A photograph showing a woman with long brown hair and a young girl with blonde hair sitting together on a couch. They are both looking down at a book or document the woman is holding. The woman is pointing at something in the book, and the girl is resting her chin on her hand, looking thoughtful.

Preparing children for the threat of a bushfire

Information for parents and carers

Disasters such as bushfires can be frightening for anyone, but can be particularly terrifying for children. As families prepare for the bushfire season, it is important to protect children from becoming too frightened or anxious, even though many of their fears may be real.

This information sheet provides ways of assisting parents and carers to help children manage their fears and to have a greater sense of being in control in threatening bushfire situations. It should be read along with information about being physically prepared to protect lives, homes and properties in a bushfire emergency, which is usually available from local councils and emergency services. This information sheet can also be helpful for carers of children who are experiencing anxiety about bushfires or other threats, but may not be directly at risk.

Helping children manage fears

Children react differently to fearful situations depending on their age and personality. Their reactions will also be significantly affected by how the important adults in their lives are responding to a threatening situation. Adults who are able to remain relatively calm and act in a controlled manner in an emergency situation will assist children to feel safe.

Being psychologically prepared when a bushfire is threatening can help you feel more confident, more in control and better able to think clearly about what you need to do to keep safe. Being calmer and more collected will also be very helpful to children. You can help children by:

- Involving them in physical preparations
- Preparing yourself psychologically so that you feel more in control, and then teaching children the same skills
- Listening to children's concerns and correcting any thoughts or ideas that are exaggerated or inaccurate
- Remaining positive and reassuring, saying things like "Remember the plan we have and the things we can do to help us all keep safe if a bushfire comes".

Involving children in physical preparations

Involving children in your household's physical preparations for a bushfire emergency can help them have a greater sense of control and assist them to manage their fears.

- During a threatening situation, it helps everyone to remain calm if they can be occupied in some useful activity. Select a suitable activity for each child that gives them a feeling of having something to do, and note it in the household plan.
- Talk about the household bushfire plan with all the family, write it up and display it in a place where everyone can see it.
- Practise the plan with the family until everyone knows it really well.
- Talk with children about their school bushfire plan as well.

How to prepare children psychologically: A four-step process

Psychological and physical preparation are closely linked and both are important. If all members of the household are psychologically prepared, everyone should be able to think more clearly and act according to the household emergency plan. Once you have learnt how to be psychologically prepared yourself, you can help children to learn the skills too. Children are also better able to cope with stressful events if those around them are also coping well.

AIME for being psychologically prepared in four steps:

1. **ANTICIPATE** that the situation will be stressful
2. **IDENTIFY** your typical physical and emotional responses
3. **MANAGE** your feelings and thoughts with simple breathing and self-talk
4. **ENGAGE** meaningfully with at least one trusted person

1. ANTICIPATE that the situation will be stressful

When people understand their usual reactions to stress they can learn ways to manage them better when they happen.

- Think about how your children usually react to stress. What other frightening experiences have they had?
- Discuss with them what it might be like in an emergency and how they might react.
- Help them to understand that although these reactions are very understandable, sometimes they can get in the way of thinking clearly and acting in a helpful way in an emergency.

2. IDENTIFY your typical physical and emotional responses

In highly stressful situations, the body usually shows signs of anxiety, such as a racing heart, feeling sick or being short of breath. These bodily reactions to stress usually trigger stressful thoughts such as "I can't cope" or "I'm so afraid".

- Help children to notice what is happening to their body and the changes that tell them that they are feeling scared.
- Help them to put names on these bodily feelings ("When I get butterflies in my stomach that can sometimes mean I am feeling scared").
- Show them how to identify unhelpful thoughts they might be having that are adding to their fears ("Something bad is going to happen to us").
- Remind children that strong bodily sensations and frightening thoughts are normal, but there are ways to manage them so they don't get out of control and stop us from doing what is helpful..

3. MANAGE your feelings and thoughts with simple breathing and self-talk

Children can learn two simple strategies to help them to feel more in control.

1. Teach children to slow down their breathing to help calm anxiety reactions ("Imagine you're breathing out like a sleepy dog lying in the sun"). When breathing out slowly, teach children to say to themselves "It's OK, breathe easy".
2. Teach children to replace frightening thoughts with more helpful ones ("This might be scary but there are some things that my family can do to help us stay safe"; "We have a plan of what to do and we have practised the plan, so that should really help").

When children know what to do in an emergency situation, they will often feel calmer. Make sure your whole household practises both your physical plan and your psychological preparations so you all know what to do and can all feel more in control.

4. ENGAGE meaningfully with at least one trusted person

During periods of high stress, it is extremely important for children's mental health that they feel connected to one or more significant others. Try to ensure that your child/children has/have a trusted someone with whom they can talk, share their concerns with, and receive support from.

Protecting children during a disaster

Although children can show remarkable resilience, they can also be very vulnerable to trauma in highly stressful situations. The best way to enhance children's ability to cope is to help them have a sense of safety and security, and to assist them to feel more in control of their fears.

Although children sometimes appear to cope well during an emergency, they may be very distressed much later. Some children are likely to feel more anxious and stressed than others in the face of a bushfire threat. Cuddling, holding and plenty of affection helps to comfort and reassure these children. Talking to them about what is going on and what the adults are doing to make things safe will help to give children a sense of security and closeness.

Older children may react with anger and blame (at parents or others for not keeping them safer), distrust or hopelessness, or may become rebellious or withdrawn. These are common reactions and adults can best deal with them by being patient and understanding while continuing to explain what is happening to keep everyone safe.

Authorities recommend that families leave their properties early on extreme weather days. This will not only reduce the risk of physical harm, but will also keep the family together in a less stressful situation and help children to feel safe. If your plan is to stay and defend your property, the authorities strongly advise that children should be sent away from the danger. Removing children from possible exposure to traumatic experiences is the best protection from long-term harmful effects. If you do choose to 'prepare, stay and defend' and you send your children away, you can help them deal with any distress at being separated by:

- making sure they are looked after by familiar adults who they feel safe around
- planning regular communication with children to let them know you are safe.

Key messages for children who are anxious about bushfires but may not be directly at risk

Hot days and the potential risk of a bushfire can be a time of increased anxiety for many people. Children are also vulnerable, and the increased media coverage and discussion in the community, schools and at home about bushfires can raise their alarm. There are several ways in which parents and carers can help children to be aware of the threats, but also reassure them that they are safe and secure.

- Monitor their media exposure. Limit it, or watch the news with them. Being able to talk about what they are watching or hearing can greatly reduce their distress.
- Listen to understand how children are feeling and thinking. Encourage them to talk, but don't force them. Help them to recognise and put words to their feelings. Let them know it's normal to feel this way.
- Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings about bad weather or frightening things.

- Provide truthful but simple and thoughtful explanations. Give your child your full attention when answering their questions. Help them to develop realistic thinking about weather events.
- Reassure children that they are safe and are being looked after, that nothing bad will happen to them personally, and that there many people working to protect others from harm.
- Be aware of how you talk in the presence of children. Children can distort what they hear or see especially when information is received through indirect communication, like overheard adult conversations about worrying things.
- Pay attention to your own reactions. Stay calm and show children how you manage your own emotions. This helps to show children that potentially distressing events can be dealt with.

Seek additional support when needed

If you are worried about your child's fears or are finding it difficult to cope yourself, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details..


There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians during disasters. Visit www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Disasters

The Australian Psychological Society Limited
PO Box 38, Flinders Lane, VIC, 8009

Telephone: (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497
Fax: (03) 9663 6177
Email: membership@psychology.org.au
Web: psychology.org.au

Find us on social media   

ABN 23 000 543 788 © 2020