



Children & Recovery from Wildfires

Helping children and families respond to the psychological impact of wildfires.

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Every year in the United States, wildfires burn more than 5 million acres. They can destroy homes, businesses, and decimate entire communities. They sometimes result in the death of loved ones and can inflict life-threatening burn injuries. It is not surprising that wildfires can have a tremendous psychological impact on children. This document addresses some of the ways children may be affected by wildfires, and offers suggestions about how to help restore a sense of safety and comfort in their world.

In the aftermath of a wildfire, it is normal for children to experience behavioral, emotional, or adjustment reactions. These responses can range from mild, short-term symptoms that subside on their own to long-lasting difficulties that may benefit from professional support. The severity of a child's reactions to the wildfire depends not only on how close they were physically to the fire, but also on the emotional impact of the accumulated losses that they have experienced. Of course, the loss of a family member, a beloved pet, or a home will have a major impact on their recovery. Other potential factors include the child's age, developmental stage, temperament, previous life experiences, extent to which their neighborhood or school was affected, exposure to media coverage of the fire, and access to support systems.

As the children in your life attempt to understand their world in the aftermath of a wildfire, it may be helpful to familiarize yourself with some of the behaviors that are common to each developmental age group. This document identifies some of the reactions that children may have in response to the wildfire, and provides suggestions for how to help.

Common Reactions

Infants & Toddlers

- ◆ More fears related to safety and security. Children as young as newborns can experience a sensitive startle reflex in response to loud sounds, smells, or sensory overload.
- ◆ Increased separation anxiety and clinginess. Infants may experience more fussiness than usual. Young children may experience more temper tantrums and irritability.
- ◆ Sleep difficulties. For example, trouble falling asleep, waking frequently, needing to sleep in your bed, night terrors, or repetitive nightmares.
- ◆ Temporary loss of previously mastered developmental skills. For example, wanting to be fed rather than feeding themselves, returning to diapers after being potty trained, reverting to baby talk, increased thumb sucking.
- ◆ For those coping with the loss of a residential home or school: They may ask when they can “go home.” Or when other aspects of life will return to normal. May repeatedly express anger, sadness, or disappointment related to the loss.
- ◆ For those coping with the death of a family member: May ask when a person will “come back” or return home. Babies and toddlers do not conceptually understand death and other permanent losses, but they do notice and grieve absence and change. May express frequent feelings of anger, sadness, or disappointment related to the loss. For this age group, these expressions are more likely to be behavioral than verbal.

How to Help

Infants & Toddlers

- ◆ Offer expressions of love and physical affection. Young children feel an increased sense of safety and security through hugging, holding, rocking, singing, humming, and verbal assurances of safety and interpersonal connection.
- ◆ Infants, toddlers, and children of all ages will take cues from their parents, guardians, or other adults in their lives. Children will closely watch parents and respond to parental coping styles.

- ◆ Children as young as newborns can sense parental stress. Tending to your own recovery process as a parent or guardian will directly support the children in your life.
- ◆ Return to established routines to the greatest extent that you can. If former routines are not possible, establish new ones that are consistent and predictable.
- ◆ Pay attention to your tone and facial expression when your child is with you. Babies, including newborns, are sensitive to the tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language of their caregivers. Infants, toddlers, and children of all ages can regulate their own stress responses by watching and listening to the adults in their lives. Calming your own voice, expression, and body language can help your baby feel safe and secure.
- ◆ Be mindful of adult conversation about the wildfire in the presence of young children. Be aware that children listening to adult conversation about the wildfire devastation, especially on a frequent basis, may become more frightened.
- ◆ Talk to your infant or toddler. Acknowledge and label feelings. Use a calm, soothing voice when talking with your child. By attempting to regulate your own reactions to the wildfire, you can model healthy coping for your children.
- ◆ After speaking with your infant or toddler about the wildfire, spend time transitioning to a supportive activity such as snuggling, reading a book together, or playing a physical game that enables them to release their emotions in a safe and appropriate way.
- ◆ Try your best to limit exposure to television coverage of the wildfire. Protect your infant or toddler from uncensored images of the fire, including visual and auditory reminders associated with the fire. Young children are more likely to misunderstand the information presented in the media (for instance, misinterpreting news coverage of the fire as a wildfire that is happening again).
- ◆ Let children know about parents' whereabouts and when they will be back. Transitional objects such as a stuffed animal, small blanket, or special toy can be sources of comfort during and after separations.
- ◆ Through play, children can release emotions and process a traumatic experience. Trusted adults can help children ask and answer questions about the wildfire during play sessions through gentle and supportive prompting.
- ◆ Be patient and tolerant of developmental regressions. Talk with your child's doctor if you are concerned about your child's regressive behaviors in reaction to the wildfire.

