

Preparing for the second anniversary of the Victorian Bushfires (2009)

Information for schools

Anniversaries and memorials

Anniversaries are times of remembering and reflecting. As the second anniversary of the Victorian Bushfires (2009) approaches it is likely there will be increased discussion in schools and the wider community. Discussion about the anniversary will be welcomed by some and unwanted by others. Some students and staff may find this a very emotional time and may need the school to be a 'safe haven' where they continue with their usual routine. It is important to think carefully about anniversary activities that might be beneficial and to also be mindful of the possible impacts of reflection and re-exposure for students and staff as a result of these activities.

Staff wellbeing

Staff at schools with students who have been affected by the bushfires will have had a more demanding year than usual in 2010. Understanding, caring for and assisting students who have experienced a traumatic event presents staff with intense and often exhausting demands. It is important that staff look after their own physical and mental health and wellbeing, and develop long-term self care strategies. Principals should consult with staff to find out how they feel about possible anniversary or memorial activities, and should respect and support individual staff decisions about being involved in any planned activities.

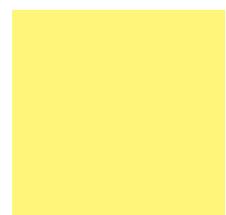
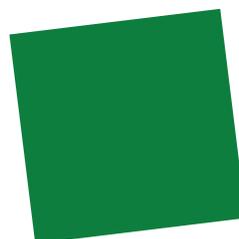
Student wellbeing

Activities focusing on survivorship, safety and the progress students, their families and the school has made since the fires are particularly beneficial. These positive anniversary or memorial activities will allow students to feel more comfortable participating and expressing their feelings. However, staff should be alert to any reactions that suggest the activity is causing anxiety. While participation in any anniversary or memorial activity should be voluntary, unexplained absences should immediately be followed up. It is important to provide meaningful alternative activities for those students who do not want to participate.

Ongoing support for students

Schools can support students by:

- Acknowledging losses, fears and other emotions.
- Providing reassurance that it is normal to have strong thoughts, feelings and reactions and that there is no 'right' way to respond.
- Celebrating the strengths and progress of the individual student and of the school.
- Reminding students about their coping strategies.
- Keeping an optimistic view of the future (which can help to normalise students' reactions).
- Utilising school welfare staff or Student Support Services Officers to support and assist students who are overwhelmed by their feelings and reactions.



Media

As the second anniversary approaches, increased media coverage can be expected, which may reactivate feelings of fear, anxiety, loss and distress in students of all ages. Images may be strong reminders of the challenges of the time since the bushfires. It is very important that parents/ carers and other adults monitor children's exposure and reactions to media.

If schools are contacted directly by the media, they should contact the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's Media Unit on (03) 9637 2871 for advice and support on managing and responding to media enquiries.

Additional information

This information has been adapted from The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network. Further information is available at http://www.earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au/resource_hubs/early_childhood_schools_hub/victorian_bushfires/

Further information about supporting children through trauma, grief and loss can be found on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's website at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/support/default.htm>

