

Helping Kids Affected by Wildfires

Living through a wildfire will undoubtedly impact your family's routine. As adults, your priority at this time is likely your children's physical safety and basic needs. At the same time, children may ask difficult questions or display strong emotions, so it is important to address their mental health, too.

Children who experience natural disasters are at increased risk of mental health concerns. Depending on their age, kids may not know how to process what they've experienced; their imaginations may run wild, or their thoughts may gravitate to the most upsetting things they've witnessed.

Older children and teens are more likely to hyper-focus on or worry after disasters, which may lead to anxiety or depression. Younger children may initially have trouble adjusting to changes, but when things return to normal, they often adjust quicker.

For two or three weeks after a natural disaster, it's normal for kids to:

- Show changes in sleep
- Show changes in appetite
- Be quieter or more withdrawn
- Constantly ask questions about the disaster or its aftermath
- Experience headaches, stomachaches or fatigue
- Have difficulty focusing on schoolwork

If these symptoms fade within two to three weeks, your child may not need intervention. However, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects up to half of children after natural disasters. PTSD may cause excessive worry, sadness, sleep disturbances, heart palpitations (their heart beating too hard or too fast) and other symptoms. Research suggests that a child's PTSD risk increases after natural disasters if they witness the event, are injured or lose loved ones. A mental health therapist can provide treatment for PTSD.

At this time, one of the best things you can do is simply be there with your children. You can:

- **Talk about it.** Share age-appropriate information to calm your child without giving false hope. Tell younger children basic facts. For older children, explain how your family is coping and how others are doing. You can share that your job is to keep them safe and there are people working hard to keep the community safe.
- **Lend an ear.** Listen to your child's concerns. Research shows that when parents acknowledge their child's feelings after a natural disaster, it helps promote healing. Also, remember to validate any emotions they share.
- **Provide context.** Kids may think they know what happened, but they may have gotten misinformation from friends or unreliable sources. Find out what they've heard and clarify any misunderstandings.
- **Re-establish a routine.** Even if you're displaced from your home, stability is important. Try to keep small parts of your routine when you can, like reading a book before sleep or eating breakfast around the same time each day.
- **Limit news exposure.** Disaster coverage often focuses on devastation. Your child might watch upsetting footage for days, adding to their stress levels. Set time limits for watching the news, and honor the same limits. Keep in mind that children may also get news information from social media, so you may want to consider closely monitoring what they are exposed to on their phones.
- **Set a good example.** Kids take cues from their parents. It's OK to express emotions appropriately in front of your children, but you may want to cope with big emotions privately. If you constantly ask if they're OK, they may think they shouldn't be. Remember, your mental health matters too. Continue to care for yourself and reach out to your community for support.
- **Offer stress-release activities.** Think of enjoyable, distracting indoor activities like board games, puzzles and art activities.

Natural disasters can be scary for adults and kids. By using these mental wellness skills, you can help them begin to recover.

You can learn more about helping children through our guide on Loss and Change, including free conversations starters, by scanning the QR code.