Common Reactions

Preschoolers and Younger School-Aged Children:

- ◆ Uncertainty that the fire is really over or fear that the fire will happen again. Worries about their own safety and the safety of their loved ones.
- ◆ Heightened fearfulness and sensitive startle reflex. Increased temper tantrums, irritability, and disruptive behaviors. Expressions of physical and emotional distress when reminded about the fire.
- ◆ Repeatedly talking about the fire. Incorporating the wildfire memories into play activities. Repeatedly playing out scenes related to the wildfire during imaginative play.
- ◆ Disruptions in sleep and/or eating patterns. For example, fear of falling asleep, repetitive nightmares, needing to sleep in your bed, or loss of appetite.
- ◆ Temporary loss of previously mastered developmental skills. For example, regressions in toilet training, reverting to baby talk, increased bed wetting, refusing to separate from parents at school or during work hours.
- ◆ For those struggling with the death of a family member, beloved pet, home, or school: A child of this age may begin to grasp the reality of a death or loss but is unlikely to understand its permanence and irreversibility. It is important to help correct and clarify any misunderstanding or misconceptions associated with the loss.

How to Help

Preschoolers and Younger School-Aged Children:

- ◆ Assure your children that they are safe. Be patient in repeating this assurance as frequently as a child needs. Spend extra time with your children and tell them you love them.
- ◆ Answer your child's questions about the wildfire in an honest and direct way. Reassure them that their friends and neighbors are being cared for. Talk about the "helpers" who put out the wildfire, such as firefighters, first responders, and community members.
- ◆ Provide predictability and routine in your child's daily life. If your home was lost in the wildfire, do your best to implement a predictable schedule in your new living setting. Replace lost toys to the best of your ability. Help the children in your life get enough rest, exercise, food, and water.
- ◆ Offer extra support during transitional moments, such as staying a few minutes longer at bedtime or playing together before leaving for work. Minimize uncertainty by planning ahead to let children know what to expect during the day.

- ◆ Be mindful of adult conversation about the wildfire in the presence of young children. Be aware that children listening to adult conversation about the wildfire devastation, especially on a frequent basis, may become more frightened.
- ◆ Try your best to limit exposure to media coverage of the wildfire. Protect your child from uncensored images of the fire, including visual and auditory reminders associated with the wildfire. Young children are more likely to misunderstand the information presented in the media.
- ◆ Set clear, fair limits on your child's behavior and continue to encourage the limits and expectations that your child is accustomed to. Maintain expectations about respect for others and follow through with appropriate consequences. Help children contribute to the family unit by giving them simple chores and responsibilities. Keep in mind that children may need more reminding than usual.
- ◆ Help children label their emotions and feelings. Be present and supportive of children who are experiencing big feelings and assure them that they are not alone. Let them know that their feelings are normal and the turbulent emotions will eventually pass. Read books with characters that experience different feelings and talk about those feelings.
- ◆ Take cues from your child's artwork or imaginative play in order to better understand how they are thinking about and processing the fire. Children often communicate better through play than through conversation. Address any misconceptions or questions brought up in their play.
- ◆ Support the children in your life as they return to school or as they relocate to a new school. Be extra patient as your children adjust to the school setting. In the aftermath of a wildfire, affected students may benefit from shorter lessons, less homework than usual, and going at a slower pace. A temporary decline in academic performance is to be expected.
- ◆ Tell children about community recovery efforts. Let them know about all the "helpers" who are assisting in those efforts and working hard to provide housing, insurance, financial support, assistance in replacing belongings, as well as restoring electricity, phones, water, and gas to buildings that have survived the wildfire.
- ◆ After speaking with children about the wildfire, spend time transitioning to a supportive activity such as snuggling, reading a book together, playing with toys, or initiating a physical game that enables them to release their emotions in a safe and appropriate way. Unplug from media outlets during this time.

Common Reactions

Older School-Aged Children & Teens

- ◆ Older children and adolescents have a better understanding of the finality of their losses associated with wildfire. Loss of loved ones, physical displacement, destruction of personal belongings, and financial hardships are likely to compound the stressors that older children and teenagers experience in the aftermath of the fire.
- ◆ The impact of wildfire exposure, evacuation, and accumulative losses can have lasting effects on adolescents and young adults, signs of which may not fully emerge until after physical and emotional safety is restored. Older children and teenagers may experience longer states of fearfulness and high arousal following a wildfire, and symptoms commonly persist for weeks or months the wildfire has been contained and safety has been restored.
- ◆ Elevated levels of distress may include symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in children and adolescents. Sights, sounds, and smells that remind them of the wildfire may provoke overwhelming thoughts and memories, recurring nightmares, and distressing bodily reactions.
- ◆ Older children and teenagers may experience mixed emotions, including sadness, anxiety, anger, agitation, or irritability in the aftermath of a devastating wildfire. Mood swings may increase in frequency and intensity.

How to Help

Older School-Aged Children & Teens

- ◆ Answer your older children and adolescents' questions about the wildfire in an honest and direct way. Stay calm when answering these questions. Remain patient and open when clarifying any additional questions your teen may have.
- ◆ Let older children know that it is okay to share their thoughts and fears with you, with their peers, or with another trusted adult in their life. Assure teenagers that any reactions they may have to the wildfire are normal, and even expected, given the traumatic nature of the event.
- ◆ Invite your older child or adolescent to talk about their feelings associated with the wildfire. Do not pressure or force them to talk if they are unable or unwilling to verbalize their experiences.

