

# Information for Parents and Carers

## Helping children and young people after a bushfire

Many children and young people are feeling scared and anxious about the bushfires.

Even if they weren't directly involved in the bushfires, children may be feeling distressed by things they have seen and heard in the media.

This information sheet has been developed by experts from the Victorian government as a guide for parents and carers of children and young people.

It includes answers to questions that many parents and carers have raised and provides advice to assist parent and carers support children over the coming weeks and months.

### Questions and Answers

#### How do children normally react in such situations?

Natural disasters can cause a range of different feelings and emotions for adults, children and young people.

These feelings and emotions may emerge immediately or over a period of time.

Many factors will influence how children and young people respond after the bushfires.

It will depend on whether they were directly or indirectly involved in the fires, and their exposure to the media coverage.

Their age will also be a factor, along with the reactions and level of support from their families and caregivers

Children and young people may be experiencing the following problems as a result of the fires:

- clinginess
- crying and irritability
- dependence on parent or caregiver
- refusing to sleep alone
- withdrawal or loss of appetite
- anxiety about separation from parents or caregivers
- sleep disturbances.

Young people may also display behaviours such as:

- anger
- fear
- agitation
- frustration

- high anxiety
- withdrawal from family and friends
- loss of interest in activities
- nightmares.

More information about children's and young people's reactions at each developmental stage can be found on the website [www.education.vic.gov.au](http://www.education.vic.gov.au)

#### What should I do to help and support my child?

Children and young people look to their families and carers for comfort and reassurance during and after a tragedy like the fires.

Reassure them with plenty of hugs and by spending time listening to them.

Remain calm and keep to normal routines as far as possible.

Discuss your feelings with your children and let them know that this is a difficult time for everyone. It's normal to be saddened by the bushfires.

Every  
child,  
every  
opportunity

Talk about how you cope with your own feelings for example by listening to music, going for a walk, or talking to family and friends.

Older children often benefit if they are involved in activities which give them a sense of control over their lives. Keeping up their connections to their family, friends and community will help them.

For younger children, limit exposure to the media, especially photos and footage of the fires.

For older children, monitor what they are seeing or hearing and give them the opportunity to talk with you about their reactions

If the changes in your child's behaviour don't decrease over time or if you are worried you may want to seek advice and assistance.

Support is available from your local doctor or community health centre, your maternal and child health services, or your local government support services. Your child's kindergarten or school can also assist you.

### **If our home was directly affected, how do I decide whether to bring my children to see it?**

Only you can know whether it is appropriate for your child to return home.

As you may also be under considerable stress you may wish to seek professional advice about this decision.

If you have any concerns or questions you should discuss these with a counsellor before returning home.

Consider the physical safety of the area and the age of the child. Younger children may not fully understand what is going on and become distressed.

Consider your own ability to support the children at the time of a return home.

You know your child's personality better than anyone. Consider how they normally react in different situations and the circumstances under which they left.

Children who were evacuated through the fire may find the return very traumatic.

If you decide to take the children home, preparing them will be important. Make sure you have enough help to support them at the time of the return.

This information was developed by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Human Services

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## **General Advice for Parents and Carers**

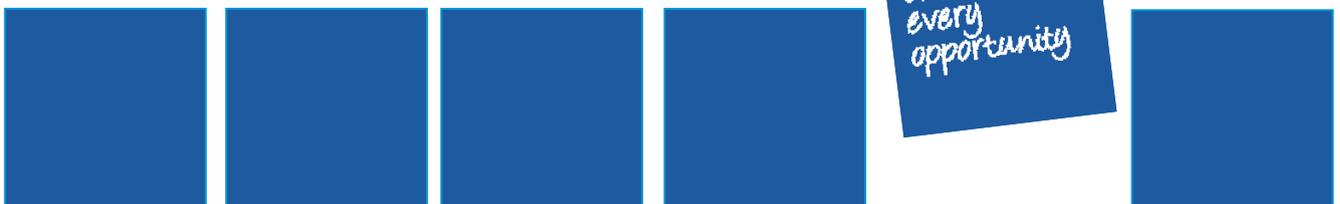
### **Don't assume children don't know about the bushfires.**

While we need to protect children from the pain and horror of devastating situations, don't assume they know nothing about the bushfires.

News travels quickly because of technology and the media.

### **Be available to talk to children.**

Let them know it's okay to talk about the fires. Not talking about them may give the impression that the fires can't be discussed.



**Monitor the amount of television children watch.**

Watching television with children allows you to discuss the situation and monitor their levels of stress and understanding of what has occurred.

**Listen to what children say, think and feel.**

Watch to see if there are any changes in behaviour.

**Be willing to answer children's questions.**

You don't need to explain more than they ask about. Don't be afraid to say you don't have the answer.

**Reassure children.**

Help them feel safe. When tragedies occur, children may be afraid the same thing will happen again, directly affecting them.

Let them know they're not at risk (if they're not).

Try to be realistic and reassuring. You can try to support and protect them, but you can't prevent all bad things from happening.

Let children know you love them and give them plenty of hugs. This often reassures children and helps them heal.

**Maintain routines to help children feel safe.**

**Share your feelings**

Tell children if you feel afraid, angry, or frustrated. It helps them understand that others are also upset by the bushfires.

