

Australian Bushfires

Parent and Carer Tips

Tips for parents on media coverage

While the media (television, radio, print and the internet) can help inform and educate you and your children during bushfires, media coverage unfortunately also has the potential to upset and confuse. As parents, you can protect your children by helping them understand media coverage while limiting their exposure to distressing images.

The impact of media coverage will be different depending upon whether you are:

- a family currently evacuated viewing for the first time your home or neighbourhood destroyed
- a family viewing images from home of a bushfire nearby which could spread to your area
- a family who has been affected by fire in the past
- a family not directly threatened who is viewing news about the impact that bushfires are having on others (loss of their home, belongings, pets, school or church buildings).

Children and families who suffer loss in the bushfires are the most vulnerable to negative effects from excessive media viewing.

Understanding media exposure

- Media coverage can produce increased fears and anxiety in children.
- The more time children spend watching coverage of the bushfires, the more likely they are to have negative reactions.
- Graphic images and news stories of loss may be particularly upsetting to children.
- Very young children may not understand that the coverage and repetition of images from an earlier or past event is a replay. They may think the event is continuing to happen or is happening again.
- Excessive exposure to the media coverage may interfere with children's recovery after an event.

What parents can do to help

- Limit your children's exposure to media coverage
 - The younger the child, the less exposure s/he should have.
 - You may choose to eliminate all exposure for very young children.
 - Encourage them to watch their favourite shows or movies instead.
 - Consider family activities away from television, radio, or internet.
- Watch and discuss with children
 - Watch what they watch. Discuss the news stories with them, asking about their thoughts and feelings about what they saw, read, or heard.
 - Ask older children and teens about what they have seen on the internet, in order to get a better sense of their thoughts, fears, concerns, and point-of-view.

What parents can do to help (continued)

- Seize opportunities for communication
 - Use newsbreaks that interrupt family viewing or newspaper images as opportunities to open conversation. Be available to talk about their feelings, thoughts, and concerns, and reassure them of their safety and of plans to keep them safe, if needed, such as evacuation.
- Clear up any misunderstandings
 - Don't presume you know what your children are thinking; ask if they are worried and discuss those worries with them, reassuring them as needed.
 - Ask questions to find out if your children are understanding the situation accurately; they may think they are at risk when they are not.
- Monitor adult conversations
 - Watch what you and other adults say about the bushfires or the media coverage in front of the children; children often listen when adults are unaware and may misconstrue what they hear.
- Let your children know about successful community efforts
 - You may want to share positive media images, such as reports that the fire has been contained in areas or news stories of people or animals brought to safety.
 - Reassure your children the firefighters are working very hard to put out the fire. This will give them a sense that adults are actively taking steps to protect them, their home, their pets, and their neighbourhood.
- Educate yourself
 - Learn about children's common reactions to bushfires or other natural disasters.
 - Know that many children are resilient and cope well, but some may have continuing difficulties. These reactions vary with age and exposure to the event.
 - For more information, visit our website for resources to help children and teenagers after a traumatic event: www.phoenixaustralia.org/recovery/helping-children-and-teens.

When your family is part of the story

Know your limits

- Decide if it's a good idea for you or your children to talk to the media. While it's natural to want to tell your story, the media may not be the best place to do so.
- Think about what you are willing and not willing to discuss. You have the right to set limits with reporters.
- Ask the reporter for the purpose of the story and its content.

Protect your children

- Make sure the reporter has had experience working with children in the past.
- Discuss with your children before the interview. Assure them there are no wrong answers.
- Let them know they can say "no" to any question and can stop the interview at any time.
- Be present when your child is interviewed. Stop the interview if s/he becomes upset or distressed.
- After the interview, discuss the experience with your children. Praise them for doing a great job and listen carefully to any concerns they have.
- Prepare your children that the final media story may be short or edited in ways that do not reflect their experience.

Adapted with permission from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network