

INSIGHTS

Supporting kids affected by bush fires



This summer's Australian bushfire crisis is a reminder of the fragility of life, the unpredictability of our relationship to nature and the incredible human capacity to come together when tragedy strikes.

The fires have also provided a poignant reminder of the vital place that local schools place within our communities. Whether it's been a gathering point during fires, a recovery centre or the place where people go for a sense of community, local schools have been major assets during this time of crisis. And they continue to provide a sense of connection not just for those areas directly affected by the fires, but for communities across the country who've been deeply affected.

Children and young people are not immune to the impact of these fires. For those children and young people directly exposed to the bushfires shock, anxiety, sadness, fear and anger are common emotions that you may see on display as their vulnerability and infallibility has been exposed. Those not directly affected by the bushfires are not immune to their impact. They too can feel distressed, upset and unsettled by these events.

As a parent it can be difficult to know how to help kids to process what they've seen and experienced. Here are some ideas to help:

Give kids permission, space and time to talk

Make it easy for children and young people to talk about the bushfires and share their thoughts and stories. Try to ensure that they don't run away with the facts, which can exacerbate anxiety. Children can be faulty interpreters of information so be prepared to assist them to process what they see and hear.

Listen to what they have to say

Gauge children's emotional reactions by listening to what they have to say. Sometimes children can feel distressed, unhappy, sad or scared, yet they can't connect it to a specific event. You don't necessarily need to make a link but understand that their feelings are real.

Monitor the media your children access

Children under the age of six can be frightened by images and stories they see and hear on the TV news so it's probably best to keep the TV turned off at news time. Older children and teens are more able to cope with disturbing images but they may not fully understand what they see. They also generally want to know what's happening and can feel more of a sense of control when they can learn first hand the latest fire news. Common sense and sensitivity are your best assets when it comes to monitoring children and the media.

Take solace in everyday routines

School routines add structure to the day and can stop kids thinking endlessly about what's happened. If family life has been upended by bushfires, a return to routine is part of the recovery process.

Support children's concern for others

They may have genuine concerns for the suffering that has occurred to people and wildlife, and they may need an outlet for those concerns. It's heartwarming to see this empathy and concern for others. Helping others overcomes our feelings of helplessness in the face of tragedy or catastrophic events. Look for ways that kids can help whether it's donating some pocket money to one of the various bushfire appeals, helping one of the many localised action groups that have sprung up everywhere or even assisting you to minimise the possible impact of bushfires in your own community.

Make anxiety management a lifestyle

If the bushfires is a cause of anxiety for your children, use anxiety management techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness, exercise and other simple relaxation techniques. Being close to someone who makes them feel safe can also lower a child's anxiety.

And remember in difficult times like these, what adults and children need most is each other.



Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.