

# Preparing for anniversaries and memorials

Information for early childhood settings and  
primary schools

This summary sheet aims to provide staff working with young children affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires with information to assist in making thoughtful preparations for anniversaries and memorials related to the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

## Anniversaries and memorials

Anniversaries are times of remembering, reflection and review. As the anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires approaches there will be increased discussion in the community, in early childhood settings and in schools. Discussion of the anniversary will be welcomed by some and unwanted by others. Some children and staff might find their emotions are intense and may need their early childhood setting or school to be a 'safe haven' where they can get on with their usual routine. It is important to think carefully about the kind of anniversary activities that might be beneficial and to be mindful of the possible impacts of reflection and re-exposure for children and staff as a result of these activities.

## Preparing and supporting staff

Staff at early childhood settings and schools with children who have been affected by the bushfires will have had a more demanding year than usual. Understanding, caring for and assisting children who have experienced a traumatic event presents staff with intense and often exhausting demands. It is important that staff look after their own physical and mental health and wellbeing and develop long-term self care strategies. Principals should consult with staff to find out how they feel about possible anniversary or memorial activities, and should respect and support individual staff decisions about being involved in any planned activities.

## Preparing children for anniversaries and memorials

Activities that focus on survivorship, safety and the progress that children, their families, early childhood settings and schools have made since the fires are particularly beneficial. These positive anniversary activities will allow children to feel more comfortable participating and expressing their feelings. However, staff should be alert to any reactions that suggest the activity is causing distress. While participation in any anniversary or memorial activity should be voluntary, unexplained absences should immediately be followed up. It is important to prepare children for anniversary activities and provide meaningful alternative activities for those children who do not want to participate.

When considering anniversary or memorial activities it is important that children's developmental stages are considered. Young children (pre-schoolers and prep or grade one students) have a limited understanding of time and memorials may simply create new fears that scary things are happening now.

**During anniversary or memorial activities, early childhood settings and schools can support children by:**

- **Acknowledging losses, fears and other emotions.**
- **Providing reassurance that the thoughts, feelings and reactions are normal even though they may be upsetting. Remind children that feelings change and can get better as time passes and with help from other people.**
- **Celebrating strengths and progress of the individual child and of the school.**
- **Giving age appropriate information and knowledge to children about fire behaviour, fire safety and preparedness.**
- **Reminding children of their coping strategies and those used by others.**
- **Keeping an optimistic view of the future (which can help to normalise children's reactions).**
- **Utilising welfare staff or Student Support Services Officers to support and assist children who are overwhelmed by their feelings and reactions.**

## Media

As the anniversary approaches, increased media coverage can be expected. Children may be exposed to more than they can manage and the increased media coverage may reactivate feelings of fear, anxiety, loss and distress. Images and sounds may be strong reminders of the challenges of the weeks and months since the bushfires, and may have a negative impact upon children, even those who were not directly affected by the bushfires.

If schools or early childhood settings are contacted directly by the media, they should contact the Department of Early Childhood Development's Media Unit on (03) 9637 2871 for advice and support on managing and responding to media enquiries.

## Possible reactions of children

The nature and degree of a child's reaction will vary depending on a number of factors such as age, developmental level, experiences during the fires and recovery after the fires. Children who have experienced the death of someone close to them, the loss of their home and/or belongings or who were in close proximity to the fires may have more specific needs and need to be closely monitored. Children may display increased activity levels, decreased ability to concentrate and pay attention, changes in behaviour or an increase in anxiety levels in the lead up to the anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

## Suggested activities for children

- Make hats, flags, banners, or posters or ask children to draw what makes them feel better or happier.
- Have a picnic and sing songs to commemorate the anniversary.
- Discuss or take a walk outside to see the recovery cycle of nature in which change, loss and growth are a normal part of life.
- Trace each child's hand onto paper and get them to write on each finger the people they can talk to about their thoughts and feelings.
- Develop a class memory book in which children can complete sentence strings about their experiences. Have more than one caring adult in the room to monitor reactions or work with students in small groups with similar situations and stressors related to the fires. Some sentence strings for a memory book could include:
  - The hardest thing since the fires....
  - The best thing since the fires....
  - Right now I feel...
  - What I hope for in the future is....

## Additional information

This summary sheet has been adapted from the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network's *Understanding and Managing Anniversary Reactions: Tips for Families Affected by Bushfires* brochure. More detailed information about anniversaries and memorial can be found in the full version of the above brochure which can be downloaded from [http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/resource\\_hubs/early\\_childhood\\_schools\\_hub/victorian\\_bushfires/](http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/resource_hubs/early_childhood_schools_hub/victorian_bushfires/).

Further information about supporting children through trauma, grief and loss can be found on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's website at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/>.

