

Talking to Children About Wildfires and Other Natural Disasters

By David Fassler, MD

When a wildfire or other natural disaster occurs, parents and teachers are faced with the challenge of discussing what's happened with children. Although these may be difficult conversations, they are also important. There are no "right" or "wrong" ways to talk with children about such tragic events. However, here are some suggestions that you may find helpful:

1. Create an open and supportive environment where children know they can ask questions. At the same time, it's best not to force children to talk about things unless and until they're ready.
2. Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually know, or eventually find out, if you're "making things up." It may affect their ability to trust you or your reassurances in the future.
3. Use words and concepts children can understand. Gear your explanations to the child's age, language, and developmental level.
4. Be prepared to repeat information and explanations several times. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may also be a way for a child to ask for reassurance.
5. Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Let them know that you think their questions and concerns are important and appropriate.
6. Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about their own safety and the safety of immediate family members. They may also worry about friends or relatives who travel or who live far away.
7. Be reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises. It's fine to let children know that they are safe in their house. But you can't promise that there won't be another wildfire or other natural disaster.
8. Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not want to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems.
9. Let children know that lots of people are helping the families affected by the most recent wildfires. It's a good opportunity to show children that when something scary happens, there are people to help.

10. Children learn from watching their parents and teachers. They will be very interested in how you respond to world events. They also learn from listening to your conversations with other adults.
11. Don't let children watch too much television with frightening images. The repetition of such scenes can be disturbing and confusing.
12. Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past are particularly vulnerable to prolonged or intense reactions to news or images of wildfires or other natural disasters. These children may need extra support and attention.
13. Monitor for physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent medical cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
14. Children who are preoccupied with questions or concerns about wildfires or other natural disasters should be evaluated by a trained and qualified mental health professional. Other signs that a child may need additional help include: ongoing sleep disturbances, intrusive thoughts or worries, recurring fears about death, leaving parents or going to school. If these behaviors persist, ask your child's pediatrician, family physician or school counselor to help arrange an appropriate referral.

Wildfires and other natural disasters are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, many young children feel frightened and confused. As parents, teachers and caring adults, we can best help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent and supportive manner. Fortunately, most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. However, by creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, we can help them cope with stressful events and experiences, and reduce the risk of lasting emotional difficulties.

David Fassler, MD is a child and adolescent psychiatrist practicing in Burlington, Vermont. He is also a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine, and member of the Consumer Issues Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.