

Evacuation centre venue evaluation:

Checklist add-in for the safety of infants and young children

This checklist add-in is underpinned by the findings of the Babies and Young Children in the Black Summer (BiBS) Study.¹ This research identified that evacuation centre managers/workers and parents commonly had concerns about child safety in evacuation centres. In fact, 75% of parents who spent time in an evacuation centre said that they were worried about the safety of their children while there.

Hazards identified in evacuation centres included:

- child protection concerns related to risk of child sexual abuse and abduction and exposure to violence and drug affected people
- presence of animals who were stressed or distressed, unrestrained or hostile towards children
- risk of disease related to the washing of infant feeding bottles in evacuation centre toilet sinks
- lack of privacy for breastfeeding resulting in reduced feeding and infant dehydration
- physical safety concerns related to proximity to busy roads, fall risks (balconies and steps) and an absence of fences or other barriers to these hazards
- unsafe sleep situations
- items brought by others into the evacuation centre including medications, illicit substances and knives
- exposure to bushfire smoke in the environment.

The risks posed to children were exacerbated by overcrowding and the normal curiosity of small children, their high energy levels, and desire to play. Risks were also increased where mothers had evacuated on their own with multiple young children to care for and supervise (a common experience). Women who evacuated by themselves took actions to safeguard their children to the detriment of their own health and wellbeing, including going without food, water or sleep.

¹ Gribble, K., Hamrosi, M., & Tawia, S. (2023). 'Want to help the children? Help the parents': challenges and solutions from the Babies and Young Children in the Black Summer (BiBS) Study. Australian Breastfeeding Association. <https://doi.org/10.26183/ggeh-p937>

They often did not ask for help as they were too overwhelmed to do so. Stressed and with compromised decision-making, caregivers sometimes made choices that placed their children at risk. For example, one mother covered her sleeping infant with a blanket to hide them from strangers while she went for a shower.

Parents were also significantly concerned about the impact of bushfire smoke exposure on their babies and toddlers given their developmental vulnerabilities and inability to wear masks. Mothers who were pregnant faced additional difficulty breathing and caring for their children due to an increased oxygen requirement and universal concern about the impact of bushfire smoke on their unborn baby.

Parents and emergency responders consistently stated that families with infants and young children should be accommodated separately from the general population of evacuees, in order to protect children. As emphasised in *Preferred Sheltering Practices for Emergency Sheltering in Australia*,² 'the vulnerability of infants and young children means that addressing their nutritional and safety needs should be a priority' in evacuation settings.

The BiBS Study found a vast difference in reported safety concerns and difficulties with child caregiving between different evacuation centres, and in large measure this was a function of the venue itself. The following checklist is designed to assist those involved in evacuation venue decision-making to include the safety of infants and young children in their evaluations.

² Australian Red Cross. (2014). Preferred Sheltering Practices for Emergency Sheltering in Australia. <https://www.redcross.org.au/globalassets/cms/emergency-services/sheltering-resources/preferred-sheltering-practices-handbook.pdf>

Checklist add-in for the safety of infants and young children and their caregivers in evacuation centre venues

Venue characteristic	Y/N	Comment
Set back or can be protected from busy roads and other hazards such as bodies of water		
Single level building (or if stairs and balconies are present, there are safety measures in place to mitigate the risk of falls)		
Absence of hazards such as machinery, chemicals, or unsafe fixed play equipment		
Childproof fencing or other barriers to hazards		
Several rooms available or the ability to divide large areas into smaller spaces to accommodate different groups of people		
A secondary kitchen facility with hot water for infant food preparation and washing		
Room available to provide privacy for breastfeeding (that is not in a toilet)		
Air filters in place for the whole venue or for a room within the venue		

Resource created under the Australian Breastfeeding Association's *Community Protection for Infants and Young Children in Bushfire Emergencies Project*, which received funding from the Australian Government.

In addition to these venue characteristics, how an evacuation centre is operated can mitigate risk to children.

Recommendations include:

- Gathering families with infants and young children and pregnant women together in a designated section of a larger room if a separate room is not available. Screens and barriers can assist in defining this space, which should be positioned as far as possible from potential hazards.
- Providing a temporary screened and signed area for optional use by women who require privacy for breastfeeding if a separate room is not available.
- Developing and implementing procedures to facilitate the safe washing of infant feeding items, including for evacuation centre staff to wash items if caregivers are not able to access kitchen facilities.
- Displaying temporary evacuation centre signage informing caregivers of where they can access resources, seek assistance, and mitigate risks (for example, displaying a 'Do not wash infant feeding bottles here' sign in the toilets).
- Offering proactive assistance to pregnant women and those caring for infants and young children, particularly sole caregivers.
- Ensuring that daily site hazard inspections are undertaken and include monitoring and management of hazards and risks posed to children and their caregivers.
- Ensuring that evacuation centre managers and workers are educated in and consider the needs of pregnant women, infants, young children and their caregivers, with all aware of their child protection responsibilities.
- Making sure that hazards such as machinery, chemicals and unsafe equipment are removed, secured or behind barriers. For example, using childproofing covers for power outlets, and taking measures to prevent children's access to electrical appliances, boiling water and other hot surfaces.
- Prioritising pregnant women, infants and young children for the least smoky locations.

Pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers should be prioritised to more appropriate evacuation locations where these are available.

Supporting resources

The Australian Breastfeeding Association's *Community Protection for Infants and Young Children in Bushfire Emergencies Project* has developed resources that can assist those planning for and operating evacuation and recovery centres to support pregnant women and those caring for infants and toddlers.

These resources include:

- A quick and free **e-learning module** that covers the practical measures to support caregivers of infants and toddlers in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.
- **Evacuation centre training scenarios** on the needs of infants and young children for use in evacuation centre setup exercises.
- An **infographic** on the support needs of families with babies and toddlers in evacuation centres.
- Information on **supporting safer sleep** for infants in evacuation settings.
- An **animation** on providing psychological first aid for babies and toddlers and their caregivers.
- Evacuation and recovery centre **signage pack** for the needs of pregnant women, infants, toddlers and their caregivers.
- Guidance on the **management of infant formula** donations, procurement and distributions in emergencies.

All resources can be found at aba.asn.au/disaster-support