

Looking after children who are anxious about bushfire season

Hot days and the potential risk of more bushfires can be a time of increased anxiety for many people. Children are also vulnerable, and the increased media coverage and discussion in the community, schools and at home about fires can raise their alarm. How do we help children to be aware of the threats, but also reassure them that they are safe and secure?



Guidelines for parents and caregivers

Signs that children are feeling distressed

Children are not always able to express complex feelings in the same direct way that adults do, and therefore might not show the same reactions to stress as adults. It is therefore very important to look out for changes in children's behaviour that suggest they are unsettled or anxious, such as:

- Changes in their play, drawing, dreams or spontaneous conversations
- Regressive behaviour – children behaving younger than they normally do
- Nightmares
- Anxiety about sleeping alone
- Trouble getting to sleep
- Irritability or anger
- Tantrums, increased defiance
- Fussy eating
- Withdrawing
- Wanting to stay close to a parent, becoming more clingy
- Decreased concentration or attention span
- Feelings of anxiety, fears, and worries about safety of self and others
- Increased aggression, angry outbursts
- Questions about death and dying
- Increased somatic complaints (sore tummy, headaches)

What adults can do to help

Activities and suggestions vary depending on the age of the child.

Monitor media exposure

Children can become anxious after listening to or watching repeated stories about bushfires, and can come to believe that everywhere is under threat. Young children may not realise that footage on television is a replay and not another event. Be confident in your role as a parent and limit their exposure to news and other programs with potentially distressing images and sounds.

Limit the amount of time children listen to media reports about the fires.

If children are viewing media stories of distressing events, it is best to watch with them. They need your adult presence and perspective. Being able to talk about the material with a caring and reassuring adult can greatly reduce these reactions.

Listen to understand how children are feeling and thinking

Encourage (but don't force) children to talk about their thoughts and feelings about bushfires and other scary things.

Let them know that it is normal to think and feel that way.

Expect that children might ask the same questions over and over as they attempt to make sense of events.

Remain patient and provide truthful but simple and thoughtful explanations that will help them to develop a realistic understanding of things.

Correct any misperceptions they might have about the events and likely risks.

Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings

Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them.



Reassure children

Children need comfort, reassurance and support, and to know that they are safe and are being looked after and that nothing bad will happen to them personally.

Let children know that there are people all over the place working hard to make sure that people stay safe, and that these people are very good at their job.

Do calming activities with children who are distressed.

Reassure them that you are watching out for them.

Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of affection through cuddles and hugs.

Maintain good routines – predictable family activity is very reassuring for children.

Be aware of how you talk in the presence of children

Shield children from in-depth adult discussion about these events, especially if they cannot join in at their own age or stage of development. Children can distort what they hear or see especially when the information is received through indirect communication (for example, overheard adult conversations about worrying things).

Pay attention to your own reactions

Children may respond to the anxieties felt and expressed by the people around them. They often see and hear far more than adults are aware of, and they will take their cues for how to respond from you.

Talk privately with trusted adults if you are needing to air your own feelings or explore your own reactions to threats.

Share your own feelings, but show that you are in control of them.

Leave children with a feeling of security but also hope

Help children to see that their world is basically a safe place, and that life is worth living.

Seeking further help

While most children can handle their concerns with the support for caring adults, some children may show prolonged distress and could benefit from professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents or caregivers to learn strategies for dealing with anxiety.

Speak to your GP about a referral to a psychologist or phone the APS Find a Psychologist service on **1800 333 497**. Alternatively, you can locate a psychologist in your area by visiting the APS Find a Psychologist website – www.findapsychologist.org.au.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/