

News Release

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Talking to Children about the California Fires: Tips for Parents and Teachers

Arlington, VA - As thousands evacuate Southern California, children across the country are experiencing anxiety and uncertainty. Parents and teachers are faced with the challenge of discussing a traumatic situation that many children find scary and confusing. David Fassler, M.D., a child psychiatrist and trustee of the American Psychiatric Association, offers the following tips on how to help children cope:

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. Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about friends or relatives who live in an area directly or indirectly affected by or associated with the fires. They may also worry about their own safety and the safety of their immediate family members, even if they live far away from the fires.
3. Let children know that firefighters, police, and neighbors are helping the families, children, and pets affected by the fires. It is a good opportunity to show children that when something scary does happen, there are people to help.
4. Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Let them know that you think their questions and concerns are important and appropriate.
5. Be reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises. You can't promise children that there won't be another fire or that no one will get hurt, but you can help them feel safe in their own house.
6. Give children honest answers and information. Use words and concepts children can understand. Gear your explanations to the child's age, language, and developmental level.
7. 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. Some children may also want to send letters to families directly affected by the fires.
8. Don't let children watch too much television with upsetting images. Ask local TV stations and newspapers to limit the repetition of particularly disturbing or traumatic scenes.
9. Don't confront your child's defenses. If a child is reassured that things are happening "far away" it's usually best not to argue or disagree. The child may be telling you that this is how they need to think about things right now in order to feel safe.
10. Children who have experienced trauma, such as a fire in their own home, are particularly vulnerable to prolonged or intense reactions to news of the fires or heightened fears of a fire in their community. These children will need extra support and attention.

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11. Be mindful of physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.

12. Children who are preoccupied with questions or concerns about fires 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, worries, recurring fears about death, leaving parents or going to school. If these behaviors persist, ask your child's pediatrician, family practitioner or school counselor to help arrange an appropriate referral.

Fortunately, most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like most adults, they will get through the current challenges and go on with their lives. However, by creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, we can help them cope and reduce the risk of lasting emotional difficulties.

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society, founded in 1844, whose more than 35,000 physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. For more information, visit the APA Web site at www.psych.org.