

HELPFUL STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AND YOUTH DURING AND AFTER WILDFIRES

FOR CAREGIVERS AND TEACHERS

Children and Youth may fear that their homes or the homes of family members and friends will be destroyed, or that they or their loved ones may be injured or experience harm.

For families directly affected, daily routines may be disrupted for weeks or months. Families may experience financial hardship as well as problems with housing and transportation, and work-related and/or school-related problems.

Reactions to fires and their effects are strongly influenced by how their parents, teachers, and other caregivers cope with what is happening. They often turn to adults for information, comfort, and help.

This is usually while their supportive adults are going through significant stress which can make it hard to respond in ways that are helpful. Below you will find some ideas on what to expect and ways you might answer some of the challenging questions and topics that may come up.

Listen for some common concerns children and youth may be experiencing:

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others, including pets.
- Fears of new fires starting
- Distress and anxiety with reminders of the fires (e.g., burning smell, sounds of sirens, burnt buildings, news reports)
- Worries about separation from family members, including not wanting to go to school or sleep alone

Watch for changes in their behaviours such as:

- Activity level
- Concentration and attention
- Mood-such as angry outbursts
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Increased difficulty in school
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- High-risk behaviors in adolescents (e.g., drinking, substance-misuse, self-harm)

How You Can Help

- **Understand that challenging behaviours show us that children are struggling.** During this time children might focus on the fires (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children’s “play” may focus on the fires) and you might notice regressive behaviors in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums). These are usually considered normal following events such as this. If these continue for longer than two-weeks consider bringing this to the attention of a doctor and counsellor.
- **Let youth know that it is okay to ask questions and to express their concerns.** Issues may need to be discussed more than one time. Remain flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions and providing clarifications. Go at their pace, don't force them to talk sooner or longer than they initiate.
- **Answer questions briefly and honestly, and also ask them for their opinions and ideas about what is discussed.** For younger children, try to follow conversations about fires with a favorite story or an activity to help them feel safer and calmer.

Things You Can Do for Yourself

- **Take care of yourself.** Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating regularly if possible, prioritizing sleep, and resting when you can.
- **Listen to each other.** Parents, teachers and other caregivers should provide support for each other during this time. Don't feel pressure to give or receive advice, just listening and feeling understood is most important at this time.
- **Put off major decisions.** If the situation allows, try to put off major decisions or changes you had already been planning until things feel settled again.

Things You Can do for Children Youth

- **Try to show hope.** Children and youth will take cues on how to handle situations from adults in their lives. Showing them that stress and sadness are normal when hard things happen, AND that you have hope things will get better again shows them that hard things are temporary.
- **Encourage healthy habits.** Help them learn to take care of themselves by encouraging them to maintain their needs during times of stress including getting appropriate rest, finding ways to stay active, and staying hydrated. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and physical activities.
- **Let them know about plans to keep them safe.** For example, safety measures that are in place such as plans and fire drills, efforts being made to contain the fires, and extra help being provided to the community to respond to the fires. These may need to be repeated many times to provide comfort.

•**Maintain routines.** Children and youth feel safer and more secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, stick to everyday routines, or create new ones to suit the circumstances if needed.

•**Limit media exposure.** It is important to protect them from overexposure to images of and news stories about the fires, including those in newspapers, on the internet, or on television.

•**Try to Be patient.** Children and youth may need a little extra patience and attention during these times. They may need added reminders or extra help with chores or homework because their brain is trying to make sense and process the uncertainty of their situation.

•**Offer consistent connection.** Children and youth may become anxious when they are left alone. Examples include when teachers are leaving the classroom, or when children and youth are expected to go to bed. Be prepared to be more flexible and provide support at these times.

•**Limit their exposure of adult conversations.** Limit what is being said during adult conversations about the fires and their effects. Children and youth may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily about something they do not understand.

• **Invite conversation or questions and give honest answers.** If you don't know the answer, tell children and youth that you will try to find out instead of speculating.