

# reflections

GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION ISSUE 1 2020



## ADDRESSING THE IMPACTS OF BUSHFIRES ON AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN

With the devastating bushfires burning across our nation this summer, there is a saturation of information present through television, radio, social media and conversation. Children may be exposed to this and can be concerned about a range of matters, including loss of people's homes and belongings, the tragic loss of life and the terrible impact on animals. They may also be worried about the possibility of losing their own home or pets due to the dangers of bushfires. Consequently, it is important for families and educators to monitor children's exposure to this information and to minimise the negative effects.

Supporting children to understand and manage what they are seeing, hearing and experiencing will help them to feel emotionally secure. It is, however, normal for

adults to find this task difficult and uncomfortable due to the uncertainty about what they should say. Thankfully, there is a range of information available from various organisations and websites to assist.

**Gowrie Queensland CEO, Louise Jackson**, has sourced *Talking With Children About Bushfires* from The Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (QCPIMH) and Michelle Richardson, Executive Director Pedagogy at Gowrie New South Wales, has sourced *Helping Children Who have Been Affected by Bushfires* from Dr Govind Krishnamoorthy, Dr Kay Ayre and Bronwyn Rees. Thank you Louise and Michelle. We hope this double edition of Reflections will be a useful and practical resource to guide professional thinking and action.

# TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT BUSHFIRES

## The Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (QCPIMH)

There's a lot of anxiety, anger and sadness in the community at present about the recent bushfires affecting most states and territories in Australia. Sadly, some children are returning to early childhood settings having been directly affected by the fires. Educators may also have suffered distress and loss.

Some adults worry that talking with children about the fires will frighten or distress them. But such major events can't be ignored. It's important to talk with children about what's happened, to help reassure and support them. Here are some tips on how to do this with sensitivity and confidence.

### Build knowledge

As you know, young children often understand more than we think. Talk with them about what's happened. Find out what they've heard or experienced. Answer their questions in an honest way, using language suitable for their age.

### Validate feelings

Let the children know it's okay to talk about how they're feeling about the fires. Encourage them to learn words for 'big feelings' like sad, worried or angry, as well as words for feeling happy and safe.

### Books and stories

Stories can help children process their experiences, providing a sense of narrative closure and a hopeful ending.

'Birdie and the Fire' can be read online in English and 8 other languages at <https://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/chq/our-services/mental-health-services/qcpimh/natural-disaster-resources/storybooks/> (or Google 'Birdie's Tree'). Printed copies in English can be ordered from the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health [birdies-tree@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:birdies-tree@health.qld.gov.au)

Books about fire for slightly for older children include Jackie French's 'Fire' and Neridah McMullin's 'Fabish: The horse that braved a bushfire'.

You can use techniques like 'story stones' to help children create stories for themselves, about getting through difficult times.

### Art and play

Encourage children to use art and play materials to process their experiences. Pay attention, join in, and encourage them to talk about feelings. Children may work through troubling memories as they play. Gently help them move towards a focus on the present (being safe, having fun, enjoying friends). Restorative activities, like planting seeds and building things, will help them think positively about the future.

### Focus on positives

Help the children child pay attention to the 'good' in the situation, like the ways people are helping each other and caring for injured animals. Maybe there are practical ways your centre can contribute to the recovery and rebuilding efforts.

### Be alert

Watch for signs that a child may need extra emotional support following their experience of the fires. Young children communicate through behaviour. If a child doesn't seem themselves, is particularly anxious or oppositional, or seems to have regressed to an earlier stage of development (for example, in toileting or language skills), they may be experiencing disruption or distress. If you're concerned, trust your gut and talk with your director and the child's parents.

### Take care of yourself

It's okay to share your own feelings about the fires in language suitable to the children's age (e.g. 'Yes, I feel sad too'), so long as you stay calm and in control.