Talk about things you do yourself to cope with your feelings, such as going for walks or talking to friends.

Encourage children to come up with their own ways of coping.

**Help children use their own creative outlets to express their feelings.**

Use drawings, music and/or books to help you understand their reactions.

**Encourage children to explore ways of helping others.**

Children may be concerned for people they do not know who have been affected by the fires.

They may have learnt that many people have died and lost their homes and/or pets.

One way for adults, children and young people to reduce stress is to do something.

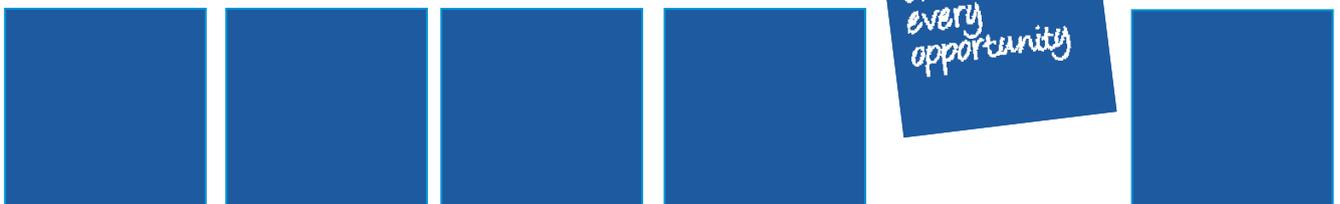
Children and young people may want to write a letter to an organisation assisting with or managing the bushfires.

They may want to write to a school that has been affected or send a donation to help the victims.

There are many websites and agencies collecting to help people affected by the bushfire.

By taking action and getting involved, young people know parents/carers are working with them to make a difference.

This can make them feel safer and more positive about the future. It gives them hope.



## Supporting Children Aged 0 – 5

Seek, accept and increase support for yourself, to manage your own emotional responses.

Maintain young children's routines around holding, sleeping and eating.

Seek support from your partner, family or Maternal Child Health nurse to help you understand and respond to your infant's cues.

Avoid unnecessarily separating children from their important caregivers.

Keep a calm atmosphere in children's presence. Provide additional soothing activities.

Tolerate children's clinginess and lack of independence.

Take time out yourself to recharge.

Remain calm. Listen to and tolerate children's retelling of events.

Respect children's fears and give them time to cope.

Protect children from re-exposure to frightening situations and reminders of the fires, including scary television programs, movies and stories.

Accept and help children to name strong feelings during brief conversations. Children cannot talk about these feelings or the experience for long.

Expect that your child's behaviour may regress, be difficult or uncharacteristic - but maintain basic household standards and rules.

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## Supporting Children Aged 5 -12

Seek, accept and increase support for yourself to manage your own responses.

Respect children's fears and give them time to cope.

Keep an eye on children's play, which may involve secretive re-enactments with peers and siblings. Set limits on scary play.

Tolerate them retelling events.

Let children try out new ideas to cope with fearfulness at bedtime.

Extra reading time, having the radio on or listening to a tape in the middle of the night may help allay fears caused by nightmares.

Reassure children that fear or behaviours that feel out of control or babyish, such as bed-wetting, are normal after a frightening experience. Let them know they will feel more like themselves with time.

Encourage children to talk about confusing feelings and thoughts, worries, daydreams and nightmares.

Encourage children to accept their feelings. It will help if they know you are listening to them.

Remind children their reactions are normal after a scary event.

Monitor how they're coping at school and in community activities. Maintain communication with the school about their progress.



Every child,  
every opportunity

If children have been deeply affected, their school performance may decrease for a short time. Let them know this is a natural and temporary result in such circumstances.

Protect children from re-exposure to frightening situations and reminders of the fires. Keep clear of scary television programs, movies and stories.

Expect and understand that children may regress or display some difficult or uncharacteristic behaviour. Continue to maintain basic household rules.

Watch and listen for children's misunderstanding of the fires, particularly those that involve self-blame and magical thinking.

Gently help children develop a realistic understanding of events.

Remain aware of your own reactions to children's distress. Reassure them that feelings will diminish over time.

Provide opportunities for children to experience control and make choices in their daily activities.

Provide children with frequent high protein snacks and meals during the day.

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## Supporting Young People Aged 12-18

Seek, accept and increase support for yourself to manage your own emotions.

Remain calm. Encourage young people to talk about the events with family members.

Provide opportunities for young people to spend time with close supportive friends.

Reassure young people that strong feelings - guilt, shame, embarrassment or desire for revenge - are normal after a disaster like the fires.

Help young people find activities that give them the chance to have control over themselves and their lives.

Encourage young people to get involved in physical activities such as sports and dancing.

Monitor how young people are coping at home, school and in their peer group.

Address acting-out behaviour involving aggression or self destructive behaviour quickly and firmly. Set limits and seek professional help if you need it.

Seek help if there are signs of depression, self harm, accident proneness, recklessness and persistent personality change.

Help young people develop sense of perspective on the impact of the fires and the importance of time in recovering.

Encourage young people to delay big decisions if possible.

Seek information and advice from school about their developmental and educational progress.

Provide young people with frequent high protein snacks and meals during the day.

Take time yourself to recharge.

Information in this section has been adapted from the *Child Development & Trauma Guide*, Best Interest Series, Department of Human Services, June 2008

