

Helping Children After a Wildfire: Tips for Caregivers and Teachers

Natural disasters can be traumatic for children and youth. Experiencing a dangerous wildfire can be frightening even for adults, and the devastation to the familiar environment (i.e., home and community) can be long-lasting and distressing. Often an entire community is impacted, further undermining a child's sense of security and normalcy. Wildfires present a variety of unique issues and coping challenges, including the need to relocate when home and/or community have been destroyed, the role of the family in lessening or exacerbating the trauma, emotional reactions, and coping techniques.

Children look to the significant adults in their lives for guidance on how to manage their reactions after the immediate threat is over. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children and youth cope in the aftermath of a wildfire by remaining calm and reassuring children that they will be all right. Immediate response efforts should emphasize teaching effective coping strategies, fostering supportive relationships, and helping children understand their reactions.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH WILDFIRES

Unlike other natural disasters such as earthquakes, there is often some warning of an advancing wildfire. However, depending upon the wind and terrain, the direction and spread of a wildfire can change abruptly. The amount of warning can vary from one neighborhood to the next. While some people may have hours (or even days) to evacuate, others will have only a few minutes to gather their belongings and leave their homes. Even if evacuation is not ultimately necessary, preparing for the possibility can be frightening for children, particularly if they are seeing images of homes burning nearby on television.

Reactions immediately following a wildfire may include emotional and physical exhaustion. In some instances children may experience survivor guilt (e.g., that their home was left unharmed, while others were completely destroyed). In general it might be expected that greater symptomatology in children will be associated with more frightening experiences during the wildfire and with greater levels of damage to their community and homes. The sights, sounds, and smells of a wildfire often generate fear and anxiety. Consequently, similar sensations (e.g., the smell of smoke) may generate distress among children in the months that follow. Given the scale of most wildfires, individuals living outside the ravages of the fires may still feel exposed to the danger from drifting clouds of smoke, flames on the horizon, and television reports. Some children may also react to follow-up news coverage or even weather reports that talk about dry fire conditions after the fact. It is important to acknowledge that, although a wildfire will last for only a specific period of time, survivors can be involved with the aftermath of a wildfire for months or even years. In attempts to reconstruct their lives, families are often required to deal with multiple people and agencies (e.g., insurance adjustors, contractors, the Red Cross, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Salvation Army).

POSSIBLE REACTIONS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO WILDFIRES

Most children will be able to cope over time with the help of parents and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions. The severity of children's reactions will depend on their specific risk factors. These include exposure to the wildfire, personal injury or loss of a loved one, relocation from their home or community, level of parental support, the level of physical destruction, and pre-existing risks, such as a previous traumatic experience or mental illness. Symptoms may differ depending on age but can include:

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- **Preschoolers**—thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, and withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary school children**—irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Adolescents**—sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.

A small minority of children may be at risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms can include those listed above, exhibited over an extended period of time. Other symptoms may include re-experiencing the wildfire during play or dreams; anticipating or feeling that a wildfire is happening again; avoiding reminders of the wildfire; general numbness to emotional topics; and increased arousal symptoms, such as inability to concentrate and startle reactions. Although extremely rare, some adolescents may also be at increased risk of suicide if they suffer from serious mental health problems like PTSD or depression. Students who exhibit these symptoms should be referred for appropriate mental health evaluation and intervention.

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING A WILDFIRE: INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Remain calm and reassuring. Children take their cues from adults, especially young children. Acknowledge the loss or destruction, but emphasize the community’s efforts to clean up and rebuild. To the extent it is possible to do so, assure children that family and friends will take care of them and that life will return to normal.

Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns, and address any questions they may have regarding the event. Listen and empathize. An empathetic listener is very important. Let them know that their reactions are normal and expected.

Encourage children to talk about wildfire-related events. Children need an opportunity to discuss their experiences in a safe, accepting environment. Provide activities that enable children to discuss their experiences. This may include a range of methods (both verbal and nonverbal) and incorporate varying projects (e.g., drawing, stories, audio and video recording). Seek the help of the school psychologist, counselor, or social worker if you need help with ideas or managing the conversation.

Promote positive coping and problem-solving skills. Activities should teach children how to apply problem-solving skills to wildfire-related stressors. Encourage children to develop realistic and positive methods of coping that increase their ability to manage their anxiety and to identify which strategies fit with each situation.

Emphasize children’s resiliency. Focus on their competencies. Help children identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset. Bring their attention to other communities that have experienced wildfires and recovered.

Strengthen children’s friendship and peer support. Children with strong emotional support from others are better able to cope with adversity. Children’s relationships with peers can provide suggestions for how to cope and can help decrease isolation. In many wildfire situations, friendships may be disrupted because of family relocations. In some cases, parents may be less available to provide support to their children because of their own distress and feelings of being overwhelmed. Activities such as asking children to work cooperatively in small groups can help children strengthen supportive relationships with their peers.

