

## Supporting your child through the Australian bushfires



As New Year's Eve passed, and we entered the 2020's, I felt a little more uneasy than usual, like there wasn't much cause for celebration. I left the smoke haze of Sydney for a South Australian Christmas, hearing upon arrival that my family were told to evacuate our Adelaide Hills property, then heading to Kangaroo Island a few days later and being told fires had broken out there too.

My family was lucky, the fires came close but missed our property. But others have experienced severe stress, losing loved ones, pets, homes, and land. Children are particularly vulnerable in times like these.

In my mid 20's, I visited hospitals to hear the stories of hundreds of children affected by trauma, with their words forming the heart of my PhD. What I learnt from this was – whether your child is worried a fire is approaching, has seen distressing images, or has been exposed to the fires – your child could be struggling with it.

Just imagine how confusing and scary the experience of a bushfire is for a child with a developing understanding of the world around them.

Many children exposed to the bushfires will be plagued by vivid nightmares and upsetting memories of the bushfires along with other anxiety, grief, and depressive symptoms. The distressing footage of injured people, dead animals, and 'apocalyptic' fire-ridden landscapes dominating news headlines across the world is also causing anxiety and fear amongst children living in cities.

If your child is currently struggling to cope, don't panic! You will be relieved to hear that experiencing these symptoms in the early days after a natural disaster is really normal. Once the threat is over, these symptoms tend to go away naturally within the first few months as your child adjusts to what has happened.

Some children directly impacted by the fires will continue to be haunted by their memories and develop a condition called Post-traumatic Stress Disorder or [PTSD](#). There are lots of negative impacts of this disorder, and I have treated children with PTSD who start to fail at school, stop their hobbies, and isolate themselves from friends and family.

For your child to positively adjust to the bushfire crisis, he/she needs to develop a healthy understanding of what has happened, why it happened, and any implications for the future. Here are some tips!

### **1. Don't make assumptions**

Don't assume your child is okay just because they are not talking about it. In my experience, it is very common for children to avoid talking about distressing events. Some children fear that talking about it will cause them to have a distressing flashback memory. Others feel ashamed to tell people that they are not coping.

### **2. Talking about it is a good thing**

There is a big myth out there that talking about distressing events will retraumatize a child. I meet many parents who don't talk to their child about frightening events because they fear harming them. They say things like 'there is nothing to worry about' or 'let's not talk about it any further', which unfortunately makes the child feel invalidated. On the contrary, engaging in regular, sensitive and age-appropriate conversations with your child is hugely beneficial.

### **3. Check-in with your child, but don't force them to talk**

In the first instance, check-in with your child about how they are feeling. If your child is reluctant to speak, don't try and force it. Give your child space and time and try again later. If your child continues to be unwilling, respect your child's wishes, try not to take it personally, and arrange for another trusted adult to check-in.

### **4. Help your child to understand that their reactions are normal**

Children struggling to adjust to trauma often tell me they feel like they are 'going crazy'. Never underestimate the power of letting your child know that you understand. Furthermore, explain to them that there are a lot of other adults and kids that recover from these issues. There are also [educational stories](#) or YouTube Clips explaining children's responses to trauma that you and your child can look at together.

### **5. Help your child make sense of the experience**

You play an important role in helping your child to get their head around what has happened. Children often feel unsafe after an event of this nature, and they benefit

from your education and reassurance in this regard. Children are also often confused about aspects of the event. Answer your child's questions and clarify any misconceptions in a truthful manner. Lying about things is not helpful. With younger children, you might use dolls or toys, or pictures to help them understand.

#### **6. Keep your reactions in check**

Children soak up information from their parents, especially when trying to make sense of events that are beyond their realm of understanding. It is important for you to keep your emotions in check and be mindful of the conversations your child is hearing. Be aware that your child is more likely to struggle to adjust if they hear you frequently catastrophising and talking fearfully about the future.

#### **7. If you are struggling.**

If you are struggling, consider how you can move forward emotionally as this is also a priority. Ask yourself 'can I talk to my child about it in a calm manner?' If not, enlist the help of a trusted adult and work on trying to get yourself to the point where you feel you can talk to your child about it.

#### **8. Establish routines.**

Whilst it might seem impossible for families directly affected by the fires to have any routine, be aware that it is important to try and re-establish a routine (e.g., bedtime, dinner time, stories etc.) for the child when it becomes practically possible.

#### **9. Build positive experiences**

Try and incorporate a relaxation exercise (there are lots of great apps online) into your child's day and find children as many opportunities to laugh and have fun during this stressful time.

#### **10. Seeking professional help**

If your child continues to show problems several weeks after the event, consult with your GP about whether counselling is needed.