If you're feeling distressed or struggling to cope, seek support for yourself. Talk about the situation with other trusted adults, away from the children. It's completely okay to talk with your GP, a counsellor or helpline to get emotional support. Just as on an aeroplane you fit your own oxygen mask before helping others, it's important after a natural disaster to look after ourselves so we can be there for the children in our care.

### More help and resources

There are lots of resources to help educators and other adults support babies and young children in recovery from bushfires. Some of the following may be useful:

Birdie's Tree - <https://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/natural-disaster-recovery/>

Children's Television Workshop - <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/traumatic-experiences/>

Emerging Minds - <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/>

For more information, contact the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health: phone (07) 3266 3100 or email [birdies-tree@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:birdies-tree@health.qld.gov.au)

# HELPING CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY BUSHFIRES

**Dr. Govind Krishnamoorthy BBsc BPsych (Hons) PhD MAPS, Lecturer, University of Southern Queensland**

**Dr. Kay Ayre EdD, Lecturer, Edith Cowan University**

**Bronwyn Rees BSc. BPsych (Hons) MPsych MAPS, Clinical Psychologist, Young Minds Psychology**

*As bushfires continue to rage, over six hundred schools and early education centres have been closed in Queensland and New South Wales. The devastating toll of the fires have been felt by many across the country, with some children having been urgently evacuated while still in school. Families have lost their homes to the fires, while large numbers of animals and livestock have perished. Images of distress and dislocated men, women and children have served as a reminder of the significant losses and traumatic impact of such natural disasters.*

## WHAT TOLL DO TRAUMATIC EVENTS HAVE ON YOUNG CHILDREN?

Traumatic events are any events that a child subjectively experiences as distressing. These events can be experienced only by the individual (e.g. being in an accident, witnessing a terrible event) or can be events in which groups of people are involved (e.g. bushfires). We know that up to one in four children experience traumatic events in their childhood. Research has shown that the psychological impact of such events can be different for children, compared to adults exposed to traumatic events. For example, in the context of natural disasters, parents may feel that their life or the life of their child was threatened. The child, however, may be much more

concerned with being separated from their parents and family during or immediately after the event.

It is normal for both children and adults to experience emotional distress and other reactions following such events. In fact, some of these emotional reactions have been found to be adaptive and positive in coping, and most children find a way to cope and recover fairly quickly. Every child will react differently to traumatic events. A number of factors influence a child's capacity to cope with the bush fires – these include previous exposure to traumatic events; their proximity to the fires, as well as post-trauma environmental factors, such as changes in the family and living arrangements. Research on the longer term impact of natural disasters has found that, depending on the nature of the events, between 7% to 45% of children exposed to traumatic events develop psychological difficulties over time.

Perceptions of threat in children may also depend on the developmental characteristics, or age of the child. Children under the age of five are often the most vulnerable to the effects of such natural disasters. While it was previously thought that such young children would be immune to such traumatic effects due to their limited understanding, we now know this to be untrue.



## HELPING CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY BUSHFIRES (CONTINUED)

Common reactions in young children may include:

- *Changes in their behaviour:* Feelings of fear and anxiety are often expressed in the form of behaviour in young children. These could include an increase in physical and verbal aggression towards family and friends, temper tantrums, demanding attention or becoming unusually whiney.
- *Increased energy levels and physiological arousal:* Feelings of excessive stress can manifest itself in children's bodies – leading to disturbed sleep (e.g. taking longer to fall asleep, night waking), as well as increased arousal (e.g. increased irritability, easily startled by loud noises, difficulties with concentration and increased activity levels).
- *Changes to their general mood and emotionality:* Some children may become increasingly moody and fussy, have difficulties calming down, with some even exhibiting emotional outbursts for no obvious reason.
- *Difficulties separating from care-givers or educators:* Excessive clinginess to primary caregivers or teachers is commonly observed amongst children. While some may cry excessively on separation from parents, others may be demanding to be picked up, or refusing to stay in the room.
- *Re-experiencing events related to the fires:* Children may repetitively play out scenes of traumatic events – such as their family home burning down. Others may draw or repeatedly talk about the event. Distressing nightmares and night terrors are often common ways for children to re-experience events. Seemingly innocuous situations may be reminders of the traumatic events (e.g. smell of burning toast; sirens) and may make some children distressed, while others may become frozen, 'spaced out' or unresponsive.
- *Avoiding conversations, people or reminders of the event:* Such avoidant behaviours can be subtle in young children – with some turning away their heads, leaving the room or becoming distracted when faced with potential reminders of the events. Some pre-schoolers may become more withdrawn from family, educators and friends, while others may become less interested in playing and exploring their environments.
- *Other reactions* could include increased physical health symptoms (in the form of stomach aches or headaches); the emergence of new fears that are unrelated to the fires (such as the dark, monsters and animals); changes in appetite – becoming fussier with foods or not having an appetite; regression or loss of previously acquired developmental skills

