

For Families

Supporting Children and Young People: Bushfires

What can adults do if their child or young person is anxious?

1. Monitor media exposure

Children and young people can become anxious after listening to or watching repeated stories about bushfires, and can come to believe that everywhere is under threat. They may not realise that footage on television is a replay and not another event. Be confident in your role as a parent/ carer and limit their exposure to news and other programs with potentially distressing images and sounds.

2. Listen to understand how they are feeling and thinking

Encourage (but don't force) children and young people to talk about their thoughts and feelings about bushfires. Let them know that it is normal to think and feel that way. Expect that they might ask the same questions over and over as they attempt to make sense of events. Remain patient and provide truthful but simple and thoughtful explanations that will help them to develop a realistic understanding of things. Correct any misperceptions they might have about the events and likely risks.

3. Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings

Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them.

4. Reassure

Children and young people need comfort, reassurance and support, and to know that they are safe and are being looked after. Reassure them that their reactions are normal and will pass in time.

5. Be aware of how you talk in their presence

Shield children and young people from in-depth adult discussion about these events, especially if they cannot join in at their own age or stage of development. They can distort what they hear or see especially when the information is received through indirect communication (for example, overheard adult conversations about worrying things).

6. Pay attention to your own reactions

Children and young people may respond to the anxieties felt and expressed by the people around them. They often see and hear far more than adults are aware of, and they will take their cues for how to respond from you.

Signs that a child or young person has been negatively affected by information about bushfires might include:

- becoming clingier towards a parent or carer – for example wanting to be held more than usual, wanting to be with parents or carers, asking about fire, seeking reassurance.

- changes to sleeping or eating patterns, or both
- the emergence of new physical complaints – such as stomach ache or headache
- changes in mood – such as being more easily irritable, or shutting down
- appearing on edge and frightened – for example, being more easily startled, developing new fears or having nightmares.

Some other considerations:

Accept the child or young person's responses, reactions and feelings. Don't tell them to 'stop being silly', or to 'be brave'.

Do not make behavioural or emotional demands or have expectations the child might not be able to meet at this particular time.

Make sure you look after your own safety and wellbeing.

Sources: Looking After Children Who Are Anxious about Bushfire Season. Australian Psychological Society (2016).

Psychological First Aid for Children and Adolescents. Trauma and Grief Network

Better Health www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/talking-to-children-about-bushfire-risk

