

---

## Helping Children During & After a Disaster

Effectively parenting during an active fire and its aftermath may seem near impossible. Especially when tensions are high, and stress and uncertainty rule daily life. When you feel like there's nothing you can do, just know you can at least control how you help your children through this time. Children look to their parents, teachers, and other caregivers to learn how to cope during and after the events; turning to them for information, comfort, and help. Responding to their needs and worries in a healthy way will help them deal with all of the complex emotions associated with this traumatic experience.

### Common Reactions

Below are common reactions parents may see in their children. These generally decrease with time, but seek professional help if children have difficulties for more than six weeks after the wildfires.

1. Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (including pets)
2. Young children may become more clingy to parents, siblings, or teachers
3. Distress and anxiety with reminders of the wildfires (e.g., burning smell, sounds of sirens or helicopters, burnt landscape and buildings)
4. Changes in behavior:
  - a. Increased activity level
  - b. Decreased concentration and attention
  - c. Increased irritability
  - d. Withdrawal
  - e. Angry outbursts
5. Prolonged focus on the wildfires (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)
6. Changes in sleep and appetite
7. Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
  - a. Changes in school performance
  - b. Regressive behaviors in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
  - c. Increased chance of high-risk behaviors in adolescents (e.g., drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors)

*Information adapted from National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org).  
Contact Heather S. Wallace, PhD, CFLE ([heather.wallace@utk.edu](mailto:heather.wallace@utk.edu)) for more information.*

---

## Helping Children During & After a Disaster

### How Can I Help My Child?

1. **Spend time talking with your child.** This will let your child know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. Children may have questions on more than one occasion. Remain flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions.
2. **Answer questions briefly and honestly.** Try to follow wildfire conversations with a favorite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.
3. **Be a role model.** Changes in living conditions can be extremely stressful for children. They will take cues of how to handle situations from their parents. Modeling calm behaviors will be important during chaotic times.
4. **Reassure children that they are safe or the plans you have for their safety.** This may need to be repeated many times during and after a wildfire. You should spend extra time with your children and stay connected. It doesn't matter whether it's playing games, reading together, or just cuddling. Be sure to tell children they are loved.
5. **Maintain routines.** Even in the mist of chaos and change, children feel more safe and secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, stick to everyday routines (including mealtimes, bedtime, etc.).
6. **Maintain expectations.** Stick with family rules, such as rules about good behavior and respect for others.
7. **Talk about community response and recovery.** Reassure children about the work being done in their community to contain the wildfires (such as first responders protecting people, homes, pets, and wildlife), to restore electricity and water, to remove debris, and to help families find housing.
8. **Be patient.** Children may need a little extra patience and attention during these times. They may need added reminders or extra help with chores or homework once school is in session as they may be more distracted.
9. **Give support at bedtime.** Children may become anxious when they separate from their parents, in particular at bedtime. First try to spend more time with your child at bed time with such activities as reading a book. It's okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep near you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a set future date.
10. **Monitor adult conversations.** Be aware of what is being said during adult conversations about the wildfires and its aftermath. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily about something they do not understand.