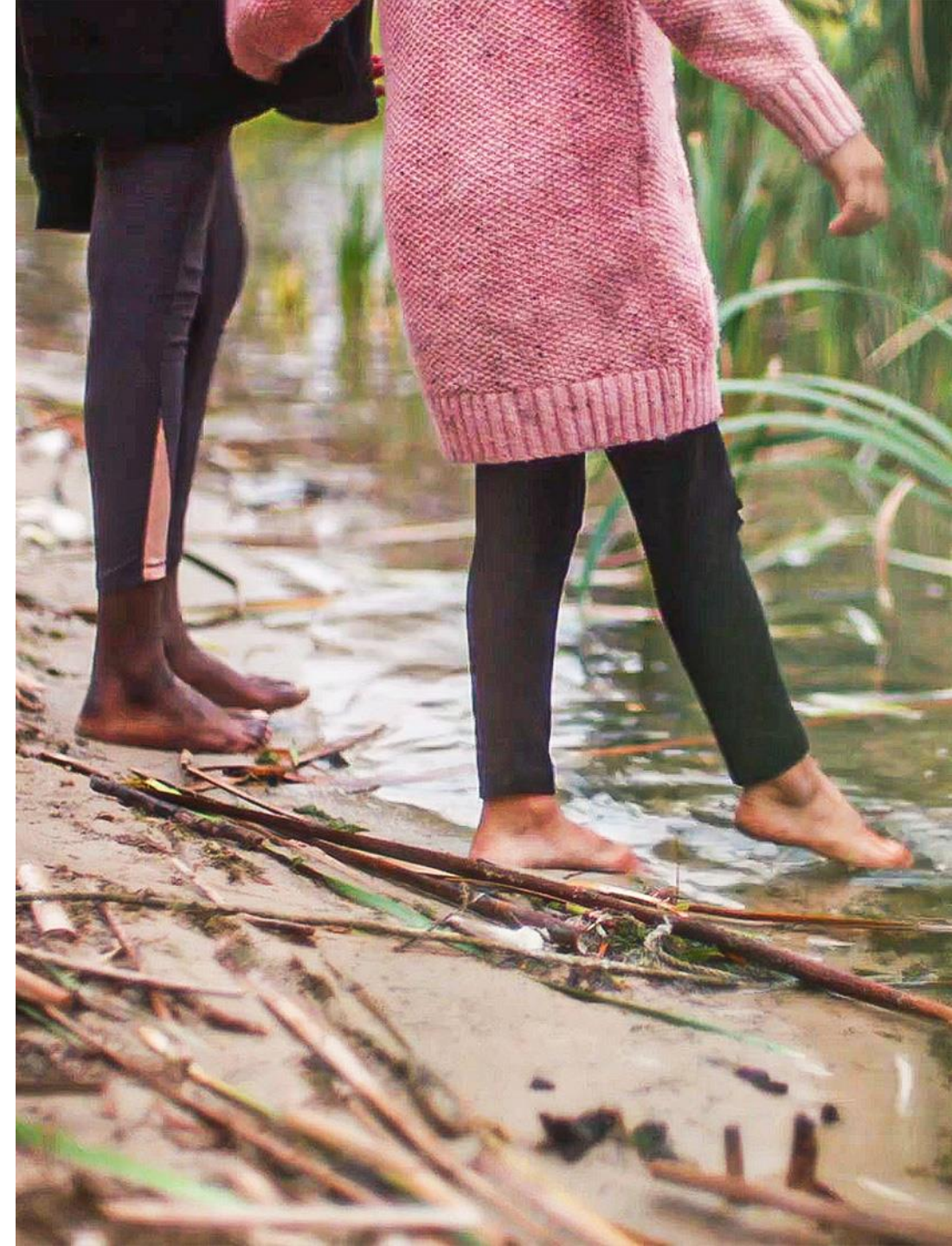
Practice Leaders

Practitioners

Families

“While each of us in our family experienced an injury, our family was also injured. Our whole family dynamic had gone from a place of play, safety and trust, to one where no one felt safe.

Over the years I found it really difficult to articulate to mental health practitioners that the family should be considered as another person or entity who needs to be supported, in a way that’s different to how you might work solely with an individual parent or child.”





“There was death everywhere. Livestock were dying, native animals are dying, plants are dying, 100-year-old-trees were dying. It was just everywhere you looked. But something that was really important for him was stability and routine... and trying to let him have an opportunity to be a child.”

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“We talked about what they needed [with the kids]. In the difference of feeling and being safe. And, they both agree that they need to know their parents are okay. They need to know that, you know, mom's okay. Dad's okay. They need to know that we're going to be okay.”

