

# Kids need help to deal with bushfire crisis

**A**NYONE touched by the bushfire crisis knows that threat makes the world feel dangerous. Your mind is overwhelmed.

Stress seeps into your body and you act on instinct. You run and run even when your tank is empty. You face what you fear. You fight to save your children, your family, your friends.

As long as threat is present, you keep going. You have no choice.

Trauma is what is left once the threat ends. It is like a trapped memory ready to explode in you again at the faintest sign of danger.

For many of those forced to fight or escape the bushfires, trauma will reverberate for some time. Small reminders can switch on the survival response: the sound of sirens, the smell of smoke, the feel of heat may all act as triggers that set their heart racing, blur their vision, start them sweating. It is painful, hard. It will often take them by surprise.

For many, the trauma will subside. Feeling safe again is what makes the most difference. Feeling that you are not alone also helps. It gives you confidence that you will make it through.

That is why our offers of support and donations mean more than the practical help they deliver. They send the message that we are connected to each other through threads of commitment that spread throughout the world. We understand and bear witness to their pain – as if it was our own.

Some will need more support, specialist help to them grieve and slowly recover. That is also normal. The intensity of the fear and uncertainty is different for everyone.

So we should not make the mistake of believing that children react to threat in the same way as adults. They don't. They cannot protect themselves from danger. They are helpless and are overwhelmed by far less stress than adults can tolerate. They often cannot describe what is going on inside them and instead show it in the way they behave. Some withdraw.

Some are inconsolable. Others demand attention, refusing to listen to simple requests. Others argue back.

All of it comes from the same feelings of confusion and fear. We need to be sensitive to them because it is not what we do for and to children that will help them in these moments, it is what we do alongside them that makes all the difference.

Children need everything to slow down. It is the hectic pace of a crisis that terrifies them because they don't know what will happen next. Everything feels like it is changing quickly and all the time. As soon they form one question in their mind, there is another right behind it and their confusion builds.

They see high levels of activity



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around them. Mum or dad do not feel familiar to them because they are distracted. Children need to feel sure that the parents they have known all their lives are the same. In the face of fast moving change, children need stillness and time.

So parents and family have to take the chance to start their children's healing.

Children affected by the trauma of these bushfires need simple things. They need someone to listen and pay attention to them, they need an adult to put down their phone and focus on them even if it is only for 15 minutes. That time needs to be predictable and regular.

They need their feelings to be acknowledged and validated: "I know you were scared. I was scared too. I can see you are still worried. I know you had bad dreams last night. It is really hard that we are not at home. I know you miss your best friend."

Children don't know that it is legitimate to feel the way they do.

They need to be reassured. Tell them that they will get through this, that it won't always be like this. That there are people who will help.

"A lot of people care about us. I will look after you. You are safe with us."

**C**HILDREN need their questions answered directly and clearly: "I don't know what started the fires. The fires may come back, but we know what to do. I don't know what happened to our pets, but I am trying to find out. You will still go to school when it starts again. The fire fighters are brave."

And they need to be able to play. Play is like medicine for traumatised children. It mends and cures them, so let them lead and you follow. Let them create the rules while you watch and learn. Their play will tell you what is important and what they might need.

Be open to what messages they want from you.

And keep them close. Tell them you love them and that you will always love them, that danger has been an unwelcome visitor but it is not staying.

Children need to know that after the bushfires have gone, safety will be welcomed back with open arms.

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