
Talking to children about bushfire risk

Summary

- Bushfires are a common feature of Australia's landscape. Messages regarding bushfire risk and preparation are increasingly accessible from social media, television, radio, fire danger rating signs, and general conversation.
 - Children can be affected by information regarding bushfire risk and they may become concerned about issues of safety.
 - Many children are inherently resilient and will benefit from being spoken to about bushfire risk and preparation.
 - Talking to children openly in a way that suits their age, while also involving them in decisions and actions regarding bushfire preparation, will help them to feel emotionally secure and to be more confident during the bushfire season.
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The bushfire season can be stressful for those living in at-risk communities. Bushfires are occurring with increasing frequency and messages regarding the importance of bushfire preparation are a constant reminder of the ongoing risk. It is important for adults to remain aware and alert throughout bushfire season.

But what about children? How can adults talk to children about bushfire risk and preparation without compromising their sense of safety and security?

This fact sheet provides suggestions about how to talk to children about bushfire risk.

Concerns about talking to children about bushfire risk

It is common for parents and carers to find talking to their children about bushfire risk difficult because they are not sure what to say. Typical questions include:

- Should the dangers of bushfires be acknowledged?
- Should we talk about the possibility of losing our home or pets?
- My child heard that some people were recently hurt in a bushfire. Should I explain that this can happen?
- We drive past the fire danger rating sign each day on the way to and from school and sometimes my children ask 'what colour is it today'? How do I explain this without scaring them?
- Should I tell my child that bushfires cause me concern as well?

Given such questions and concerns, the section below provides suggestions about how to talk to children about bushfire risk.

Children's reactions to the risk of bushfire

While some children will be affected negatively by exposure to information about bushfire risk, this is not the case for all children. It is important to remember that many children are resilient and have a strong natural ability to adapt to challenging events.

However, signs that a child has been negatively affected by information about bushfire risk might include:

- becoming more clingy towards a parent or carer – for example wanting to be held more than usual, wanting to be with parents or carers, asking about fire, seeking reassurance
 - changes to sleeping or eating patterns, or both
 - the emergence of new physical complaints – such as stomach ache or headache
 - changes in mood – such as being more easily irritable, or shutting down
 - appearing on edge and frightened – for example, being more easily startled, developing new fears or having
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nightmares.

If you (or one of your child's carers) notice these or other changes then it is important to ask the child what they are worried about. Talk to them in a way that is open and appropriate to their age. Listen to their questions and fears and show them that you understand.

Talking to children about bushfire risk

It is important that children are taught to respect, understand and manage dangers in their lives, including bushfire risk. We do this when we educate them about the dangers of traffic, snakes and strangers, and bushfire risk can be treated in the same way.

Showing children how to protect themselves can be made a part of their normal everyday lives, and does not usually result in fears. If adults show confidence that children can be protected from these dangers by plans and actions, children will feel confident too.

Below are seven guiding principles to use when talking to children about bushfire risk:

1. **Listen carefully to what they say.** Children will often talk about what they are thinking or how they are feeling ('I think something bad is going to happen', 'I am feeling scared') without necessarily connecting their feelings to a specific event. Listen carefully to the child's words to get an understanding of what is going on in their mind.
2. **Ask questions.** If you notice changes in a child's behaviour and you think this might be a reaction to bushfire risk, ask them to describe what they are thinking or feeling. And if a child asks a specific question ('The sign is red today, that's bad isn't it?'), answer their question, being reassuring but truthful. (Explain to them that red means there is a risk of fire, but also help them understand what you are doing to make sure everyone is safe.) Try to find out what made them ask their question. This will help to identify the source of concern, which may be different to their question.
3. **Use age-relevant language.** Use language that is easy for children to understand.
4. **Identify unhelpful thoughts and feelings.** When talking to children about bushfire risk, help them to recognise unhelpful thoughts and feelings and then teach them to use more helpful alternatives. For example, instead of thinking 'I think something bad is going to happen' you could encourage your child to think, 'Because it is going to be a hot day I am feeling a little scared, but mum and dad have a plan to help us stay safe.' Tell them what that plan is. For example 'The whole family is going to go and stay with grandma and grandpa.'
5. **Remain positive and reassuring.** It is important that adults use positive and reassuring language when around children; explain that a plan has been made to keep everyone safe and show them how it will work. If they talk about bad things that have happened in the past (such as Black Saturday) explain that you have learned from that and will be prepared.
6. **Build resilience.** Help children to grow in self-confidence by talking to them about the various bushfire preparation steps taken to ensure their safety.
7. **Manage your own reactions.** Try to manage your own stress reactions and to model good coping strategies to children. (Relaxation techniques such as calm breathing – three seconds in through the nose and three seconds out through the mouth – can help, and having a bushfire plan in place will help to minimise stress because you are prepared, and know what to do.)

By using these principles adults can safely talk to children about the risks and dangers of bushfires. Talking to children about bushfire risk will reduce the likelihood of distress during summer and will also help children to build coping skills.

Other ways to help children cope with bushfire risk

In addition to talking to children about bushfire risk, parents and carers can also help children in the following ways:

- Teach stress management techniques: Introduce them to stress or anxiety management techniques such as calm breathing, or divert attention away from emotionally challenging ideas by playing or focusing on something else. Being close to someone who makes them feel safe can also help to reduce a child's stress.
- Involve children in physical preparations: Include children in preparing a bushfire plan. Give them specific, manageable, age-appropriate tasks, and include them when rehearsing the plan. By doing this children will learn that the decisions and actions are not only being made for them but with them.

- Normalise the threat of fire as one of the hazards of living in Victoria: 'We know about bushfires and have learned a lot.' 'We have plans to keep ourselves and our pets safe.'

When to seek professional help in talking to children about bushfire risk

You might want to seek professional advice if:

- your child is displaying any worrying signs that they have been negatively affected by information about bushfire risk (listed earlier in this fact sheet) and these reactions do not subside after you have talked to them
- you have concerns about whether your child is coping (or perhaps if another person who cares for your child, such as a school or kindergarten teacher, expresses concern)
- you don't understand your child's reaction to bushfire risk
- you feel that you are not coping.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Local community health centre
- Psychologist
- **Parentline Victoria** Tel. 13 22 89
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours 7 days)
- Australian Psychological Society '**Find a psychologist**' service Tel. 1800 33 34 97
- **CFA:**
 - **How to prepare your property**
 - **Escape plans**
 - **Fire safe eLearning game**

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