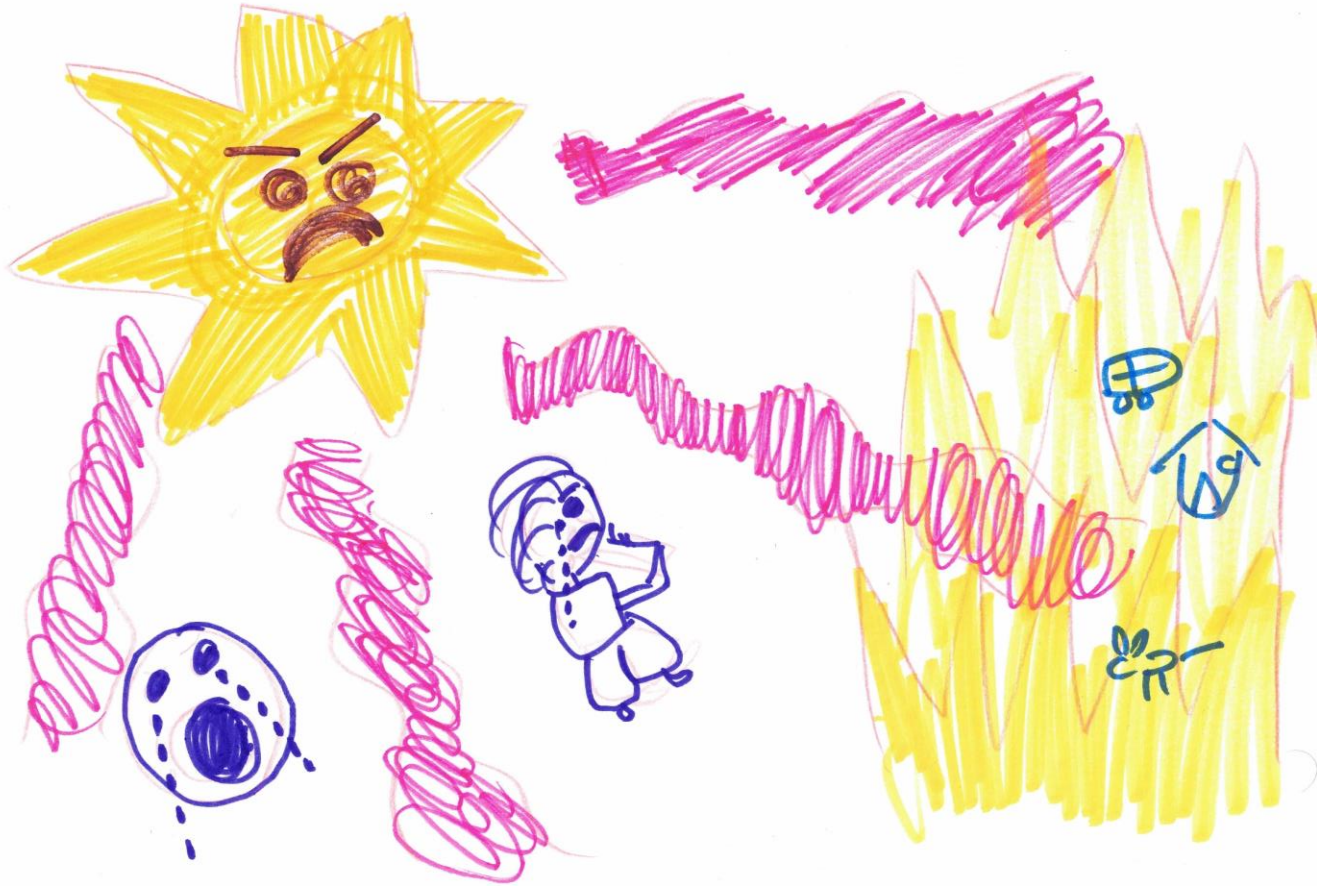


“I had intense guilt and shame not preparing for the fires.....I had no idea that there’d be two weeks where we couldn't even get food, like they helicoptered the army in to bring food in. And, you know, here I was with two packets of hot cross buns, so I felt awful. And then I, you know, at that point realised it wasn't helping my kids.”

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I hate losing my life to fire.

- Drawing by 8 year old

Give the kids lots of understanding because you don't know their perspective of the disaster. The parents have probably been through things like that, but the kids haven't lived as long, so they might be more traumatised because they don't know what to expect. – 11 year old

Check in with their kids, on how they're feeling and seeing if they're going ok...you don't know how they're feeling. They will be feeling different to you. – 13 year old



# Key strategies across different system levels

- Provision of national leadership and advice to Government
- Provision of advice and guidance to organisational, policy and sector leaders and networks
- Workforce education and practice resources
- Dissemination and delivery of professional learning
- Health literacy and guided self-help for families & practitioners





# Supporting Infants and Children in Disasters: A Practice Guide

- A comprehensive resource to enhance practitioners' work with infants, children, and families.
- Builds on the community trauma toolkit and provides more in-depth guidance on key practices.
- Covers the phases of disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.



# Key practices

*A series of 11 practice papers*

- Why we need to support infants and children before, during, and after disasters.
- Understanding how disasters influence infants and children.
- Disaster preparedness: A child-centred and family-focused approach.
- Supporting infants, children, and families during and immediately after disasters.
- Supporting infants, children, and families in an evacuation.
- How psychological first aid can support infants, children, and families who experience a disaster (Part One).
- Psychological first aid with infants and children: Practice guidance (Part Two).
- The foundations of psychosocial support with infants, children, and families after disasters.
- Practices for supporting infants and children after disasters.
- Practices for supporting parents and families after disasters.
- Looking after your well-being as a worker.

# Family Hub & Resources

- The Family Hub will offer evidence-based digital resources and guidance for early intervention in mental health concerns for children aged 0-12 years.
- It is built around an online 'guided self-help model,' combining self-help resources with practitioner guidance.
- Co-designed with 21 practitioners and 29 lived experience advisors, the Hub's prototype will include learning pathways for families.
- A focus of the Hub will be pathways related to disaster recovery, with the prototype expected to be completed by June 2025.





# Next steps

- Finalise the Practice Guide
- Develop Families Hub
- Lead the Principles and Actions
- Place based workshops
- Policy initiatives

In partnership with:

- NICDAC
- Child and Family Partners Disaster Advisory Network
- Policy stakeholders
- Organisations









# Thank you.

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**Community  
Trauma Toolkit  
QR code:**



**Families Disaster  
resources  
QR code:**

