

Support Resources

- Kids Help Phone: 1 800 668 6868
- Mental Health Helpline 1-877-303-2642 (24/7)
- Health Link 811 (Health Advice 24/7)
- For more immediate assistance call 911

Web sites:

Alberta Health Services: <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/service.aspx?id=7484>

Canadian Mental Health Commission: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/english/pages/default.aspx>

Beyond Blue: <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx>

References

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (2010). *Talking to children about wildfires and other natural disasters*. Retrieved from http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/resources_for_families/talk-ing_to_children_about_wildfires_and_other_natural_disasters

International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation. (2011). *Childhood trauma and dissociation*. Retrieved from <http://www.isst-d.org/education/faq-teachers.htm>

National Association of School Psychologists. (2003). *Helping children after a wildfire: Tips for parents and teachers*. Retrieved from http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/wildfire_teachers.pdf

Seltzer, J. M., Miller, M., & Seltzer, D. L. (n.d.). *Environmental hazards for children in the aftermath of wildfires*. Retrieved from http://www.healthyschools.org/PEHSU_AAP__Wildfires.pdf

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). *What you should know about wildfires*. Retrieved from <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters/fires/wildfires>

U.S Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). *Tips for talking to children and youth after traumatic events: A guide for parents and teachers*. Retrieved from http://www.samhsa.gov/MentalHealth/Tips_Talking_to_Children_After_Disaster.pdf

Suggested citation information:

Clarke, E., Kulig, J., & Pujadas Botey, A. (2011). *Teachers' Guide: Supporting Students After a Wildfire*. Lethbridge, AB: University of Lethbridge.

Additional electronic resources available from:

www.ruralwildfire.ca

Teachers' Guide: Supporting Students After a Wildfire

Wildfires are often traumatic events. Fires may come with little forewarning, forcing families to flee for safety with only the basic necessities. Some families may have lost their homes and loved ones. Others may have been split up temporarily due to the evacuation process.

Communities may lose resources such as businesses and other services due to the fire. Families may experience life changes and disruptions in their daily routine. Sights, sounds, and smells may remind the students of stressful experiences and emotions associated with the fire. Traumatic reactions and on-going stress associated with the aftermath of the disaster may be reflected in the student's behaviour at school.



Emotional Reactions to be Aware of

Emotional distress following a traumatic experience may include:

- Emotional and physical fatigue
- Feeling unwell
- Altered eating habits
- Nightmares and disturbed sleep
- Regressed behaviours
- Fears and anxiety
- Insecurities and worries about safety
- Uncontrollable crying
- Irritability, aggression and indifference
- Cease to engage in activities he or she once enjoyed
- Difficulty concentrating and avoidance of school
- Adolescents may be withdrawn, engage in delinquent behaviour, and be more involved in conflict

PTSD

A small percentage of students may experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms may include those previously mentioned, as well as others that impede one's ability to live a normal life. The child with PTSD may experience:

- Vivid memories of traumatic experience while playing or sleeping
- Lack of emotional arousal to appropriate situations
- Heightened "fight or flight" response, such as easily startling and having difficulty concentrating
- Respond to terrifying events by blocking out associated memories, such as blanking out for a few minutes during a class or an activity
- A rare occurrence in adolescents is increased risk for suicide related to PTSD and depression

Students presenting with PTSD symptoms need to be referred to the appropriate resources, such as counseling. The section "support resources" in this brochure provides a list of local centers offering such services.



Teens dealing with grief. (2010). <http://parentingteens.com/blog/tag/sad-experience/>

Strategies to Support Students

If a child does present with emotional distress, the teacher may privately talk with him or her:

- Acknowledge feelings of distress and let the child know their reaction is normal
- Listen empathetically to the student's needs and concerns, providing comfort and reassurance
- If the child is in need of further support, it is suggested the teacher refers the student to appropriate social and psychological support resources

It is recommended the teacher create a supportive environment in which routine is maintained. As questions about the wildfire come up you as the teacher would answer them as best you can, but let the students know when you do not know the answers.

The teacher can also create opportunities for students to express their frustrations and feelings related to the wildfire in a safe environment. For instance, the teacher



<http://www.more4kids.info/695/let->

may have students tell stories, draw pictures or write poems that help them to express themselves. The teacher may also facilitate students' development of coping mechanisms to deal with triggers of emotional reactions. For example, the teacher may support a student in identifying current methods of coping and working with him or her to add to the list. It is important for the teacher to help students build relationship with one another, such as through small group activities.