

Information for parents and carers

Large scale distressing events impact our communities in many ways. As with the drought the recent bushfires have impacted a number of our communities and have been unsettling and stressful for many students. Children cope with traumatic experiences in different ways and there is no one 'standard' pattern of reaction. If you are concerned about your child, it's important to discuss your concerns with their teacher(s) and seek support from the school counsellor or other professionals you know.

Distress may be related to:

- having been directly at risk/exposed to fires (loss of homes, pets, personal belongings)
- being concerned about family or friends
- being exposed to distressing media coverage including injured wildlife, and
- feelings and memories resulting from previous experiences and other instances of grief and loss.

There is no such thing as a typical reaction. Some may show much distress or they may ask many questions and appear preoccupied with the event. Some of these reactions may appear immediately but others may not show themselves for weeks or even months later.

Some reactions may include sleep disturbances, regressive behaviour (thumb sucking), nightmares, fear of the dark, clinging to parents/carers, loss or increase in appetite, physical complaints that have no medical basis, aggressive behaviour, competition with sibling for parental attention, withdrawal and/or loss of interest in regular activities.

Children look to the significant adults in their lives for guidance on how to manage their reactions. Parents and teachers can help children cope by remaining calm and reassuring them that they will be all right.

Children are usually very resilient and for most children these reactions will gradually reduce over time with the support of families. After a traumatic event, children need comfort, reassurance and support, and to know that they are safe and are being looked after.

How you can support your child

- Children need comfort, reassurance and support, and to know that they are safe and are being looked after. Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of affection through cuddles and hugs.
- Let them be more dependent on you for a while and try to re-establish daily routines, for example routines around mealtimes, bedtimes and returning to school. Keep to your regular routines and activities as much as possible.
- Listen to your children's concerns. Listen closely to what they are asking or saying, and if they are looking for factual information, or if the questions are expressing anxiety about the bushfires. Try to keep your own feelings to yourself when talking about their feelings. Let them know that you understand how they feel. Correct any misunderstandings or confusion.
- Keep your responses appropriate to the age and emotional maturity of your child. Young children often need reassurance more than facts.
- Monitor their exposure to television/social media stories regarding the fires. Children can be distressed by watching repeated images. Explain to them that it may not be a good idea to keep watching repeated images.
- Include your child in planning any changes resulting from the current situation.
- Support your child to stay connected to friends.
- Be aware of how you talk. Adults need to be conscious of the presence of children when discussing the effects of natural disasters. It is a good idea not to let children overhear adult conversations about worrying things if they cannot join in at their own age or stage of development.

Most importantly, look after yourself. When you are feeling cared for you are better able to respond to the needs of your children.

Where to get help

While most children will bounce back after a traumatic event, some children may show prolonged distress and may benefit from professional support. Please contact your school to discuss the most appropriate support for your child.

If you would like additional support, the following services are available:

- The school counsellor
- Your local GP
- Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800 – kidshelpline.com.au
- Headspace – 1800 650 890 – eheadspace.org.au
- Parent Helpline – 1300 1300 52
- Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636
- Mensline – 1300 789 978
- Lifeline – 13 11 14