

Children and Disasters: A tribute to Professor Kevin Ronan

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Abstract

In 1997, Professor Kevin Ronan published a paper in the first ever edition of the Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies, titled "The Effects of a "Benign" Disaster: Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress in Children Following a Series of Volcanic Eruptions". Over the next 23 years, Kevin and his many colleagues pursued aspects of children and disasters to both improve practice and advance scholarship in this area. In March 2020 we were saddened by the untimely passing of Kevin. As a tribute to Professor Ronan this special issue of the Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies brings together accounts of current research and practice initiatives inspired by, building upon, and directly influenced by Professor Ronan's work.

Keywords: children, disaster, research, Australia, New Zealand, United States

This special issue pulls together research inspired by, building upon, and directly influenced by Professor Kevin Ronan's extensive and impactful career ensuring that children are considered, involved, and empowered in the disaster context. It was with great sadness we learned of Kevin's passing in March 2020. In 1984, Kevin earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at the University of Minnesota and then attended Temple University in Philadelphia, where he earned both a Master's degree and a PhD in Clinical Psychology. He started his professional career as a clinical psychologist in 1991 at the Napa State Hospital, before moving to North Carolina, where he took up a position in adolescent

treatment services at Brunswick Hospital. In 1995 he took up a tenured lectureship in the School of Psychology at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. In 2006, Kevin relocated to Australia, where he was appointed Head of the Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences at Central Queensland University (CQU) in Rockhampton. Over the course of his career, Kevin made an outstanding contribution to research on child and adolescent mental health, disaster risk reduction, and community resilience, as well as inspiring many others to research and grow knowledge in these areas.

The 1995-96 Ruapehu eruptions in Aotearoa New Zealand were pivotal for inspiring Kevin's interest in disaster research. In the wake of these eruptions, Kevin and his colleagues conducted research on the impact the eruptions had on children and interventions to reduce that impact. This research interest in natural hazards spread to other perils, such as earthquakes, tsunami, weather, and fire, with a focus on topics such as how to better prepare children and the general populace for future hazard events, particularly through educational initiatives. Kevin and his research team used to regularly meet in Ohakune, location of the Ruapehu eruptions, to recall the commencement of their research endeavours and spend time with colleagues and friends. Such get-togethers were also a theme over the coming years as Kevin regularly caught up with friends at conferences and workshops, enjoying robust discussion about disaster-related matters and enjoying people's company. He was also a keen formal contributor to such events, often as an organiser and speaker.

Kevin was an inspiration to up and coming researchers in the field of hazards and disasters. He was gracious in acknowledging the expertise that emerging researchers could contribute, beyond his own expertise. In many a conversation, Kevin was interested in hearing the perspectives of emerging researchers as he genuinely saw value in what they brought to the table. He also gave new researchers the space to explore new ideas and was constructive in his written contributions, leading to a number of co-authored papers with new colleagues.

The papers in this issue are testimony to Kevin's legacy, with contributions from both established and new colleagues. The contents include a discussion of how to responsibly, ethically, and meaningfully research

children and disasters (Gibb et al., 2022), research into how children and adults differ in the protective actions they take in response to earthquake shaking (Adams et al., 2022), and an overview of an ongoing research project exploring the role that firefighters can play in educating Australian students about bushfire safety and risk (Jarrett, 2022).

Across all research areas, there are specific logistical and ethical considerations to bear in mind when conducting research with children and young people, including making sure questions are understandable and relevant (e.g., Mooney et al., 2017) and that consent to participate is understood and given (typically by involving the parents; Gibbs et al., 2013). These challenges can be more pressing in the disaster context as researchers aim to empower rather than potentially traumatise or re-traumatise young people participating in the research, including when disasters are discussed generally or when a specific event is studied. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which is continuing to affect all groups in society (although not equally), exacerbates some existing challenges and introduces others, but also presents opportunities for including children in disaster research.

Gibb et al. (2022) present an overview of methodologies for researching children and disasters, drawing on academic and non-academic literature as well as their own research experiences. They then discuss some of the ways in which these methods have changed, primarily due to limitations on in-person interaction for data collection. While shifts such as to more online recruitment and use of video calling software occurred mostly as an adaptation to the pandemic, the authors recognise that these changes can be seen as innovation, with ongoing and wider benefits to the inclusion of children in disaster research beyond the pandemic. Some of these changes align with pre-existing societal changes, such as the increasingly online nature of children's interactions, so that the pandemic is proposed to be accelerating, rather than initiating, the shift to a combination of in-person and virtual methods.

Also in this issue, a U.S.-based team explore differences in protective actions in response to earthquakes between children and adults (Adams et al., 2022). The authors interviewed administrators, teachers, students, parents, officials, practitioners, and professionals about behaviour during the 2018 Anchorage, Alaska and 2019 Ridgecrest, California earthquakes. Consistent with much of Professor Ronan's decades of research, they found that children tended to react appropriately

by using the protective actions they had been taught and practised in drills (in this context, by using "drop, cover, and hold on"). Many adults also performed the actions they had been taught as children, but which is now considered outdated (e.g., sheltering in doorways), acted to protect those around them, or exited buildings during shaking. These differences between the behaviour of children and adults, the "generational gap", aligns with findings from Professor Ronan's work that getting children to participate in risk reduction programmes, such as earthquake drills, helps them to act better during actual events (Johnson, Johnston et al., 2014; Johnson, Ronan et al., 2014; Ronan et al., 2016; Ronan & Johnston, 2003). Further, the authors echo Professor Ronan's calls to provide holistic education about what to do during natural hazard events (e.g., Johnson, Ronan et al., 2014), such as by including parents and the wider community in school-based events (Ronan et al., 2015).

Finally, this issue includes a research update from one of Kevin's recent PhD students. Jarrett (2022) describes the influence Professor Ronan had on the development of his doctoral research. Jarrett's work explores the role that firefighters can play in bushfire education in schools; bushfires are a constant and pressing hazard in New South Wales specifically and in Australia generally (CSIRO & Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology, 2020). Disaster resilience education in schools presents a valuable opportunity to improve young people's understanding and skills, so that they can better contribute to the planning, preparing, response, and recovery which affects them (Ronan et al., 2016). Jarrett describes a research programme to explore the effectiveness of disaster risk education in the context of bushfire risk in New South Wales, and in particular the benefit of and barriers to fire experts contributing directly in the classroom. As well as the influence Professor Ronan had on the course of the research described by Jarrett, the author also provides some insight into Kevin as an advocate for inclusion and as a generous and supportive doctoral supervisor.

The editorial team would like to thank the authors who chose to contribute their work to this special issue as well as the peer reviewers who helped to ensure that that work was ready for and beneficial to our audience. Finally, we would like to acknowledge Professor Kevin Ronan for his dedication to ensuring children are not just not forgotten within disaster contexts and disaster research, but are empowered to be part of the solutions to the challenges which affect them. His work has had a profound and lasting effect on all of us.

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