

SCHOOL PLANNING FOR THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES

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The forthcoming first anniversary of the Victorian Black Saturday and early 2009 bushfires will prompt many people to reflect and perhaps re-experience the thoughts, feelings and events that occurred at that time 12 months ago and during the following days and months. Sunday 7 February 2010 will be a focus for many, but it is important to remember that last summer fires raged before and after this date incurring loss of life, property and safety. During the course of 2009 people involved in other events have also experienced similar challenges, demands and losses.

As the anniversary approaches, increased media coverage can be expected. Children, adolescents and adults may be exposed to more than they would prefer. Media coverage may reactivate, to varying degrees, people's feelings of fear, loss, distress and struggles. Images and sounds will be strong reminders of the challenges of those weeks and the months since. These reminders are likely to impact on people living in the fire-impacted areas, those who have since moved away, and some who were not directly affected.

Discussion of the anniversary will be welcomed by some but not by others. Not all children (or adults) will want to mark or recognise the anniversary publicly. For all people, adults and children, responses can be reactivated or emerge when stimulated by anniversary memories, images and discussions.

Some might find the emotions the anniversary stirs are too intense for the school environment. Others may want to keep school separate from such memories. Some children and their families may want – and need – the school to be a 'safe haven' where they can get on with normal everyday life, while at the same time experiencing the school as attentive to and respectful of feelings and personal circumstances. For other children healing may have occurred and the fire experience will now belong to the past. The younger the child the more they live in the present and the less they need opportunities for in reflective review.

As a teacher, you will have your own thoughts reactions and needs in relation to the fires. You will have witnessed a wide range of reactions from students and yourself, colleagues and your own family since the fires.

In the classroom

In the classroom you may observe increased activity levels, a drop in concentration and attention, changes in behaviour and an increase in anxiety. These may arise as a result of personal reflection, family context, social and media activity and other concurrent trigger events such as the weather.

Not all children will exhibit observable reactions, while some may have obvious reactions that may last for some time. The degree of a child's reaction will vary depending on a number of factors such as age, developmental level and experiences during the fires and after. Children who have experienced the loss of a loved one, their pet or their home, or were in the fire front or were fearful for the safety of loved ones will have specific issues and needs.

It will be important for each school, and grade within a school, to evaluate the type and level of involvement in reflection and the potential for re-exposure for individuals within each grade or group, it is important to be constantly mindful of individual needs and sensitivities. Children's age and developmental stages also influence the need for anniversary or memorial activities. Very young children such as pre-schoolers and prep/grade one students have a limited understanding of time and as a result memorials may not be helpful, but rather create new fears that scary things are happening now. For other year levels, it is important to monitor whether memorial activities cause anxiety or overwhelming thoughts and feelings.

If, after careful discussion, assessment and consideration, your grade or school community wants to mark the anniversary, there are some useful tips for making it a helpful process. Classroom activities that focus on

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survivorship - what has been gained or learned since the disaster, are particularly helpful. Keeping an optimistic view of the future can help normalise reactions.

Positive journeys

Positive journeys can be recognised by:

- looking at the gains the child has made over time by reviewing their own writings or pictures to see how strong the child has become
- considering the recovery cycle of nature where change, loss and growth as a normal part of life
- recognising the positives of increased knowledge about fire behaviour and self-protection looking at how people have helped each other and how society has supported their school / community.

Activities

Depending on the age of the children, activities listed below may be helpful in working through reactions that the anniversary might trigger. Teachers should be alert to children for whom the activity is not appropriate or not relevant. No child or adolescent should be made to participate in these activities. It's important to provide alternative meaningful activities for those who do not want to participate without them feeling 'different' or less relevant in any way.

- Make hats, flags, banners, or posters; have a picnic with games and sing songs and play musical instruments to commemorate the anniversary (doing something active can help children who are very restless or have lots of 'unspent' energy).
- Draw pictures of the child's family then and now - what strengths have they developed? Be alert to children who have lost loved ones in the fire or during the year.
- Invite children to talk about how the fires impacted on their family but respect those who don't want to participate.
- Draw their family involved in an activity or doing something in the time since the fires and something good they can imagine their family might be doing in the future.
- Play a game to 'get rid' of the scary feelings, if it is indicated that the child has them.
- Draw around the child's hand on paper and get them to write on each finger the people they can talk to about their thoughts and feelings.
- Ask children to draw what makes them feel better or happier.
- Develop a class memory book where 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.

The hardest thing since the fires...

The best thing since the fires...

Right now I feel...

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What I hope for in the future...

For older children, team projects can develop a sense of shared experience and togetherness. Activities can focus on the positive gains made. Participation should be voluntary and unexplained absences should be noted and followed up. Topics that can be used in discussions, digital media and projects may include:

- the impact on Victoria
- heroes – this works also for younger children – they love heroes – footy players, action men, women and men in the emergency services
- the role of the individual, family, community in healing
- mental health issues related to the fires
- planning and preparedness – lessons learnt.

Guidelines for supporting students during these activities:

- acknowledge losses, fears and other emotions when present
- provide reassurance that the thoughts, feelings and reactions are normal even though they may be upsetting
- help the students to feel safe in their contributions
- celebrate strengths and progress
- use your school counsellor or Student Support Services Officer to assist students who are overwhelmed by their feelings and reactions
- remind students of their coping strategies.

Guidelines for supporting teachers

Teachers at schools impacted by the fires will have had a more demanding year than usual. Within many schools, staff and students along with members of the school community have been affected. Understanding, caring for and assisting students who have been impacted by untoward events presents school staff with intense and often exhausting demands. In order to be in a position to be alert to, sensitive of and responsive to individual and group needs of their students and parents it is essential that 'guidelines for self care' are practiced.

This may include:

- thinking about your own needs on this day and letting colleagues know if you want someone else in the classroom to assist with fire related memorial activities
- using calming breathing to keep your levels of arousal and anxiety to a coping level

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- be well planned and organised for the day, pre-think about what might be difficult and what might be helpful and have back up strategies for this
- remember to eat well and to have some 'you' times in the day
- schedule in quiet activity times throughout the day, bring in some music that everyone in the grade can focus on and relax to
- make sure that the grade or class knows what the plan for the day is, take away unpredictability for you and them
- factor in friends and family for yourself.

It is okay to share your feelings and thoughts about whether fires will happen again in a manner appropriate to the classroom setting and ages of the children; this allows them to learn from you and to know that you are open to talking about such things.

Principals & school leadership

Reflect on your own feelings and those of your staff. Find out how teachers feel about possible ceremonies or memorials and support them with their decisions about being involved – some may dread these events and find it distressing to be involved – some may prefer not to take leadership roles in these activities or even prefer not to be at school at that time. Consider 'buddying-up' classes for activities that focus on memorials or having extra support in classrooms for that time.

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ACATLGN is a national collaboration to provide expertise, evidence-based resources and linkages to support children and their families through the trauma and grief associated with natural disasters and other adversities. It offers key resources to help school communities, families and others involved in the care of children and adolescents.

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