

Victoria's Survive and Thrive Program

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In the eight years since the Black Saturday bushfires devastated our community, my staff and I have faced many challenges in our small school. Many of these were what we'd have expected to deal with post-disaster, but many were beyond what we'd ever considered. We managed all that came with being displaced and operating from our temporary setting, while dealing with the challenge of rebuilding our school.

We worked closely with students and families as they dealt with disbelief, anger, grief and loss. Student and family wellbeing underpinned every decision we made. Never did we imagine the reality of the timeline of what is generally referred to as 'recovery'. We've learned that there is no end date to this journey and that the idea of getting back to normal is an interesting one.

For many years events, things managed with ease in other schools, had to be very carefully handled in our setting. Hot days, strong winds, a helicopter passing overhead, all meant the close monitoring of our kids. Our weeks were structured and organised so that there

were no surprises. Our students needed consistent boundaries and needed to feel safe and secure at all times. Regular fire and evacuation drills were referred to as an 'Emergency Practice', so that the word 'fire' wasn't mentioned, and often these drills took up to an hour and half to implement. Our evacuation processes always went smoothly, everyone knew what to do, but the question time which inevitably followed a drill was always hard going. 'But what if the wall was glowing?' or 'What if we couldn't go that way because a tree fell and blocked our way?' Our children had lived experiences and knew so much.



Students for Strathewen Primary School participate in field trips and learn the science of fire.

Image: Jane Hayward



Students and teachers work together to understand the hazards of fire.

Image: Jane Hayward

In 2016, the opportunity to be involved in the CFA's Survive and Thrive program came our way thanks to our local Strathewen Arthurs Creek brigade and their connection with Jamie McKenzie, who had a pilot program running with Anglesea Primary School. This provided the opportunity for our group of ten grade five and six students to work with experts and community volunteers on a program aimed at learning about fire risk in our local area and learning to love where they live. The success of our first year of involvement in this program has far exceeded expectation.

Students have participated in field trips, researched local wildlife and learnt the science of fire. They are able to use tools like whirling hygrometers, inclinometers, moisture meters and McArthur meters. They are able to collect information on air moisture, fuel load and fuel moisture levels to determine the Fire Danger Rating (FDR) for the day. They know how fire travels and how to prepare for the fire season. Using this knowledge, students came up with a story and created a claymation movie showing what a family living in a bushfire prone area like Strathewen needs to do depending on the FDR for the day. The film 'If you care, stay aware, be prepared- a message from Gem Gem' has been really well received, with thousands of views online (CFA Facebook and Youtube). Their film is already being used as an education tool in many schools.

Our students have certainly thrived on gaining knowledge and they've been completely engaged in this program. Their level of understanding is incredible. They have presented information sessions to community groups and enjoyed every aspect of their learning. The knowledge



The students thrive on gaining knowledge and have been very engaged in the program.

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they now have has given them a deeper understanding of bushfire risk and what we all need to do to stay safe. We have the next stage of our program planned for this year and 2017 promises to deliver more great learning opportunities.