

Emerging Minds.

National
Workforce
Centre for Child
Mental Health

How do I support my child during the bushfire season?

This tip sheet provides general information for parents and caregivers to support children during this bushfire season.

For further information on supporting children during a disaster or community trauma, visit: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/>



Children look to parents and caregivers to guide them in how to behave when distressing or overwhelming events, such as bushfires and heavy smoke haze occur.

As a parent or caregiver, the best support you can give your child is to be calm, positive, loving and reassuring. Maintaining routines, making time for your child, responding to their questions, and keeping them connected with their friends and family will all help to maintain their sense of safety.

You may be struggling with your own feelings of distress, grief and loss and it is important that you look after yourself. The fires and smoke may bring back distressing feelings and images from other traumatic events you have witnessed. Recognise that you are doing the best you can under these challenging circumstances, and don't forget to draw on support from family, friends and community to help you care for and support your children.

Here are 10 tips to help you to support your child:

1. **Talk to your child** and reassure them that they are safe. Be as honest as possible and don't make promises which you may not be able to keep.
2. **Avoid unnecessary separation** from your child.
3. **If possible, remove your child** from distressing sights, sounds, smells and circumstances of the fires.
4. **Remove your child from the company of people who are distressed**, or who are having conversations about their experience. Limit their exposure to media reporting of the fires as much as possible.
5. **Make time** to give your child lots of comfort. Singing lullabies, cuddling, holding and stroking them, holding hands and sitting together having a quiet conversation can help to reassure them that they will be OK.
6. **Accept your child's feelings** and responses to these events. Don't tell them to 'be good', to 'stop being silly', or to 'be brave'.
7. **Be patient** if there are changes in your child's behaviour (a return to wetting the bed, being unsettled or taking longer to settle for sleep, acting out or becoming withdrawn). Reassure them that you are looking after them and keeping them safe.
8. **Answer any questions** your child has calmly, clearly and concisely. Be honest but avoid any unnecessary detail. If you don't have all the information it's OK to say so.
9. **Don't be afraid to be a little creative.** Some children may not want (or have the words) to talk about their thoughts, feelings or fears. Activities like drawing, playing with toys or writing stories can help them to express themselves in different ways.
10. **Keep your child connected** with their family and friends and return to their normal routines as soon as possible. The more familiar the routine, the more settled children will be.

Recovery

Each child responds differently to distressing and overwhelming events depending on their age, personality and family environment. With love and support from parents and caregivers, most children will recover from traumatic events. However, if you have concerns that your child's reactions to these events are persisting or are worsening then it is a good idea to visit your GP.

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