It is important to note that while the capacity for a child to explain the reasons for their reactions is dependent on their developmental stage, verbal abilities and any speech and language concerns, their relationship with their parents is often more critical to their coping. As with all aspects of early childhood development, it is important to understand the impact of such traumatic events in the context of their significant relationships, namely the parent-child relationship. A post-disaster home environment may mean that some parents and

other caregivers are unable to provide basic needs such as food, clothing or shelter. For families severely affected by the fires, disorganisation and unstable living arrangements are common. For children, this may mean moving to a new home, a new school or centre and a general lack of familiarity with their new surroundings. Coping with such changes and transitions can be difficult, and sometimes distressing, for young children.

A child's reactions to traumatic events is also dependent on how their parents and other adults, such as educators, express their reactions after a traumatic event. For parents, feelings of grief and high anxiety may lead to changes in their parenting style – becoming more reactive and upset with their children or more restrictive for fear of the child being harmed. Highly distressed parents may unknowingly model their fear response to their child and may not be as able to support their child's emotional reactions. Research has shown that there is a significant association between parent distress and children's emotional and behavioural functioning. Therefore, it's important for parents and caregivers to be aware of how they are coping and whether they would also benefit from some support.

In addition to families affected, it is important to recognise the impact of such disasters on schools and centres and their communities. In some disasters, the school or child care centre may be the place where the children and educators were present while the disaster unfolded. In other situations, the centre or school may have been the only place of refuge. Disasters may affect school and centre communities through loss of life of children, parents and educators and, loss of centre or school buildings, facilities such as computer equipment and power, loss of resources such as libraries and sporting equipment, loss of records and children's work, overcrowding in remaining centres and schools and the loss of infrastructure to attend centres/school, such as roads being destroyed, bus companies being unable to operate.

### HOW CAN EDUCATORS HELP?

The educator's primary role following natural disasters is to do what they do best – continue being a caring good educator. Children need to return to normal routines, and thrive on the certainty of knowing where they need to be and what they need to do throughout each day. Although educators may play an important role in identifying any concerns in the children they care for and teach, their primary role should be focusing on continuing and supporting the children's education.

Below are some of the other ways educators can support children:

#### Take care of yourself

In all likelihood, educators and teachers of children impacted by natural disasters may also have been affected by the traumatic events, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, caring for others who have experienced the trauma may not only be a stressful experience, but may compound the educator's own reactions. In addition to helping children manage their emotions following such natural

## HELPING CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY BUSHFIRES (CONTINUED)

disasters, it is equally important for educators and teachers to care for their own emotions. It can be extremely helpful for educators and teachers to talk to others about their own experiences and get support where necessary. Caring for children who have experienced traumatic events can also have an impact on the educators. This could involve feeling physically and emotionally worn out, feeling overwhelmed by the child's trauma and reactions and experiencing traumatic stress of their own. Such reactions are not a sign of weakness. Rather, they are the cost of caring for and helping others – often referred to as 'compassionate fatigue' or 'secondary traumatic stress.'

