

Preparing for anniversaries and memorials

Information for parents and carers

This summary sheet aims to provide parents and carers of children affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires with some simple information about supporting children and adolescents through bushfire-related anniversaries and memorials.

Anniversaries and memorials

Anniversaries are times of remembering, reflection and review. As the anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires approaches there will be increased discussion in the community, in kindergartens and in schools. Many children may find this helpful, but it is important that this process is monitored, supervised and managed by adults as children are vulnerable if they are over-exposed to discussions and images that are not age-appropriate.

Children may react to the anniversary of the bushfires in a variety of ways. Children and adolescents may seek out relationships and environments where they feel protected from things that remind them of the bushfires, where there is familiarity, predictability and people who are able to 'tune in' to them.

- **Younger children may show signs of reluctance to sleep alone and worry for their safety or the safety of others.**
- **School aged children may demonstrate new fears or avoid things that they now see as risky or potentially dangerous.**
- **Adolescents may become more reckless and act out, or they may spend time discussing the danger with their friends, trying to predict what might happen and identify strategies to keep safe.**

What you can do to help and support your child

- Maintain your normal routines.
- Try and maintain open and honest communication.
- Let your child know that you are available to talk and listen to their feelings to support them.
- Monitor your child and any reactions or responses they may have over the anniversary period.
- Reassure your child that there are lots of people working to make them as safe as possible.
- Talk about the things that your family are doing to prepare in case there is another fire. Working with your child on a family emergency action plan will help them play an active part in feeling safe.

Knowing that children can trust the adults in their lives is vital. Being honest and genuine with your child is very important. It is okay to share your feelings and thoughts with your child, as this allows them to learn from you and know that you are open to talking and expressing feelings. However, it is important to be mindful that any deep and intense emotions you may be experiencing are best managed in an adult context, especially if there is not someone present to focus fully on the child and the impact of your emotions on them.

Media

As the anniversary approaches increased media coverage can be expected, which may reactivate feelings of fear, anxiety, loss and distress in children of all ages. Very young children might not realise that this is coverage of past events, and they may fear for their safety again. Limit the amount of media (particularly news media) that children are exposed to. It is very important that children's exposure and reactions to media are monitored. Try and sit with your child if they are watching media related to fire or the upcoming anniversary and be available to talk about any feelings or reactions that they may experience.

Marking the anniversary

Some children may want to mark the anniversary while others will want to ignore it and continue their normal routines. It is important to make sure that anniversary activities your family participates in are relevant to the age of your child. Young children (pre-schoolers and prep or grade one students) have a limited understanding of time and memorials may simply create new fears that scary things are happening now.

It is important that children don't feel pressured to participate in ceremonies or memorials, and you should try to be respectful and supportive of the choice your child makes. Ask your child if they would like to do something for the anniversary and if so, what they would like to do. It is important to respect and support your child's choice without judgement or criticism. Children may like to honour the occasion in a number of ways including:

- Writing a story.
- Using art.
- Planting tree.
- Making a memorial.
- Writing a letter.

School and community connectedness

Your child's kindergarten or school may plan to mark the anniversary. Find out what, if anything, is planned and discuss with your child whether they want to participate and if they would like anyone to be there with them.

Seeking support

Anniversaries can trigger strong emotions for some people. It is important that you look after your own physical and emotional health, and seek additional support if needed. If you don't feel that your child's reactions and feelings are getting easier, you may like to consider seeking help from a qualified mental health professional. If you think your child may need an additional level of support during the anniversary period you should talk to your child's teacher, their kindergarten or school welfare staff or your GP.

Additional information

This summary sheet has been adapted from the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network's *Understanding and Managing Anniversary Reactions: Tops for Families Affected by Bushfires* brochure. If you would like more detailed information about anniversaries and memorials, including suggestions on how to talk to your child about their feelings, the full version of the above brochure can be downloaded from http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/resource_hubs/early_childhood_schools_hub/victorian_bushfires/.

Further information about supporting children after a traumatic event can be found on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's website at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/>.

