

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR THE THREAT OF BUSHFIRE

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

Disasters such as bushfires can be frightening for anyone, but can be particularly terrifying for children. As families prepare for the bushfire season, it is important to protect children from becoming too frightened or anxious, even though many of their fears may be real.

This brochure provides ways of assisting parents and carers to help children manage their fears and to have a greater sense of being in control in threatening bushfire situations.



Protecting children during a disaster

Although children can show remarkable resilience, they can also be very vulnerable to trauma in highly stressful situations. The best way to enhance children's ability to cope is to help them have a sense of safety and security, and to assist them to feel more in control of their fears.

Although children sometimes appear to cope well during an emergency, they may be very distressed much later. Some children are likely to feel more anxious and stressed than others in the face of a bushfire threat. Cuddling, holding and plenty of affection helps to comfort and reassure these children. Talking to them about what is going on and what the adults are doing to make things safe will help to give children a sense of security and closeness.

Older children may react with anger and blame (at parents or others for not keeping them safer), distrust or hopelessness, or may become rebellious or withdrawn. These are common reactions and adults can best deal with them by being patient and understanding while continuing to explain what is happening to keep everyone safe.

Authorities recommend that families leave their properties early on extreme or catastrophic fire danger days. This will not only reduce the risk of physical harm, but will also keep the family together in a less stressful situation and help children to feel safe. If your plan is to stay and defend your property, the authorities strongly advise that children should be sent away from the danger. Removing children from possible exposure to traumatic experiences is the best protection from long-term harmful effects. If you do choose to 'prepare, stay and defend' and you send your children away, you can help them deal with any distress at being separated by:

- Making sure they are looked after by familiar adults who they feel safe around
- Planning regular communication with children to let them know you are safe.

Seeking professional assistance

If you are worried about your child's fears or are finding it difficult to cope yourself, then you might find some additional support helpful. In most areas of Australia, psychologists are available to provide a range of assistance for children and adults to help them cope better both before and after a threatening or traumatic situation.

APS psychologists have at least six years of education and training. They are able to provide immediate, short-term stress management strategies and can also provide long-term, ongoing support for more complex stress reactions.

To talk to an APS psychologist, ask your GP for a referral, phone the APS Find a Psychologist service on 1800 333 497, or locate a psychologist in your area by going to the APS Find a Psychologist website – www.findapsychologist.org.au. Psychologists may also be accessed through your local community health service.

Other brochures and information on managing in bushfire emergencies can be found on the APS website and the website of the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network.



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Helping children manage fears

Children react differently to fearful situations depending on their age and personality. Their reactions will also be significantly affected by how the important adults in their lives are responding to a threatening situation. Adults who are able to remain relatively calm and act in a controlled manner in an emergency situation will assist children to feel safe.

Being psychologically prepared when a bushfire is threatening can help you feel more confident, more in control and better able to think clearly about what you need to do to keep safe. Being cooler, calmer and more collected will also be very helpful to children.

You can help children by:

- Involving them in physical preparations
- Preparing yourself psychologically so that you feel more in control, and then teaching children the same skills
- Listening to children's concerns and correcting any thoughts or ideas that are exaggerated or inaccurate
- Remaining positive and reassuring, saying things like "Remember the plan we have and the things we can do to help us all keep safe if a bushfire comes".

Involving children in physical preparations

Involving children in your household's physical preparations for a bushfire emergency can help them have a greater sense of control and assist them to manage their fears.

- During a threatening situation, it helps everyone to remain calm if they can be occupied in some useful activity. Select a suitable activity for each child that gives them a feeling of having something to do, and note it in the household plan.
- Talk about the household bushfire plan with all the family, write it up and display it in a place where everyone can see it.
- Practise the plan with the family until everyone knows it really well.
- Talk with children about their school bushfire plan as well.

Being psychologically prepared

Psychological and physical preparation are closely linked and both are important. If all members of the household are psychologically prepared, everyone should be able to think more clearly and act according to the household emergency plan. Once you have learnt how to be psychologically prepared yourself, you can help children to learn the skills too.

A I M for being psychologically prepared in three steps

1. **ANTICIPATE** that the situation will be stressful
2. **IDENTIFY** your body changes related to anxiety and any frightening thoughts that are adding to the fear
3. **MANAGE** your responses using controlled breathing and self-talk

STEP 1

Anticipate your psychological reactions

When people understand their usual reactions to stress they can learn ways to manage them better when they happen.

- Think about how your children usually react to stress. What other frightening experiences have they had?
- Discuss with them what it might be like in an emergency and how they might react.
- Help them to understand that although these reactions are very understandable, sometimes they can get in the way of thinking clearly and acting in a helpful way in an emergency.

STEP 2

Identify feelings and thoughts

In highly stressful situations, the body usually shows signs of anxiety, such as a racing heart, feeling sick or being short of breath. These bodily reactions to stress usually trigger stressful thoughts such as "I can't cope" or "I'm so afraid".

- Help children to notice what is happening to their body and the changes that tell them that they are feeling scared.
- Help them to put names on these bodily feelings ("When I get butterflies in my stomach that can sometimes mean I am feeling scared").
- Show them how to identify unhelpful thoughts they might be having that are adding to their fears ("Something bad is going to happen to us").
- Remind children that strong bodily sensations and frightening thoughts are normal, but there are ways to manage them so they don't get out of control and stop us from doing what is helpful.

STEP 3

Manage responses to the stress

Children can learn two simple strategies to help them to feel more in control.

1. Teach children to slow down their breathing to help calm anxiety reactions ("Imagine you're breathing out like a sleepy dog lying in the sun"). When breathing out slowly, teach children to say to themselves "It's OK, breathe easy".
2. Teach children to replace frightening thoughts with more helpful ones ("This might be scary but there are some things that my family can do to help us stay safe"; "We have a plan of what to do and we have practised the plan, so that should really help").

When children know what to do in an emergency situation, they will often feel calmer. Make sure your whole household practises both your physical plan and your psychological preparations so you all know what to do and can all feel more in control.