It has been demonstrated that educators who look after themselves and manage their own stress levels are more equipped and able to manage children's behaviours and difficulties. Educators who are stressed or experience strong emotional reactions will find it harder to react in calm and constructive ways to children who are demonstrating difficult behaviours. Things that can help with caring for yourself could include:

- Monitoring your own reactions, emotions and needs. Be aware of any signs that you might be showing and seek out support for yourself (in the centre and/or community). If your signs persist for longer than two or three weeks, it might be a good idea to seek further assessment or assistance from a health professional.
- Make time for yourself, family and friends: Part of a healthy lifestyle includes maintaining your mental health. A big part of this is making time for yourself, family and friends. Everyone needs time out for themselves, to relax, have fun and enjoy themselves. Allowing yourself this time keeps you mentally fit and makes it much easier to manage your own stress and to help children manage their stress.
- Sometimes it is necessary to actively schedule these times in, rather than just waiting for others to do this. Try and organise fun activities every week and spend a little time each day doing something for yourself. This might even be as simple as taking 30 minutes to read a book, taking time out to have a relaxing bath or spending time playing games with your family.
- Spend time with children who have not experienced traumatic stress. Sometimes it can help to spend time with children who have not experienced traumatic stress and to involve yourself in other aspects of children's lives.

### Maintain routines and positive expectations

Generally, most children respond well to a structured environment, with clear goals, timelines and activities. Keeping familiar routines helps reduce unnecessary stress for the young person. Familiar routines and structure will help the child to feel safe and maintain consistency in one area of their life. Although this may be of greater importance immediately following the traumatic event, it may also be particularly important to children who are still experiencing difficulties sometime later.

Acting out and misbehaving may be demonstrated by children in response to natural disasters and traumatic

events. During times of recovery, it is important for children to return to normal routines and functioning. As part of this, it is important that teachers do not change expectations relating to schoolwork and behaviour, rather, make adjustments where necessary to the way classroom activities are delivered. For example, if children are having some difficulty maintaining concentration, it may be necessary to provide preferred activities and additional choices of activities and change to 15 or 30 minute blocks. Incorporating physical activity in between (e.g. stand up and shake it out) to stimulate attention and concentration can also be beneficial.

For many families, there can be a long time following the trauma where the focus remains on the traumatic event, getting their lives back together and dealing with the problematic reactions that follow. As a result it can be very easy to focus on the negative things going on in the child's life, including problems managing emotions and behaviours. Often little attention is paid to the positive behaviours or coping strategies the child is showing. Providing acknowledgement for things the child has done well not only makes the child feel good, but also demonstrates to them the type of behaviours they should continue to engage in. Reinforcing strengths, positive behaviours and coping strategies can be incorporated into daily learning activities and can promote self-esteem and confidence in the children. Educators and teachers could help one another to practice noticing positive behaviours.

### Monitor children over time

Being familiar with the types of reactions that children can have is the first step to being able to help. Remaining vigilant and curious about changes in behaviour of any of the children and knowing how to help a child and their family get the assistance they need is also particularly important.

### Modify how you talk to children and plan activities

A common misconception is that talking about the traumatic event can cause more problems or cause the child to develop distress reactions. Although it is important to consider how you talk to the child who has experienced trauma (and what sort of reactions and coping strategies you model), talking about the traumatic event and the child's feelings does not generally cause the child to develop problems.

The other misconception is that children must talk about these events to recover. Children must never be forced to talk about such events or be made to listen to others talking about their experiences. As an educator or teacher, your role is to manage and facilitate how children who want to talk, play, draw or express their feelings, can do so safely in the learning environment.

### TIPS FOR WHEN CHILDREN MAY WANT TO TALK ABOUT THE BUSHFIRES

Some children will need to talk about the bushfires, but it is important that educators and teachers place some rules around this to limit potential modelling of distress and inappropriate coping mechanisms. For example,

## HELPING CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY BUSHFIRES (CONTINUED)

Immediately following such events, it may be useful to set dedicated periods for talking about the events (e.g. 10 minutes at the start of class). Without such limits talking about the disaster can easily become overwhelming and unhealthy for the entire group/class. One way around this is to encourage children to draw pictures or write in journals instead of talking about the disaster with the class.

