

NCTSNThe National Child  
Traumatic Stress NetworkRady  
Children's | Chadwick Center  
San Diego | for Children & Families

## Parent Guidelines for Helping Children Impacted by Wildfires

Wildfires cause emotional distress as well as physical damage. People may fear that their loved ones will be killed or injured. Separation from family members can occur, with hours or days passing before being reunited. Neighborhoods and communities may be called on to evacuate on short notice, forcing people to make important decisions in minutes – whether to evacuate, where to go, when to leave, and what to bring with them (including pets). People may live in shelters for days, not knowing if their homes and businesses have been saved or lost. Routine is disrupted and one's sense of security is undermined. Families and communities should not underestimate the accumulative effects of evacuation, displacement, relocation, and rebuilding.

In the aftermath, as the scope of the damage is known, families may learn of injuries to loved ones. The loss of homes, pets, livestock, and valuables, including sentimental items, will increase feelings of sadness and vulnerability. If a fire is found to have been set intentionally, people grapple with increased anger and blame. Like other traumatic events, wildfires will be particularly difficult for individuals with special needs.

Post-wildfire problems with housing, food, water, electricity, transportation, work, school, childcare, and daily routines can disrupt living for weeks or months. People suffer financial hardships when their homes, businesses, or jobs are lost. Confusion can mount as they seek disaster assistance from local and federal agencies or their insurance companies. As a result, signs of stress may become evident even months after the fires.

Children's reactions to the wildfires and their aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, teachers, and other caregivers cope during and after the events. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. Below are common reactions parents may see in their children. These generally diminish with time, but knowing that these reactions are likely can help you be prepared to help your child.

### Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (including pets):
  - Children may have increased fears and worries about separation from family members
  - Young children may become more clingy to parents, siblings, or teachers
- Fears of wildfires spreading or new ones starting

- Distress and anxiety with reminders of the wildfires (e.g., burning smell, sounds of sirens or helicopters, burnt landscape and buildings)
- Changes in behavior:
  - Increased activity level
  - Decreased concentration and attention
  - Increased irritability
  - Withdrawal
  - Angry outbursts
  - Aggression
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Prolonged focus on the wildfires (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Changes in school performance
- Regressive behaviors in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
- Increased chance of high-risk behaviors in adolescents (e.g., drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors)

### How Can I Help My Child?

- *Spend time talking with your child.* This will let your child know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. Because during and after wildfires includes constantly changing situations, children may have questions on more than one occasion. Issues may need to be discussed more than one time. You should remain flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions and providing clarifications. If you have to evacuate suddenly, tell your child briefly where you are going and that you will answer their questions once you get to safety.
- *You should answer questions briefly and honestly, but also ask your children for their opinions and ideas about what is discussed.* For younger children, try to follow wildfire conversations with a favorite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.

### Things I Can Do for Myself

- *Take care of yourself.* Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating well, sleeping well, getting exercise, and receiving proper medical care.
- *Listen to each other.* Parents and other caregivers should provide support for each other during this time.
- *Put off major decisions.* Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this stressful post-wildfire period.

- *Give yourself a break.* Try not to overdo clean-up activities. These activities may include lifting heavy items or working for extended periods of time. Using moderation when doing such work can reduce injury.

### Things I Can Do for My Child

- *Be a role model.* Changes in living conditions can be extremely stressful for children. They will take cues of how to handle situations from their parents. Modeling calm behaviors will be important during chaotic times.
- *Encourage your children.* Help children help take care of themselves by encouraging them to get appropriate rest, exercise, and diet. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and physical activities.
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- *Reassure children that they are safe or the plans you have for their safety.* This may need to be repeated many times during and after a wildfire. You should spend extra time with your children and stay connected. It doesn't matter whether it's playing games, reading together, or just cuddling. Be sure to tell children they are loved.
- *Maintain routines.* Even in the mist of chaos and change, children feel more safe and secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, stick to everyday routines (including mealtimes, bedtime, etc.).
- *Maintain expectations.* Stick with family rules, such as rules about good behavior and respect for others.
- *Limit media exposure.* It is important for you to protect your child from overexposure to sights and images of the wildfires, including those in newspapers, on the Internet, or on television.
- *Calm worries about friends' safety.* As phone service may be disrupted, communication will be difficult. Reassure your children that their friends' parents are taking care of them just as they are being cared for by you.
- *Talk about community response and recovery.* Reassure children about the work being done in their community to contain the wildfires (such as first responders protecting people, homes, pets, and wildlife), to restore electricity and water, to remove debris, and to help families find housing.
- *Encourage children to help.* Children recover and cope better when they feel they are helping. Find opportunities in which they can contribute in the aftermath of the wildfire. Give small tasks related to clean-up or family activities. After children spend time in clean-up activities, provide activities that are not related to the wildfires. This may include playing a game, reading a book, playing cards, etc.

- *Be patient.* Children may need a little extra patience and attention during these times. They may need added reminders or extra help with chores or homework once school is in session as they may be more distracted.
- *Give support at bedtime.* Children may become anxious when they separate from their parents, in particular at bedtime. First try to spend more time with your child at bed time with such activities as reading a book. It's okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep with you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a set future date.
- *Monitor adult conversations.* Be aware of what is being said during adult conversations about the wildfires and its aftermath. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily about something they do not understand.
- *Seek professional help.* If children have difficulties for more than six weeks after the wildfires, parents should consult a mental health professional for an evaluation.
- *Keep things hopeful.* Even in the most difficult situations, it is important to identify some positive aspect and to stay hopeful for the future. A positive and optimistic outlook helps children see the good things in the world around them. This outlook can be one way to help them get through even the most challenging times.

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