

## **The Wellbeing Project: co-designing a program to support mental health recovery in young people who have experienced a burn injury**

### **Why are we doing this project?**

Burn injuries are one of the leading causes for hospitalisation amongst Australian children. They are also one of the most distressing injuries that a child can experience and may involve a long and painful recovery journey. Nowadays, because of advances in technology, the survival rates and physical outcomes for kids who have burn injuries is good, but the impact on wellbeing has mostly been overlooked.

Previous research, led by Embrace's Dr. Alix Woolard, has found that children and young people who sustain a burn are vulnerable to developing short- and long-term mental health problems following the injury<sup>1</sup>. Anxiety is commonly found in children who may be fearful of hospitalisations, painful treatments, or appearance concerns with scarring. Thoughts of re-experiencing the injury, avoidance of thoughts or situations, and heightened anxiety associated with the injury are also commonly experienced. Worryingly, these problems can develop regardless of the burn size or severity and can persist well into adulthood.

However, not all children that sustain a burn injury develop mental health problems. Our research has found some factors that can promote resilience after injury, including having strong social supports, optimism, problem-solving skills, social support and autonomy<sup>2</sup>. Some patients can experience positive change after their injury which is encouraged through coping mechanisms, and positively reframing the accident. Understanding factors that promote resilience and growth can lend valuable insights in providing better support to patients who may experience difficulties in adapting to the psychological challenges of their injury.

Our researchers have worked with children who have experienced a burn injury and their parents, as well as hospital staff from the Perth Children's Hospital Burns Unit, which has led to the design of the Wellbeing Project. We are currently delivering the program to children who have had a burn injury, to improve their resilience and wellbeing.

## How did we design the program?

We wanted to hear about peoples' own experiences of how the burn injury impacted on their mental health, what supports they used or needed, and what they would like to see available in the way of mental health supports. We also wanted to hear from hospital staff who work with these children and their families to determine if a program to support the mental wellbeing of patients would be helpful.

	Participants
Total	23
Caregivers of children aged 4-12 years who have experienced a burn injury	11
Adolescents who have experienced a burn injury	7
Clinicians from the Stan Perron Centre of Excellence for Childhood Burns, and Perth Children's Hospital burns outpatient unit clinicians	5

## What were the results?

### Participants' concerns about the burn and their recovery

The young people in our study identified important factors following their experience of their burn accident. They noted how much the burn, and the recovery process, disrupted their day-to-day living, which had negative impacts on their mental health<sup>3</sup>. For example, young people were concerned about the appearance of their scar and how it could be viewed by other people. Removing coverings of the scar, such as a compression garment, caused distress especially when surrounded by others. Another example is that the wound and the scar made it harder to participate in activities like sport. In addition, hospital appointments were often scheduled during school hours, which meant that participants felt they were missing out on education.

Caregivers described observing fear and anxiety in their child following the accident. Furthermore, caregivers said that they experienced guilt and shame for allowing the accident to occur in the first place<sup>4</sup>. This also prevented them from reaching out to peers and family for support, in fear of being judged. However, some children and young people also noted positive outcomes as they were able to develop resilience in the road to recovery<sup>3</sup>. Young people mentioned the importance of developing coping strategies through accessing support services such as the hospital and counselling services.

## Final design of the Wellbeing Project

Based on the experiences of children, young people, and their caregivers, we were able to conceptualise a program that would be most helpful for children and young people to overcome concerns that accompany the burn, the recovery of the wound, and their perceptions of the scar once healed. The program runs for six sessions, 45 minutes long. The sessions cover the following:

1. Initial introduction and meeting between the wellbeing facilitator and child/young person.
2. Managing reactions through behaviour.
3. Managing reactions through thoughts.
4. Identifying and strengthening coping skills.
5. Problem solving skills.
6. Consolidating lessons and preventing setbacks.



The program is intended to make sure that young people learn healthy thoughts and behaviours for when they encounter difficult situations. The program is currently underway and young people who have taken part in the program have found the sessions to be educational and helpful.

For example, a young person noted that this has helped them with their mental health and with how they see their burn:

*“These sessions have changed my mental state for the better and I feel so much more confident.”*

In addition, a parent recognised how they see this as benefiting their family:

*“We love to support worthwhile research... I see this as something that could really help my child as he transitions into high school and adolescence. I suppose this could also help me, as the parent, too since we get to learn about all the things that they are doing.”*

## References

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- 3 Woolard A, Wickens N, McGivern L, Belinelo P, Martin L, Wood F, Janse van Rensburg E, et al. "I just get scared it's going to happen again": A qualitative study of the psychosocial impact of pediatric burns from the child's perspective. *BMC Pediatrics*. 2023;23(1):280-2023. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-023-04105-y>
- 4 Wickens N, Janse van Resnburg E, Belinelo P, Milroy H, Martin L, Wood F, Woolard A. [In review]. "It's a big trauma for the family": Insight into the psychological trauma of paediatric burns from the perspective of mothers. Telethon Kids Institute.

## Project team

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5 *Fiona Wood Foundation*

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