When discussing the bushfires, it is important for the educator and teacher to contain any conversations which encourage fear. It is important for educators to remain calm and convey a clear message that the threat/danger is over, and that now the focus is on recovery and rebuilding lives.

In more formal school settings, often it is good to schedule these sessions when you have some extra support in the classroom. A teacher's aide may provide support for both the teacher and children if needed. It may be useful for children to be given a choice about participating in such discussions – with options of alternate, routine activities that they can choose to do instead with the support of the teacher aide.

While it is okay for educators and teachers to share some of their own experiences with the trauma, it is very important for teachers to maintain the 'teacher' role. Educators and teachers should aim to model calmness when discussing stressful situations and model appropriate coping behaviours. If they have also experienced the traumatic situation and are traumatised, it is important they be thoughtful about how they talk to children and convey calmness during the conversation.

For some children, talking about the event may be difficult. Some children might respond better to drawing as a way of communicating. Ask children to draw pictures of their family and household then and now. Encourage them to look for the positive things that have changed, the strengths they have developed and how their family is planning to change or do fun things from here.

It is likely that children may re-experience some of their symptoms or experience some distress at important milestones. Anniversaries of the event, birthdays of lost family members, holiday times (Easter, Christmas, Mother's / Father's Day) can all be especially difficult for some children. During these times, it is possible that the child might demonstrate an intensification of emotional difficulties and problem behaviours or might even develop new difficulties. Where possible, it may be a good idea for educators to plan ahead and pre-empt these occasions

and provide support where appropriate. For anniversaries, strategies may need to be discussed with family members of the children, and other educators, administrators. It is important to consider the wishes of the families affected by the trauma and work collaboratively. Educators and teachers may plan events to coincide with anniversaries, with an emphasis on survival stories and positive events since the trauma.

It can also be useful for educators and teachers to warn or prepare children for any sudden events. For example, children may need to be warned about upcoming fire drills or sirens to be trialled. Educators and teachers may also need to let children know if they are about to do anything sudden, like turning off all the lights, or making loud noises. Educators and teachers may also approach the families of some children, where appropriate or necessary, to work out if they require extra support during this time, and how they may react to the events planned at the centre /school or mark such anniversaries and milestones.

Educators and teachers are in a unique position to identify children who are experiencing difficulties following a natural disaster because of their role, expertise, and extended contact with children. Every child reacts differently to a traumatic event so it is not always clear what types of reactions they will display, or how the event might affect them in the longer-term. Being informed and attuned to the emotional and behavioural difficulties and coping of children after traumatic events is the first step to helping children. By thinking together with your colleagues, and collaborating with families and health professionals, educators and teachers can prevent the likelihood of children developing long-term adverse reactions, while helping their school or centre be part of the journey of recovery, growth and resilience in their communities.

If reading this article has raised any concerns for yourself or your family, please access the resources below or contact your GP for further advice.

Lifeline – 13 11 14

Parentline – 13 22 89

Australian Centre for Grief & Bereavement – 1300 664 786

Beyond Blue – [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

*Gowrie Australia continues to be concerned over the impact of the current bushfires and has subsequently contributed to discussions about how the Australian Government can provide support to the early education services, families and children affected by the fires.*

For your professional learning and support contact your state based Gowrie listed below:

NSW [www.gowriensw.com.au](http://www.gowriensw.com.au)

TAS [www.gowrie-tas.com.au](http://www.gowrie-tas.com.au)

QLD [www.gowrieqld.com.au](http://www.gowrieqld.com.au)

VIC [www.gowrievictoria.com.au](http://www.gowrievictoria.com.au)

SA [www.gowriesa.org.au](http://www.gowriesa.org.au)

WA [www.gowrie-wa.com.au](http://www.gowrie-wa.com.au)