

Bushfires and children

Bushfires can be a cause of major trauma to children as well as adults. Research on children who have been directly affected by bushfires shows that some children experience emotional distress for a long time after the bushfire. This can be related to the experience of having to leave their homes, fears about their parents' safety and fears about the future as well as actual experience of the fire.

Some children who are distressed don't share this with their parents as they don't want to worry them, so it is important for parents and carers to be aware of the other ways that children show their feelings.

If children who show signs of stress don't get support and understanding and appropriate reassurance at an early stage, the emotional effects of the bushfire can continue over many months. It is important to remember also that sometimes children can seem to be coping well at first but stress reactions can come later.

Impact of bushfire on children

The impact of a bushfire on children will depend on:

- how close the fire is to home
- how the child's parents and carers respond
- the child's temperament
- whether they were apart from their parents at the time of the fire
- family support – being apart increases anxiety
- how much they see on the media. Repeated and vivid images on television can confuse young children because it can seem like the fire is being repeated over and over again and that they are very close, even when they are not
- whether children have personal losses, e.g. if their home is burnt and their whole life disrupted, or loss of a loved pet. There is the grief related to the losses and also fears of what will happen in the future
- the child's age. Younger children in particular may be affected because they don't fully understand what is happening and what they imagine may be even more frightening than the reality.

Note: Being apart from parents during a bushfire can be very stressful for children who worry about parents' safety.

Children's losses

Some of the losses for children include:

- loss of memories and treasured possessions
- loss of their secure home base
- loss of support from stressed parents
- loss of friends if they have to move to a new area
- loss of pets.

For young children even the loss of what seem to adults like small things, such as a special toy, can be very upsetting. Grief and loss in children may lead to:

- feelings of insecurity and anxiety
- feelings of shock, denial, anger, fear, guilt and sadness
- loss of feelings of safety.

Grief reactions

Some of the ways grief is evident in children.

- Physical reactions, e.g. stomach aches or headaches.
- Sleeping difficulties, bad dreams, and nightmares.
- Eating problems.
- Acting like a younger child.
- Difficulties concentrating.
- Acting as if they haven't taken in what has happened.
- Becoming easily upset and showing fears.
- Fear of the darkness.
- Being mean to others or destructive.
- Being angry, irritable or aggressive.
- Temper tantrums.
- Low self esteem.
- Fear of loud noises, smoke or areas where the fire has been.
- Guilt.
- Withdrawal, loss of interest in regular activities.
- Clinginess and fear of separation.
- Having trouble concentrating on school work.
- Not wanting to go to school, running away.
- Playing the same thing over and over – some children may seem obsessed by fire.
- Crying or giggling without obvious reason.

Pre-school children

- Impact of the loss may be greater in the early years because they don't really understand what's happening.
- Children are likely to show their grief in less direct ways than adults and because they move in and out of grief sometimes they seem OK and then suddenly this changes.
- Children often have more needs at this time which can lead to demanding behaviour as they try to get closeness, care, information and support from adults. They don't always have the words to express feelings and will show them in the way they act.
- Each child's experience of loss is unique to that child and needs to be understood and responded to individually.
- Often young children will ask the same question over and over again if it has important meaning for them.

Early years at school

- At this age some children still show signs of emotional stress and distress after a bush fire.
- Children may be starting to express their feelings in words and will also show it in their behaviour and play.

Later primary school years

Children can talk about their feelings better now but don't always do so. Fewer children show signs of ongoing stress but some still do. As they get older they are more able to understand what other people are going through as well.

What you can do to help

- Even if you are very stressed yourself it is important not to lose sight of your children's needs. The continuity of the positive family support basis is the greatest security for children and will help them deal with any emotional distress much better. [If a child is stressed it is not a good time to start any other life changes which could wait, e.g. change of child carer].
- Keep as many familiar family routines as possible as too many changes can increase the stress for the child. Familiarity will assist children feel safe, as will physical closeness and comfort.

