

# TOOL KIT Helping your children cope with the after effects of a bushfire

How children react and how you can help

## What are some common responses?

Common trauma reactions include: sleep disturbances, nightmares, fear of the dark, clinging to parents, loss or increase in appetite, aggressive behaviour, competition with siblings for parental attention, withdrawal, and/or loss of interest in regular activities.

These reactions may vary according to a child's age. Importantly, most children will experience healing and recovery following painful experiences, as they rebuild their lives and develop new strengths. Your support can play a vital role in this process.



### Children 5 years and under

Children 5 years and under have a tendency to be strongly affected by their parents' reactions. At this age children are unable to protect themselves, as a result, fear can arise, and your child may become anxious when separated from you.

### Children 6 – 11 years

At this age children are able to understand loss and permanent change. Reactions may include: anxiety, regressive behaviour (e.g. thumb sucking), refusing to go to school, outbursts of anger, depression, feeling numb, physical complaints that have no medical basis, and concentration difficulties resulting in poor school work.

### Children/adolescents 12 – 18 years

This age group may have reactions similar to those of adults. Reactions may include: flashbacks, anti-social behaviour, rebellion, substance abuse and guilt. loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, agitation or decrease of energy, change in friends, substance abuse. A young person in this age group may also feel guilty for being unable to 'stop the fire', 'prevent the house flooding' or 'save the house'. Difficulty talking about thoughts and feelings is common.

## What can I do to help?

Let your children know about your own feelings as a result of the traumatic event and reassure them that it is normal to feel upset after a terrible experience.

Encourage your children to express their feelings and listen to them without passing judgement. If your child is unable to discuss their feelings don't force them to but let them know you are there to listen when they are ready. Patience and tolerance lets your child know what they are experiencing is normal. Reassure your child that you love them and that they are not responsible for what happened.

If your child is experiencing regressive behaviours do not criticise by saying "You're behaving like a baby" this will only discourage them from opening up.

Include your child in making plans for the future and cleaning up any destruction to your home.

Talk to your child's teacher so that you can work together in supporting your child through this terrible time.

Keep as much as possible to regular routines and activities. This provides the child with a sense that even when bad things happen, it is possible to rebuild and deal with painful changes in their lives, and that there can be security and support even in the midst of these changes.

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Children, particularly those up to around 11 years, look to their parents for security. It is helpful to let them see that you are now in control of the situation; for example, by making plans for future safety.

## Tips for helping different age groups

### 5 years and under

- plenty of hugs and affection
- time together doing activities they enjoy
- spend extra time with them before they go to bed
- allow them to share a bedroom until they can return to their own without fear

### 6 – 11 years old

- allow time to play with adults and friends
- encourage discussion of events with adults and friends
- temporarily relax your expectations of them
- include them in rehearsing plans for future disasters

### 12 – 18 years old

- allow time for individual attention
- temporarily relax your expectations of them both at home and school
- encourage structured and non-stressful activities either alone or with friends
- allow them to talk about the bushfire, but don't insist if they don't want to
- young people can gain a sense of control over the situation if they are able to contribute to some aspect of getting things back to normal

## When should I consider further help?

If you become aware of very severe reactions that are continuing for more than a few days or if less severe reactions have continued consistently for a period of more than 6 weeks you may need to consider seeking professional help.

## Where do I go for further help?

- Contact your GP or the [Child and Adolescent Health Service](#) in your area.
- For help finding an appropriate referral contact [Lifeline on 13 11 14](#).
- Children and young people can phone [Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800](#) or access web and email counselling [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)
- Parents can phone the [Parentline](#) in their State for support: <https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/how-parentline-can-help-you>
- Government Assistance <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/help-emergency/bushfires>



For 24-hour telephone support call 13 11 14. For more information visit [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

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