

Information for Principals & Early Childhood Directors

Helping children and adolescents after a bushfire

Bushfires have devastated many communities around Victoria. Such fires are unpredictable and can result in loss of human life as well as destroying homes, animals, wildlife and – particularly in the eyes of children – schools and kindergartens. Bushfires may also cause serious emotional distress to children and families.

After a bushfire most families can expect to recover over time, particularly with support from relatives, friends, community agencies and organisations. It is important to remember that the recovery time for an individual may relate to past and present experiences, the thoughts and actions that contribute to these experiences, and an individual's own coping strategies. Children need time to recover from losses such as family members, friends, homes, pets, schools and kindergartens.

Children, particularly those of a younger age, will look to parents/caregivers for love and support during and following a disaster such as a bushfire. It is important that parents and teachers provide information, comfort and reassurances. Parents and teachers need to provide calm and honest answers to children's questions and, importantly, be guided by what a child asks. It helps children to understand what has happened if parents/caregivers and teachers spend time responding to their needs.

Adjustment to a bushfire disaster may be difficult for some time. This can result in impairment in social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive functioning for some children. Further information will be provided to schools and kindergartens on possible child and adolescent reactions and strategies for managing these.

Suggestions for schools and kindergartens for crisis response and recovery planning

- Develop an information letter acknowledging the disaster and the effects it may have had on children and families, letting parents know what the school/kindergarten is doing to support children.
- Address any needs of staff and provide assistance.
- Develop a list of the names and phone numbers of the crisis support team assigned to the school to provide psychological first aid support.
- Have a sign-in book and name badges for counsellors and any visitors to the school/kindergarten.
- Provide an information sheet for parents advising them of the process for meeting with a counsellor to answer any questions in relation to assistance.
- Develop an information sheet for parents outlining possible reactions and strategies for dealing with them.

- Designate rooms for counsellors to meet with children and families and discuss any assistance they require.
- Set aside a designated room for secondary students, with teacher supervision, for students to gather and talk to each other, and a counsellor if they wish – it is advisable to have things such as refreshments, writing materials and music available for students.
- Develop a resource list of external agencies indicating what they can provide for families affected by the bushfires – such as food, clothing, accommodation, legal advice and financial assistance.
- Designate a person to deal with any media inquiries, ensuring that children are protected at all times.

