

Helping Children after a Bushfire – Teacher Booklet

Every
child,
every
opportunity



This has been designed to assist those who work with children in schools to address issues in relation to Bushfires.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been developed as a resource for teachers to help children recover from the effects of a bushfire.

Disasters such as bushfires can be quite traumatic for children. Children have difficulty understanding and accepting that there are events in their lives that cannot be controlled or predicted.

Adults cannot 'fix' a natural disaster, cannot solve it and cannot keep it from happening again.

WHAT CAN A TEACHER DO?

- **Firstly, look after your own needs – you may need support/assistance in dealing with feelings such as helplessness, fear, anger. You will be unable to assist/support children until you have worked through your own issues.**

STARTING POINTS:

- **You need to take the time to think about what the disaster means for children before beginning to work with them.**
- **Begin the healing process with the children. Always begin with the child's starting point, use their words to talk about their experiences.**
- **Identify those children who may require support from mental health professionals. You can refer to the Checklist at the back of this book. **Always discuss your concerns with parents.****

DISASTERS AND THEIR EFFECTS

WHAT IS A DISASTER?

➤ A disaster is a devastating, catastrophic event that may be life threatening, injury producing which may create the following distressing experiences:

- Sense of fear
- Disruption of home, routine
- Feeling that one's life was threatened
- Witness to injury, death, pain



- Feeling 'trapped', isolated
- Feeling life is out of control
- Threatening basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, comfort
- Being separated from family members
- Children taking on the role of 'adult' for parents who are distressed
- Loss – possibly people, pets, possessions, environment, routine, and/or relationships.

Some children may have previously experienced traumatic events which may influence their response to and recovery from

this event. There will be a varying degree of reactions and symptoms.



You must firstly know a child's baseline (usual) behaviour and any cultural or religious responses before you can identify 'unusual' or problematic behaviour in a student.

Children may wish to ‘talk’ about the bushfires in different ways – some will use language, some will use play, others may prefer to write or draw.



TALKING

- Allow the child to take the lead – they will guide the discussion, give them time to ask questions, discuss their feelings and emotions.
- Inform and educate children about the event. This will assist to make it less threatening to talk about.
- Reassure children by verbally acknowledging and ‘normalising’ their experiences. Listen carefully to what children say and acknowledge with them the ‘awfulness’ of their experience.

Remember that for some children ‘talking’ is not what they want.

WHY?

- ❖ In some cultures, talking openly is not appropriate
- ❖ Some children have been raised with family members not talking about their feelings
- ❖ Some children prefer not to discuss their feelings openly.

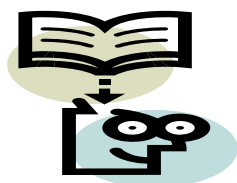
All of these reasons should be respected.

Children may wish to express themselves using WRITING OR DRAWING.

Writing or drawing, as with talking, should only be presented as an option for expression – not as a required activity.

Some Suggestions

❖ Draw/ Write a Book together



- ❖ Write journal/pictures**
- ❖ Collective mural (murals develop support and teamwork) use it to demonstrate getting through a difficult event, facilitate discussion around this.**

- ❖ Language is important – rather than saying ‘Draw a fireman helping people’, say ‘Draw a person you saw doing something helpful after the fire’. This allows the child to communicate what is important to them.**

Allow for a full range of expression – some children draw recognisable things while others draw abstractly.

Respect all drawings, as they are an individual child’s expression.

The discussion after the children have finished assists to bring 'closure' to their experience.

- ❖ Allow children to talk about their writing/drawing**
- ❖ Some children will have closure by listening**
- ❖ Allow children to finish with drawing a picture of themselves now – you can ask them to draw how they are 'different'**

REMEMBER - A drawing can give you clues to some deeper issues the child may have.

Children's books you may like to use

Sometimes books are a great resource for opening the way for discussion around a traumatic experience.

- L. Wilson, Bushfire (Nelson, 1982)
- J. Conway, Sometimes it scares me (Children's Press, 1977)
- M. Holmes, A Terrible Thing Happened (Magination Press, 2000)
- M.Hann Syme, Bushfire (Scholastic Press, 2000)

Familiar stories.

Sometimes children prefer to hear a story about "remember when"

Stories you make up

You can make up their own stories around the disaster. You need to be careful to present story telling as part of the recovery process for children. Therefore the story will need to be age appropriate and will need to show how thoughts, feelings and emotions are normal and natural reactions that diminish. The story must not include your own difficult experiences, issues and stresses.

Michelle Roberts and Vicki Trethowan
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(Acknowledgement that some of the materials have been adapted from "Recovering from Loss" – Health Department, Victoria, 1985.)