

Preparing for the anniversary of the Victorian Bushfires (2009)

Information for schools

Anniversaries and memorials

Anniversaries are times of remembering and reflecting. As the anniversary of the Victorian Bushfires (2009) approaches it is likely there will be increased discussion at schools and within the wider community. Discussion about the anniversary will be welcomed by some and unwanted by others. Some children, young people and staff may find this a very emotional time and may need the school to be a 'safe haven' where they continue with their usual routine. It is important to think carefully about anniversary activities that might be beneficial while at the same time being mindful of the possible impacts of reflection and re-exposure for children, young people and staff as a result of these activities.

Supporting staff

It is important that staff continue to look after their own physical and mental health and wellbeing and use individual self care strategies. Principals should consult with staff to find out how they feel about possible anniversary or memorial activities, and should respect and support individual staff decisions about being involved in any planned activities.

Student Wellbeing

Positive anniversary or memorial activities will allow children to feel more comfortable participating and expressing their feelings. Staff should be alert to any reactions that suggest the activity is causing anxiety. While participation in anniversary or memorial activity should be voluntary, any unexplained student absences should immediately be followed up. It is important to provide meaningful alternative activities for those children and young people who do not want to participate.

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. Images may be strong reminders of the challenges of the time since the bushfires. It is very important that parents/carers and other adults monitor children's exposure and reactions to media.

Supporting children

Around the anniversary, schools can support children and young people by:

- Acknowledging losses, fears and other emotions.
- Providing reassurance that it is normal to have strong thoughts, feelings.
- Celebrating strengths of individuals and the school community.
- Reminding children about their support networks and coping strategies
- Keeping an optimistic view of the future (which can help to normalise reactions).
- Utilising welfare staff to support and assist children and young people who are overwhelmed by their feelings.



If schools are contacted directly by the media, they should contact the Department of Early Childhood Development's Media Unit on (03) 9637 2871 for advice and support on managing and responding to media enquiries.

Additional information

This information has been adapted from the Australia Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network.

http://www.earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au/resource_hubs/early_childhood_schools_hub/victorian_bushfires/

Further information about supporting children through trauma, grief and loss can be found on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's website at

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/support/default.htm>