

SUPPORTING YOUR FAMILY IN THE EVENT OF A WILDFIRE

Download the Help Kids Cope Mobile App

- Learn what to do and say before, during, and after wildfires, winter storms, floods, landslides, tornadoes, extreme heat, and earthquakes
- Explain different disasters to your kids using age-appropriate language
- Find tips on caring for yourself—as you care for your family
- Connect to activities, children's books, tip sheets, and more



Wildfires cause emotional distress as well as physical damage. The loss of homes, pets, livestock, and valuables, including sentimental items, will increase feelings of sadness and vulnerability. 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)
- Prolonged focus on the wildfires (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increased activity level
 - Decreased concentration and attention
 - Increased irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Aggression/Angry outbursts
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- 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)

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

- **SPEND TIME TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD.** This will let your child know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. 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, but do not force your child to talk. 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.
- **ANSWER QUESTIONS BRIEFLY AND HONESTLY.** 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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **LIMIT MEDIA EXPOSURE.** It is important for you to protect your child from overexposure to sights and images of the wildfires, including newspapers, TV or on the Internet.
- **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.
- **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 wildfire. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily about something they do not understand.
- **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.

WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT FROM A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

A few general guidelines may be useful in deciding when normal reactions to disaster become issues requiring assistance:

When disturbing emotions or behaviors last more than four to six weeks.	When a person's emotions or behaviors make it difficult to function normally, whether at home, work, school or out in the community.	Any time someone feels unstable or concerned about themselves.
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