This information was provided by Pam Linke from Children, Youth and Women's Health Service, and can be found at www.cyh.com

- Give clear and truthful information in a way the child can understand. Children need to know what is happening. It may take children longer to understand what it all means, so you may need to answer the same question over and over.
- Reassure children in ways that you can, e.g. that you will stay with them and protect them, that the bushfire is a long way away (if it is true), that you will have a place to live that will be home for them and that you can keep them safe.
- Adults need to maintain their adult role and not rely on the child for support. The child needs to be supported by adults. Children need to know that important people are in their lives and will be there for them.
- It is also important for others involved in the care of the child to understand what has been happening for the child and family. Children can feel supported and cared for by other children and adults at child care and school but these people need to know first what has happened.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share worries with a caring adult. If it seems needed, reassure children that they are not responsible in any way for what has happened and that they are loved. (Sometimes children think the fire is punishment for something 'bad' that they have done or wished for).
- If a young child is asking lots of questions, try and work out how this relates to his or her own life and experience, so you can respond appropriately. For example a child who may have had some punishment may have wished that something bad would happen to the person who punished him or her, and then become very focused on risk to that person. They may feel especially guilty if something does happen to that person.
- Provide an encouraging environment where the child feels safe to express feelings in whatever way they can. Give opportunities for children to find ways to express their feelings through play, art, writing, or stories.
- Try to open the way for children to express their feelings by discussing how it is sometimes hard to talk but it can really help. Make sure there is time for this. Bedtime is often a good time. Don't pressure children to talk. If they don't want to, you can say that you are ready to listen when they do.
- It is important that the child's varied expressions, feelings, behavioural reactions are accepted and understood, and there is consistency and constancy in adult responses.

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- Share your own feelings of grief and loss with children, as this will help them in their grieving and to understand that it is normal to have the feelings they are experiencing. It is important, however, that children do not see adults too distressed, as the child needs to feel that the adult is in control and can keep them safe.
- Parents and others affected by experiences such as bush fires which cause loss and grief need to also make sure they have support for themselves. Talk to partners, friends, relatives or agencies that can help support you. Try not to talk about it in front of children too often or too dramatically. Children are very sensitive to adult feelings.
- It is important to protect children from the media and the distressing images and stories they could be exposed to. Parents and caregivers should monitor all forms of media.
- As soon as you can after the disaster remember that you and your children are still the same people with the same strengths and interests and hopes and relationships to move forward. Remember to still do some fun things together, make plans for good things and work towards your own and your children's future goals.
- The biggest need for children who have experienced the type of losses incurred by bushfires is to be supported and cared for and to have someone to talk about it with.

Practical things

Often children and adults are helped to cope with situations like a bushfire if they feel they can do something helpful for others. This might include:

- sending some toys or clothes to people left homeless
- writing a letter of sympathy
- taking part in an event to raise money for victims
- helping develop a family plan to prevent fires in their own home
- if their family is personally affected having some jobs to do, appropriate to their age which are helpful, such as helping clean up if it is safe.

Remember to try and keep children, especially young children, inside if the air is smoky.

If a child's reactions after a trauma such as a bushfire seem to be getting worse, or not showing signs of getting better after a few weeks, it is important to get professional help. If you find that you are unable to move forward yourself emotionally, it is also important to look for some professional support for your own sake and your children's.

Resource

Country Fire Service (CFS) South Australia

<http://www.cfs.org.au/>

References

American Academy of Pediatrics (2003) 'Psychosocial issues for children and families in disasters: a guide for the primary care physician' [Click here](#)

Fetsch, Robert (2002) 'Three questions and answers related to wildfires and stress' www.ext.colostate.edu/drought/wildstress.html

McDermott, Brett & Palmer, Lyle (1999) 'Post-disaster service provision following proactive identification of children with emotional distress and depression' in Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry; 33: 855-883

McDermott, Brett & Palmer, Lyle (2002) 'Postdisaster emotional distress, depression and event-related variables; findings across child and adolescent developmental stages' in Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry 36: 754-761

McFarlane, Alexander et al. (1987) 'A longitudinal study of the psychological morbidity in children due to a natural disaster' in Psychological Medicine 17, 727-738

The information on this site should not be used as an alternative to professional care. If you have a particular problem, see a doctor, or ring the Parent Helpline on 1300 364 100 (local call cost from anywhere in South Australia).

This topic may use 'he' and 'she' in turn – please change to suit your child's sex.