

## Helping Children Cope With Stress/Anxiety After Bushfires

The scale of the 2019-20 Australian bushfires has devastated many communities and the impact is widely felt in the community. During this time, many children have felt powerless and unprepared. Most children are resilient and return to their previous level of functioning over time, but may require support to do this. This info sheet provides some ideas for families on how they can support children.

### How Children Might Respond

The responses of children to bushfires may be intense and varied. Sometimes their responses can appear immediately after the event, or a few hours or a few days later. Any situation that leaves a child feeling overwhelmed, anxious, alone or helpless can cause uncharacteristic responses, even when the event doesn't directly impact the child.

These responses are part of an automatic system that all animals and humans share. It is known as the fight, flight or freeze response. Adults can experience this and children can also have similar responses but cannot, as easily, rationalise that they will be okay, or have the resources to feel safe.

The way children see and understand their parent's response is very important. Children are aware of their parent's worries most of the time but they are particularly sensitive after a major event. A child's response also depends on their age, how directly connected they are to the event, and the support that they get from the adults in their lives.

### Symptoms and Responses Your Child May Exhibit

Some general reactions common to children (these can vary depending on age) are:

- Fearfulness, clinginess
- Grief and loss
- Anger and confusion
- Sadness and emptiness
- Denial, guilt and blame
- Shock
- Replaying the event and inventing different outcomes
- Numbness and detachment
- Fretful, tearful
- Irritable or more stubborn
- Withdrawing or showing lack of response
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Bad dreams
- Easily distracted, forgetful
- Physical complaints (such as stomach ache, body aches, headaches, feeling sick)
- Temporary regression in toileting, speech or self confidence
- Difficulty expressing emotions, or conflict of emotions
- Increased fears about others safety

You can expect these symptoms and responses to last from a few days to a few months, gradually fading as they are able to process the impact of the fires.

## What Your Child Might Need

- Monitor how much your child is being exposed to television/social media stories regarding the fires; children can be distressed by watching repeated images. Explain to them that news reports will repeat images and stories and it may not be a good idea to keep watching.
- Find out what your child's understanding of the event is and correct misunderstandings or confusion.
- Include your child in making plans for the future.
- Support your child to stay connected to friends.
- Keep to your regular routines and activities as much as possible.
- When moving from one activity to another, increase the time you would normally allow your child to complete or pack up an activity. Children may need some additional time with you, or have more questions than normal.
- Help children to understand that adults are doing everything you can to keep them safe. Ask them what they need to feel safe; and if it is feasible; put their requests into action.
- Reassure children that the event is being dealt with appropriately—firefighters and the military are addressing the fire issues, people getting medical attention, buildings are being cleaned up or repaired, homes will be rebuilt, housing will be offered to families, and support is being offered to those impacted.
- Organise playtime to allow children to be children in order to overcome the emphasis the trauma has had on their lives. After a crisis, just the freedom to play and be children is important.
- Secondary reactions may emerge, such as fear of particular locations, or leaving parents. Where possible, anticipate these and prepare for them, as well as be observant of your children's reactions in various situations after the trauma. This will help you continue to help your children process the trauma's effects.
- Debrief with your child after the bushfires. During this time, listening to them and hearing their story is important in order to reveal any wrong assumptions, fears, or personal blaming they may be experiencing. After listening supportively, adults can help reframe the crisis for children without implying judgment.
- Help young children learn to use words that express their feelings, such as sad, scared, angry, or happy. Remember you as an adult have also been affected by the fires so be sure the words fit the children's feelings and not yours.
- Help children get involved in providing some kind of help for those affected by the crisis. Actively doing something to help others refocuses children's thoughts or emotions in healthy ways without minimizing them. Think together with the children about ways to contribute to the needs of others.
- In the future, consider reading stories about crisis situations and how people helped those involved. Stories that illustrate how other people cared for them after the disaster are especially effective.

For more ideas and information, the Headspace, Beyond Blue, or the Child Mind Institute websites have a range of more specific information.

*The information above was prepared based on information from the NSW Department of Education and Training, Headspace, Beyond Blue, and "© 2015 EAP Services Ltd - Partnering for Performance Helping Children Cope With The Effects Following a Stressful Event #1550"*