Take care of your own needs. Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. You will be better able to help your children if you are coping well. If you are anxious or upset, your children are more likely to feel the same way. Talk to other adults such as family, friends, faith leaders, or counselors. It is important not to dwell on your fears or anxiety by yourself. Sharing feelings with others often makes people feel more connected and secure. Take care of your physical health. Make time, however small, to do things you enjoy. Avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING A WILDFIRE: SPECIFIC INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

Allow time for staff to discuss their feelings and share their experiences. A wildfire may result in the temporary closure of a school. Upon return to school, it is important to allow time for a group discussion (in a safe and caring context) for staff to discuss their feelings and share their experiences. It is essential that teachers and staff be given permission to take care of themselves in order to ensure that they will be able to help their students. Handouts regarding possible trauma reactions among children and other relevant information can be valuable resources for caring adults (e.g., some handouts are available at www.nasponline.org). School personnel (including your school crisis team members) should also have the opportunity to receive support from a trained mental health professional. Providing crisis intervention is emotionally draining, and caregivers will need an opportunity to process their crisis response. This could include teachers and other school staff if they have been serving as crisis caregivers for students.

Provide time for students to discuss the wildfire. Depending on the situation, teachers may be able to guide this discussion in class, or students can meet with the school psychologist or other mental health professional for a group crisis intervention. Classroom discussions help children to understand the wildfire. They also encourage students to develop effective means of coping, discover that their classmates share similar questions, and develop peer support networks. Teachers should not be expected to conduct such discussions if children are severely impacted or if they themselves are distressed.

Identify children and youth who are high risk and plan interventions. Risk factors are outlined in the above section on children's reactions. Interventions may include classroom discussions, individual counseling, small-group counseling, or family therapy. From classroom discussions, and by maintaining close contact with teachers and parents, the school crisis response team can help determine which students need counseling services. A mechanism also needs to be in place for self-referral and parent referral of students.

Secure additional mental health support. Although many caregivers are often willing to provide support during the immediate aftermath of a wildfire, long-term services may be lacking. School mental health professionals can help provide and coordinate mental health services, but it is important to connect with community resources as well in order to provide such long-term assistance. Ideally these relationships would be established in advance.

HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST TO RELOCATION AFTER A WILDFIRE

The frequent need to relocate after a wildfire creates unique coping challenges. It may contribute to the social, environmental, and psychological stress experienced by children and their families. Children will be most affected by the reactions of their parents and other family members, the duration of the relocation, their natural coping style and emotional reactivity, and their ability to stay connected with friends and other familiar people and activities. To the extent possible parents and other caregivers should:

- Provide opportunities for children to see friends.
- Bring personal items that the child values when staying in temporary housing.
- Establish some daily routines so that the child is able to have a sense of what to expect (including returning to school as soon as possible).
- Provide opportunities for children to share their ideas and listen carefully to their concerns or fears.
- Be sensitive to the disruption that relocation may have and be responsive to the needs of the child.
- Consider the developmental level and unique experiences of each child; it is important to remember that as children vary, so will their responses to the disruption of relocation.

In addition, school personnel should:

- Try to determine the status of every child in the school. Make sure that each child absent from school is contacted by school personnel and a record is kept.
- Determine the unique needs of every child whose home might have been destroyed or sustained damage following the wildfire. Help connect these children to supportive resources.

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- Find out the phone numbers and addresses of every student who had to relocate. In this way classmates may be able to write notes or make phone calls.
- Help to provide accurate information and address inaccurate rumors or myths.
- Provide opportunities for children to discuss the event and how they are coping in the aftermath. It takes time for children to understand and adjust following a wildfire.
- Understand that it is perfectly normal for children to discuss the event over and over again.
- Use the creative arts (e.g., drama, art, band, chorus, photography) to help children express their emotions.
- Bring in agencies to the school that can help families deal with needs related to housing, finances, and insurance. Help children get any necessary medical and emotional assistance.
- Increase staffing for before and after school care. If possible, extend the service for additional hours and even on weekends.
- Utilize the information about the wildfire in related subject areas. Science, math, history, and language arts are especially relevant.
- Use drama, art, music, and photography to help children express their emotions.
- Develop an advisory committee of students to report back to school staff about what resources and changes in routines will help them cope in the aftermath.
- Most of all, listen to all the students. If you listen closely, they will be able to tell you what they need.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

See helpful resources on responding to natural disasters for parents, educators, mental health professionals and crisis teams: <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis>.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- [American Red Cross Wildfire Resources](#)
- [Discovery Channel School Forest Fire Lesson Plans for Teachers](#)
- [Federal Emergency Management Agency Wildfire Information](#)

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