For some children, making the transition from early childhood services (such as kindergarten) to school requires more than having a school bag and a lunch box. School transition is a period of change that can be challenging and exciting. Children may experience a range of feelings as they transition to school, including nervousness, excitement, fear or happiness.

Some children and families will require an additional level of support in the transition to school. This includes children and families who have experienced a natural disaster, such as the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

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.

This brochure outlines some common issues and suggestions for families affected by the bushfires to help their child transition into school.

Transition Learning and Development Statements

The Statement is a document that tells your child’s Prep teacher about your child’s learning and development. Your child’s early childhood educator will provide you with guidelines to help you to fill in Part 1 of the Statement. Part 1 of the Statement aims to capture both yours and your child’s views on transition to school. Please ask your child’s early childhood educator if you need help with the Statement.

Your child’s early childhood educator will complete Part 2 of the Statement, which captures a summary of your child’s learning and development as they enter school, identifies their individual approaches to learning and interests, and indicates how they can be supported to continue learning at school.

When the Statement is finished, a copy will be given to you to read and approve before it goes to your child’s school, and you will be given a copy of your child’s Statement to keep. If you haven’t yet decided which school your child will go to, you will be given a copy to provide to your child’s school once they are enrolled.

Family concerns

Many children are affected by events occurring around them in ways that are not always obvious. Working with school staff to help them understand your child or family’s unique situation and anticipating your child’s needs is an important part of a supportive transition process. This can also help your child be reassured that they can seek assistance if they are feeling anxious or upset when they start school.

Completing Part 1 of the Transition Statement can be a useful way to communicate your experiences and knowledge about your child with the school and identify how you think your child can be best supported.

Maintaining routines

It is important for children to know what the routine is both at home and at school. Starting school may mean their current routine will change. It is important to talk to your child about these changes. It may be useful to gradually introduce changes in their routines over the summer period and practice the things your child will need to do to get ready for school (e.g. waking up at a regular time, taking time to get ready for the next day by packing their bag).

Having a routine will help provide your child with stability and security, and can also help to decrease your child’s anxiety.
Family stress

Many children are affected by events occurring around them in ways that are not always obvious. A child’s learning, social skills and wellbeing can be affected by family stress. You may wish to inform your child’s teacher or welfare staff about your individual family situation so your child can be supported in the most appropriate way. This can help your child to seek assistance if they are feeling anxious or upset when they start school.

What additional needs might some children from bushfire affected areas have?

Each child will have a unique response to a traumatic event. There are differences in the length of time it takes children to begin the process of recovery and there is no ‘one way’ that children will respond and work through feelings such as sadness, frustration, anger, grief or loss.

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

- clinginess
- crying and irritability
- dependence on family member
- refusing to sleep alone
- withdrawal or loss of appetite
- anxiety about separation from family members
- sleep disturbances.

Children and young people look to their families and carers for comfort and reassurance during and after a tragedy like the fires, and it is important that children are able to discuss their feelings. It’s normal to be saddened by the bushfires.

Talking to your child’s Prep teacher during the transition process about your family’s experiences will help them to respond in appropriate ways to you and your child.

New situations

Your child may worry about who they are going to sit with or who they will play with at school. These worries may be even more stressful if your child is new to school or has recently moved to a new community.

You can assist your child by reassuring them with positive comments and providing them with information about what will happen at school.

It is useful to visit the school and allow your child the opportunity to become familiar with the school staff and the new environment. Introduce your child to school staff, particularly those who will be working with your child, and make contact with any support staff that can provide assistance to you and your child.

Talking to staff early in the school year about your child will give staff an understanding of their particular needs. This will help to increase your child’s confidence. If possible, contact with other children who will be going to the same school may also assist your child to feel more comfortable. It may also be helpful to talk to your child about previous situations that were new to them and their success in managing these.

Problem solving for children

1. Identify what the problem is and give the problem a name (ie. teasing)
2. Make up a list of ways the problem might be solved (ie. ignoring the person, telling a teacher, tell the person you don’t like what they are doing, play with someone else).
3. Go through this list with your child and cross out anything they don’t think is going to work. Keep crossing out until your child is left with one option they want to have a go at.
4. Talk to your child about how they might do what they have chosen as their way of solving the problem.
5. Role play with your child about how this might look.

Additional information

A variety of resources to assist in supporting children affected by the trauma of the bushfires including videos and fact sheets are also available for easy download from http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/support/parents.htm.

Further information on the Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative, including a general information sheet for families on transition to school can be downloaded from www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning.