

GREEN HEROES

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN DURING BUSHFIRE SEASON

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A guide to supporting and  
comforting young children  
during the Australian bushfire  
crisis.

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# LET'S TALK ABOUT FEELINGS

Providing emotional support to young children during the bushfire crisis

Children are aware of the bushfire crisis. They may have heard about it in the news and seen images on TV, or the cover of a newspaper. They will probably have heard adults talking about it and may have family members who live in affected areas. They may have been evacuated from their homes. A child's response to family and community events often presents in the classroom, through words, emotions and behaviour.

Like us, our children have a rich emotional life. What they may not have, in the early years, is the language to explain their experience or express their concerns. They may not have the skills to identify their emotions, soothe themselves from distressing feelings or choose responsible actions. As an educator, you have an opportunity to facilitate the development of these skills.



## HOW EDUCATORS CAN SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN

How you respond to a child's questions or concerns about the bushfires is similar to how you might respond to other significant events, such as a parental separation, loss of pet or relocation. It also depends on the age of the child, the child's level of cognitive and emotional development, the type of educational setting you are in, and what you know of the child's experiences.

This guide provides suggestions for identifying distress and initiating supportive connections. You will also need to trust in your knowledge of individual children to guide these interactions.

If you notice that a child is withdrawn or acting differently (which may present in a number of different ways, depending on the individual child and the environment they are in) you can make your observation out loud and enquire about it. If there is a clear emotion being demonstrated, give that emotion a name.

*For example: If a child is notably disengaged, get down to their level and warmly make your observation; 'Hello Jack. You are extra quiet today.' Depending on the age of the child, and the protocol at your facility, you might then say: 'Is something worrying you?' or 'Would you like a cuddle?'*





A child who is happily playing alone will probably say 'no' and go back to their business. A child who is dealing with a difficult emotion may also decline (perhaps ignoring you) but seek out your support at a later time. This bid for connection was not wasted.

It is worth remembering that this exchange is not an interrogation but a warm enquiry from a place of genuine interest. It is an invitation to share something that is bothering them or to connect in another way through play (whether they are, in fact, concerned about something, or not). Think of it like an extended hand that they may or may not choose to take.

*For example: You see a pensive child playing with some toys. You might say, 'Fiona, you look sad. What is happening for you today'? If she denies feeling sad, or says nothing, ask to join her play. Perhaps she is bandaging a burnt toy or her doll is running from a fire front. Through play, if you are comfortable, you can name the doll's feelings and introduce a firefighter character or friend to support her.*

Older children are more likely to engage verbally but may still have difficulty finding the words for their experience. They may not know their emotion by name or why they have acted out, but they might be able to tell you what it feels like in their body. Maybe they have an upset stomach, heavy heart or they are feeling extra alert. They may overflow with concerns or with emotion. If they are very upset, comforting words and naming the emotion can seem inadequate. It isn't and can be more meaningful than you expect. Simply saying, 'Jodie. You are very upset today. Big emotions are hard', can be enough to cultivate emotional health.

The emotions you are most likely to observe are: fear, worry, confusion and sadness. You may also see anger in older children or hear the echo of adult views. Whatever the emotion, try to recognise it and give it a name.

*For example: In a group setting or following show and tell: Hayden had a difficult weekend. He and his family needed to move away from their home for a while. He is feeling confused and sad today".*





You can enforce any behavioural boundaries that you need to, based on the protocol of your facility, while acknowledging and validating the emotion behind the behaviour.

*For example: 'Holly, You need to keep your hands to yourself. I can see that you are sad today. It is okay to be sad, but we can't hurt our friends. Let's go and read a story / do a drawing / work quietly over here'.*

When a child shares a specific concern, or you are aware of their concerns, you can provide reassurance about their safety and the safety of their loved ones (as far as this is reasonable in the circumstances). You can tell them that it is okay to be scared or worried. Perhaps you are worried too and sharing this helps to normalise their feelings. You can also reassure them that they are safe and there are a lot of adults doing what they need to do to keep them (and their loved ones) safe.

*For example: "Molly, Mum tells me that you have been worried about the fires. Your Grandma lives in... I have someone there too. I am worried too but do you know what?*

*There are lots of men and women who are down there with fire trucks and helicopters. They are working hard to keep your Grandma safe". If appropriate, you might add: "I thought today we might do a drawing / write a letter to thank them for keeping us safe".*

A child may come to you more directly with questions or statements about bushfire events. It is okay to answer these questions in a manner suitable to the child's age and the question they have asked. You can give as much or as little information as you need to satisfy the question and reassure them of their safety. It's okay to say that you don't know the answer to a specific question and this is preferable to telling a 'white lie'.

Avoid giving more information than you need to - sometimes a child's question is simpler than it first appears - or getting into a complex discussion. Instead, look for the emotion beneath the question.

*For example: "Jake you have a lot of questions about the fires today. It sounds like they might be worrying you. We are all safe here today".*

Where children are not directly affected but have concerns about the people and animals who are, it can be useful to have a conversation about what is being done to support these individuals. Educators can meet a child's worry, with hope and positive action, to build resilience.

*For example: "Yes, it is very sad what has happened to [person/animal/town]. Did you know that there are people who are doing [action] to help them".*

**Suggested activities to consider doing one-on-one with a child or as a class if many children are affected:**

- Give children the opportunity to play out their emotions. A drawing or a game can show you what they are upset about more than they can explain in words and also gives them a vehicle to honour that feeling.
- Ask children if they would like to draw a firefighter putting out a fire, or the forest growing back after a fire.
- Make and decorate a fabric pouch with a picture or message as a special gift for a rescued animal.
- Have hypothetical conversations with older children e.g. What would you do if you were a firefighter? What would you do if you were the boss of the country? How do we prepare for emergencies?
- Pretend to be firefighters fighting fires or vets treating wildlife for fire related injuries. The Green Heroes Wildlife Hospital is a useful resource for this activity.
- Write a letter or draw a card for firefighters / wildlife carers / Red Cross volunteers to thank them for their efforts.
- Talk about emergencies in general. What is an emergency? How do we keep safe? Who keeps us safe?
- Talk about the people in their lives who they can go to if they feel unsafe or worried.
- Encourage any activity that will highlight hope, gratitude and elements of personal control on a subject that is worrying children.

## **SUMMARISED IN 3 KEY STEPS:**

### **RECOGNISE**

**an emotion or behaviour change**

### **IDENTIFY**

**an emotion displayed or discussed**

**(to validate their feelings and build emotional literacy)**

### **REASSURE**

**the child that he or she is safe or that adults are working hard to keep their family members/animals/home safe**





### **A few things to avoid if possible:**

- Exposure to traumatic footage or discussion regarding fire (or any natural disaster)
- Shaming a child for feeling any emotion or ask them to 'stop it' or 'toughen up'
- Getting into a discussion about any religious or political views about a situation unless it is within the policy of your facility to do so.
- Directly contradicting the views of parents or significant adults in the child's life, unless it is within your curriculum/teaching area to do so. This might be an opportunity to label an adult's emotion e.g. 'It sounds like your Dad is very cross about that situation' and redirect the conversation to experiences and feelings.

### **WHY it is valuable for educators to support children with their emotions and experiences**

Emotional literacy and resilience are skills, like many other skills, that we cannot develop without experience and coaching. In times of natural disaster, many parents are caught up in their own stress, worry and the

practicalities of recovery. Many adults too are still developing these skills themselves and may be having difficulty coaching their children.

By identifying and naming emotions, we build emotional literacy, a skill that will help set a child up to notice how they are feeling and begin to self-regulate. Ultimately, this means better self control and classroom behaviour. It also means identifying emotions in others.

By talking about our emotions and the emotions of others, we normalise, acknowledge and validate them. This builds self-esteem and encourages the development of empathy. Acknowledging an emotion is sometimes a more efficient way to move on from it to another task. It builds relationships and increases capacity for learning.

By talking about emotions, and modelling adaptive behaviour (e.g. distraction or play-based expression), we are teaching coping skills and demonstrating that emotions are fleeting and, however difficult, will pass. A belief that underpins resilience.

## **RESOURCES TO SUPPORT**

**Green Heroes has created a bushfire response activity pack which is available for free download on our website @ [www.greenheroes.org.au/](http://www.greenheroes.org.au/)**

**Green Heroes also has a pop-up wildlife hospital (role play) kit which can be purchased as a resource for your centre. It includes 6 native animals with picture case study cards and vet/medical props. To view please visit [www.greenheroes.org.au/education](http://www.greenheroes.org.au/education)**

**a wildlife sponsorship program for preschools. To sponsor a native animal rescued from bushfires please visit [www.greenheroes.org.au/adopt-a-joe](http://www.greenheroes.org.au/adopt-a-joe)**

**To contact our team email [scribble@greenheroes.org.au](mailto:scribble@greenheroes.org.au)**

