
Talking to children about bushfires

Summary

- Bushfires are a common feature of Australia's landscape. Messages regarding bushfires are increasingly accessible from social media, television, radio, fire danger rating signs, and general conversation.
 - Children can be negatively affected by information regarding bushfires and they may become concerned about issues of safety.
 - Remember that children are inherently resilient and hopeful and will benefit from having open and supportive discussions about bushfires.
 - Talking to children openly in a way that suits their age, while also involving them in decisions and actions regarding bushfire preparation and response, will help them to feel emotionally secure and confident.
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Bushfires are occurring with increasing frequency and intensity in Australia and this can feel overwhelming and devastating for those living in bushfire affected areas and the wider community. In addition, information regarding the importance of bushfire preparation are a constant reminder of the ongoing risk.

So how can we help our children cope with bushfire emergencies? How can adults talk to children about the risk and impact of bushfires, as well as the need for preparation without compromising their sense of safety and security?

This fact sheet provides suggestions about how to talk to children about bushfires.

Concerns about talking to children about bushfires

It is common for parents and carers to find talking to their children about the risk and impact of bushfires difficult because they are not sure what to say. Typical questions include:

- Should we acknowledge the dangers of bushfires?
- Should we talk about the possibility of losing our home or pets?
- My child heard that some people were hurt or died in a bushfire. Should I explain that this can happen?
- We drive past the fire danger rating sign each day on the way to and from school and sometimes my children ask 'what colour is it today'? How do I explain this without scaring them?
- Should I tell my child that bushfires cause me concern as well?

Given such questions and concerns, the section below provides suggestions about how to talk to children about the risk and impact of bushfires.

Children's reactions to the risk and impact of bushfires

It is easy for children to feel overwhelmed and devastated when directly affected by bushfires or from the scenes that emerge afterward. Sometimes, they don't have ways of understanding what they see and can be particularly vulnerable to feelings of anxiety, stress and sadness.

While some children will be affected negatively by exposure to information about bushfires, this is not the case for all children. It is important to remember that many children are resilient and have a strong natural ability to adapt to challenging events.

However, signs that a child has been negatively affected by information about bushfires might include:

- becoming more clingy towards a parent or carer – for example wanting to be held more than usual, wanting to be with parents or carers, asking about fire, seeking reassurance
 - changes to sleeping or eating patterns, or both
 - the emergence of new physical complaints – such as stomach ache or headache
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- changes in mood – such as being more easily irritable, or shutting down
- changes in a child's behaviour or learning at school
- appearing on edge and frightened – for example, being more easily startled, developing new fears, having nightmares or regression in behaviour.

If you (or one of your child's carers) notice these or other changes then it is important to ask the child what they are worried about. Talk to them in a way that is open and appropriate to their age. Listen to their questions and fears and show them that you understand.

Talking with children about bushfires

It is important that children are taught to respect, understand and manage dangers in their lives, including bushfires. We do this when we educate them about the dangers of traffic, snakes and strangers, and bushfires can be treated in the same way.

Showing children how to protect themselves can be made a part of their normal everyday lives, and does not usually result in fears. If adults show confidence that children can be protected from these dangers by plans and actions, children will feel confident too.

Below are seven guiding principles to use when talking to children about bushfires:

1. **Listen carefully to what they say.** Children will often talk about what they are thinking or how they are feeling ('I think something bad is going to happen', 'I am feeling scared') without necessarily connecting their feelings to a specific event. Listen carefully to the child's words to get an understanding of what is going on in their mind.
2. **Ask questions.** If you notice changes in a child's behaviour and you think this might be a reaction to the risk or impact of a bushfire, ask them to describe what they are thinking or feeling. And if a child asks a specific question ('The sign is red today, that's bad isn't it?'), answer their question, being reassuring but truthful. (Explain to them that red means there is a risk of fire, but also help them understand what you are doing to make sure everyone is safe.) Try to find out what made them ask their question. This will help to identify the source of concern, which may be different to their question.
3. **Use age-relevant language.** Use language that is easy for children to understand.
4. **Identify unhelpful thoughts and feelings.** When talking to children about bushfires, help them to recognise unhelpful thoughts and feelings and then teach them to use more helpful alternatives. For example, instead of thinking 'I think something bad is going to happen' you could encourage your child to think, 'Because it is going to be a hot day I am feeling a little scared, but mum and dad have a plan to help us stay safe.' Tell them what that plan is. For example 'The whole family is going to go and stay with grandma and grandpa.'
5. **Remain positive and reassuring.** It is important that adults use positive and reassuring language when around children; explain that a plan has been made to keep everyone safe and show them how it will work. If they talk about bad things that have happened in the past (such as Black Saturday) explain that you have learned from that and will be prepared.
6. **Build resilience.** Help children to grow in self-confidence by talking to them about the various bushfire preparation steps taken to ensure their safety.
7. **Manage your own reactions.** Try to manage your own stress reactions and to model good coping strategies to children. (Relaxation techniques such as calm breathing – three seconds in through the nose and three seconds out through the mouth – can help, having a bushfire plan in place will help to minimise stress because you are prepared and know what to do.)

By using these principles, adults can safely talk to children about the risks and dangers of bushfires. Talking to children about bushfires will reduce the likelihood of distress during summer and will also help children to build coping skills.

Other ways to help children cope with the risk and impact of bushfires

In addition to talking to children about the risk and impact of bushfires, parents and carers can also help children in the following ways:

- Teach stress management techniques: Introduce them to stress or anxiety management techniques such as calm breathing or divert attention away from emotionally challenging ideas by playing or focusing on

something important to the child. Being close to someone who makes them feel safe can also help to reduce a child's stress.

- Involve children in physical preparations: Include children in preparing a bushfire plan. Give them specific, manageable, age-appropriate tasks, and include them when rehearsing the plan. By doing this, children will learn that the decisions and actions are not only being made for them but with them.
- Normalise the threat of fire as one of the hazards of living in Victoria: 'We know about bushfires and have learned a lot.' 'We have plans to keep ourselves and our pets safe.'

When to seek professional help in talking to children about bushfires

You might want to seek professional advice if:

- your child is displaying any worrying signs that they have been negatively affected by information about the risk and impact of bushfires (listed earlier in this fact sheet) and these reactions do not subside after you have talked to them
- you have concerns about whether your child is coping (or perhaps if another person who cares for your child, such as a school or kindergarten teacher, expresses concern)
- you don't understand your child's reaction to bushfires
- you feel that you are not coping.

Where to get help

- Your child's teacher
- Your doctor
- Local community health centre
- Psychologist
- **Beyond Blue** Tel. 1300 22 4636
- **Parentline Victoria** Tel. 13 22 89
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours 7 days)
- Australian Psychological Society '**Find a psychologist**' service Tel. 1800 33 34 97
- **CFA:**
 - **How to prepare your property**
 - **Escape plans**
 - **Fire safe eLearning game**

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Department of Health and Human Services - Emergency Management

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