- ◆ For many older children and teenagers, non-verbal means of processing the wildfire may offer a more effective method of coping with the trauma. Actions such as crying, hard exercise, physical activity, expressive arts, tuning into music, or socializing with peers can offer additional emotional outlets.
- ◆ Provide predictability and routine in the daily life of your older children and adolescents. If your home was lost in the wildfire, do your best to implement a predictable schedule in your new living setting. Replace lost clothing and belongings to the best of your ability.
- ◆ Model healthy coping skills to your teenagers by ensuring that the adults in your life get enough rest, healthy food, water, and exercise. Take care of your own needs and prioritize your own self-care in order to teach your child how to handle their own stress. Share your coping process with your older child or teenager and model healthy coping to the best of your ability.
- ◆ Emphasize and help your adolescent to recall moments during the fire in which they were courageous or brave. Help your teenager to separate things that are controllable from things that are not.
- ◆ Encourage your older child to write or make drawings about their feelings. Or suggest that they write a letter to someone else affected by the fire or to a firefighter.
- ◆ After speaking with older children or teenagers about the wildfire, spend time transitioning to a supportive activity that enables them to release their emotions in a safe and appropriate way.
- ◆ Get involved with your older child or adolescent in community-based activities and work to help others who have been affected by the wildfire. Point out that everyone needs each other and no one is alone.
- ◆ Plan for future special events and involve your child in this process. Celebrations can be simple and focus on increasing one's sense of safety, belonging, and community support in the aftermath of a wildfire. Cultivate moments of hopefulness in the midst of challenging times.

Understanding Therapeutic Play: A Guide for Parents and Parental Guardians

Following a traumatic event, play is an invaluable tool for children as they attempt to integrate their experience with the wildfire into their pre-existing beliefs about the world. Children may use play to express emotions, process fears, solve problems, and gain a sense of agency over a seemingly uncontrollable situation.

Just as an adult or older child might talk about the wildfire over and over, a younger child may repeatedly play out the scenario in an attempt to make sense of it and release internal emotions. Trusted adults can join children in their play and help them process the experience through gentle prompting and questions. Through play, adults can help children ask and answer questions, identify helpers and heroes, plan for the future, and express difficult emotions through a familiar and less threatening modality.

Immediately following an intensely traumatic event, children can sometimes lose the ability and interest to play. Children must feel safe in order to play freely, and thus the overwhelming feelings of fear associated with trauma can leave children too frightened to do so. This reaction is beyond their control and is not permanent.

A child in this state needs repeated physical and verbal assurances of safety and affection from a trusted adult. They need reminders that the trauma is over and that they are in a safe place. They should be approached gently and slowly. Sensory and body-based activities such as music, hugging a soft stuffed animal, and manipulating clay may be helpful. As the acuity of the trauma begins to subside and they start trusting the safety of their surroundings, children will begin to play normally again.

After experiencing a trauma, children may play out a situation again and again in order to better understand it or gain mastery over their experiences. Though it can be alarming to see them incorporating scary themes into their imaginative play, this is a normal and natural coping mechanism that can help a child begin to make meaning and heal from the event.

Seek help from your child's doctor or a trusted mental health professional if your child is becoming stuck in the trauma narrative, unable to change the story or trajectory of their play, continually presenting with a flat affect, or not appearing to experience a positive emotional release from the play activity. Observing play can offer important clues for understanding your child's reactions to a traumatic incident and supporting long-term recovery.

Resources for Children and Adolescents Who Have Sustained Burn-Injuries

If an individual has experienced a serious or life-threatening burn injury during the wildfire, there are local and national organizations that can help connect them with burn survivor resources and peer support providers that will assist in the recovery process.

The Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation

<http://www.aarbf.org/>

Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors

<https://www.phoenix-society.org/>

Resources for Children and Families Impacted by Wildfires

Child Life Disaster Relief

“Children and Fires”

<http://cldisasterrelief.org/resources-2/kids/>

First 5 Sonoma

“Resources to help families of young children cope during disasters and traumatic events”

<http://first5sonomacounty.org/Resources-for-Parents/Coping-Resources/>

Florida Institute for Family Involvement

“Disaster Preparedness for Families of Children with Special Needs”

http://www.kitsapdem.org/pdfs/special_needs/Preparedness_Children_Special_Needs.pdf

National Association of School Psychologists

“Helping Children After a Wildfire: Tips for Parents and Teachers”

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/natural-disaster/helping-children-after-a-wildfire-tips-for-parents-and-teachers>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

“Parents Guidelines for Helping Children Impacted by Wildfires”

http://www.netcn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/parents_wildfires.pdf

Zero to Three

“Coping with Trauma and Stress in the Face of Wildfires”

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2119-coping-with-trauma-and-stress-in-the-face-of-wildfires>

About the Authors

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