

## Mental health support for children and young people

Remote and regional communities often face barriers to accessing services because of distance, service availability and other social issues. COVID-19 has further exacerbated this and has disproportionately affected young Victorians, including in regional Gippsland, where Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) operates 3 headspace sites, and delivers its unique i-Connect and Connect Me programs.

There is substantial service demand in these areas as community members face significant challenges including a high prevalence of family violence and disadvantage, and above-average levels of psychological distress.

Despite the impact of the pandemic and related restrictions in Victoria this year, RAV provided continuity of care and ongoing service delivery.

### i-Connect

RAV's i-Connect Family Mental Health Support Service supports children aged 0-18 in East Gippsland who are at risk of developing mental health issues. It works to address social, mental health, social connection and self-esteem issues by providing innovative face-to-face groups and telehealth services tailored to individuals' needs.

This year, a new Caring-Go-Round program assisted primary school-aged children impacted by the East Gippsland bushfires to understand and manage their feelings. Using a whole-of-school approach, the 6-week therapeutic and strengths-based program incorporated mindfulness, relaxation, movement, and exercises to encourage self-esteem and peer connection.

### headspace services in Gippsland, Victoria

RAV's headspace sites in Bairnsdale, Sale and Wonthaggi support 12-25 year-olds through mental and physical health, alcohol and other drug, and work and study services. As most young people who are eligible to access these services live some distance from the sites, support options include telephone, telehealth and outreach.

RAV's services keep young people at the front and centre of all that they do, with active Youth Advisory Groups providing vital feedback on the establishment and operation of each headspace.

The sites are committed to removing barriers to accessing services, particularly for priority groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse people, and LGBTIQ+ young people, and young people with disability.

#### Highlights of the year:

- Awareness and engagement initiatives, including a 'pop-up' mental health stall in Wonthaggi to encourage help-seeking and enhance health literacy, and a health promotion stall and youth space at a festival in Sale;
- Focusing on increasing support, and health promotion, psychoeducation and engagement activities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families. headspace Bairnsdale consulted with Aboriginal school staff to develop and deliver positive physical and mental health presentations to young Aboriginal men in years 7 to 9;
- Operating our 3 LGBTIQ+ social groups, with our Wonthaggi group obtaining a grant to fund youth-led social events to showcase community resilience;
- Continuing our Bairnsdale social connection-focused games group for neurodiverse young people;
- A new Enhanced Mental Health Support in Schools program provides counselling for secondary school students with mild to moderate mental health concerns.

### Connect Me

RAV introduced Connect Me, a free counselling and case management program supporting children aged 4-11 in the Bass Coast, South Gippsland and Wellington areas.

The service works collaboratively with schools, maternal and child health services, kindergartens and GP clinics to support children at risk of low to medium mental health issues, including as a result of the recent bushfires or COVID-19.

The primarily outreach-based service provides multimodal counselling and case management to connect children with education, personal, physical or community services.



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