



HOW TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT OUT-OF-CONTROL FIRES

With Australia going through the worst bushfire crisis on record, it can be hard to talk to kids about the destruction these fires are having across the country – especially the impact the fires may be having on them. Children all around the country are seeing heartbreaking images of smouldering homes, dead and injured wildlife, and communities in distress across televisions and social media. All of this can fuel anxiety and even depression in young people who may be experiencing a national crisis for the first time and are unsure of how to process their emotions during a natural disaster.

That's why it's so important to reassure children and young people in these hard times – to let them know that they are safe, and to make sure that their concerns and fears are heard. This helpful guide, produced in partnership with child psychologist Karen Young, is designed to equip parents with seven steps and strategies to help them navigate some of the difficult discussions with their children that may come up during natural disasters.



The charity for
girls' equality



SEVEN STEPS

1. Let them know that whatever they are feeling is okay

Children might respond in many different ways to news of the fires. They might feel scared, sad, confused or they might feel nothing at all. Let them know they aren't alone, and that whatever they are feeling is completely understandable. *"There are so many people who feel exactly the way you do. You aren't alone – I promise."*

Whenever you can, validate their fears and feelings, but do this from a position of strength. *"I can hear how worried you are. Everything you are saying makes so much sense. What's happening is scary, but you are safe. It's scary, and we are safe."*

Children need to know that whatever they are experiencing or feeling in response to the fires is normal and understandable. They will have more trouble recovering from the trauma of the fires if they believe their feelings or symptoms (such as anxiety) are a sign that something is wrong with them.

2. Reassure your children

The questions children ask will often be driven by a need for reassurance that they are safe, so let this guide your answers. Let them talk as much as they need to as it's important that they feel comfortable to raise their fears with you, and are encouraged to speak freely about things that are concerning them. Always answer their questions honestly, with as much information as they need to feel safe. Let your children know that there are many people working hard to keep them safe. If they see firefighting services in action or hear sirens, reassure them that these emergency services are skilled at what they do.

Be mindful of your child's reactions to television and social media news and if they are showing signs of distress, distract them by taking them out of the room and calmly reassuring them that they are safe. Try to focus on positives, such as the fact you are all safe and that life will return to normal. You can also highlight the aspects of life that haven't changed: friends, family, teachers, school, sport and playing.



3. Help your children know they, and others, won't be alone

Disasters are a time when communities come together. Families, neighbours, emergency service personnel and government authorities all have skills and resources to contribute – your children should know that they won't be alone if a fire strikes. If they ask about the people who have lost homes or who have been hurt in the fire, let them know that there are a lot of people working hard to take care of them, and to keep them safe.

Talk to them about the charities and organisations that are providing resources and support. Similarly, if they ask about wildlife, talk to them about the organisations who take care of injured wildlife. Remind them of the good in the world, and whenever you can, share the good news stories about the things people are doing to help each other.

4. What if this happens to us?

Traumatic events can make children very aware of their own vulnerability. They will be aware that people and families like them have suffered great loss, and this can understandably trigger fears

that the same thing could happen to them. Children will look to the important adults in their lives for signs of safety. When those adults believe they are safe enough, it will be easier for children to believe it too.

“Every time something like this happens, we learn how to stay safer. We learn how things like this happen, so we can stop it happening again. There are people who are working really hard to make sure we are safe, and I trust them.”

5. Keep up to date with weather and warnings

While persistent drought and heat – an impact of climate change – and natural causes such as lightning strikes are major factors in out-of-control fires, we know that human activity can also contribute, such as sparks from BBQs, campfires, welding and grinding machines and discarded cigarette butts. Talk to your children about weather warnings and fire ratings, particularly warnings for total fire ban days, and explain activities that are prohibited, such as BBQs, and why. Many of the key agencies have apps or provide warnings in formats that older children can follow.

6. Make sure your children know vital information

Can your children recite their full name and address, emergency contact numbers and any allergies or medical conditions they have? Act out how to call emergency services, so they know what they need to say. Include your children when developing your family's fire plan, and make sure you practice simulations.

7. Help them find ways to help

Ask your children what they can do to help others in your community. Encouraging them towards their own acts of kindness will help to replace feelings of helplessness with a sense of helpfulness and the awareness that they can make a difference.

While the kind of fires we are now seeing are horrific and unprecedented, most children are resilient and will bounce back. By keeping the above steps in mind, parents can minimise the risk that their children will experience disaster-induced anxiety or depression. These terrible times will test all of us, but as we always have, Australians will unite in our grief and we will roll up our sleeves and pitch in to help those who are suffering.

The kindness and generosity of the Australian people who are raising money, providing food, offering their homes and caring for our wildlife is comforting and a reminder that our nation's heart is powered by a deep sense of love we all hold for our people, the natural world and for our communities.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES:

Australian Psychological Society:

www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Disasters/Bushfires/Recovering-from-bushfires/Guidelines-children-after-bushfires

Beyond Blue:

www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/bushfires-and-mental-health

Australian Red Cross:

www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/60d44951-875d-43c7-8415-1fee678ce1a1/helping-children-and-young-people-cope.pdf.aspx

www.redcross.org.au/get-help/emergencies/resources-about-disasters/resources-for-parents-and-teachers/pillowcase-program

Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience:

www.schools.aidr.org.au

Talking to children about climate change:

www.plan.org.au/learn/who-we-are/blog/2018/06/04/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-climate-change

Keeping children safe and resilient through disasters such as the bushfires can take its toll on parents too. Be sure to take care of yourself and reach out to a counselling service such as Lifeline on 131 114 if you are feeling like you are not coping.