

# Supporting children after the bushfires

Natural disasters such as bushfires have immediate and ongoing impacts on communities, families and individuals. For children, even seeing media coverage of the devastation may disrupt their sense of safety, causing anxiety and unease.

Children's responses vary depending on factors such as their age and proximity to the disaster. Some may react immediately with changes to their behaviour, such as acting out, becoming clingy, changes to sleep patterns, physical symptoms such as stomach aches, or becoming withdrawn and quiet. Some children may show no outward signs, perhaps because they are okay, or because they are still processing what's happened.

We all deal with things in our own way, and our children are no different. Parents can help by being aware of children's emotional reactions, and providing warmth and reassurance through and after such a disaster.

## Tips for Supporting Children

### **Listen to your child's questions and concerns.**

Children may ask difficult or challenging questions. Answer honestly and simply, without frightening or graphic details. You do not need to 'fix it' or have all the answers. Listening and acknowledging your child's feelings will help them feel understood.

**Give your child extra time and attention.** For some children, emotions and fears can be too big to put into words. These emotions may present as an increased focus on a fantasy world (eg. monsters). Spending extra time with children during this period can help to lessen any distress feelings. Provide opportunities for children to express their thoughts through formats such as drawing, playing or writing.

**Provide a safe environment for your child.** This is especially important if your family is in a new or temporary environment. Children need close

personal attention to feel safe. Some respond to warmth and safety through touch and physical closeness. Comfort items such as toys or blankets can help.

**Emphasise resilience in your child and the community.** Highlight times your child has shown strength and positive coping strategies. Share stories of resilience and how people come together through examples of survival, kindness and compassion in the community.

**Be patient.** Children might ask you the same questions over and over, because children often need to hear the same information many times in order to make sense of it.

**Look after your own emotional safety and wellbeing.** It is important you address your own emotional needs so you can support your children and respond to their emotions. Friends, family and professionals can assist.

**Tell your children they are loved.** Natural disasters can shake a child's sense of stability and they may begin to question how the world works. Remind your children they are safe, and that the adults in their lives are doing everything to keep them safe. Most children find their "new normal" and will recover over time, although reminders like anniversaries may bring up emotions again. A minority of children require specialist support, so if you are concerned about your child, seek help.

## Who can help?

[Parentline 1300 1300 52](https://parentline.nsw.gov.au/)

[Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800](https://kids.helpline.org.au/)