



## **A resource for teachers supporting school students after the bush fires**

An attempt to healing and recovery  
for kids affected by bush fires.

After an event of this magnitude, many children will show signs of trauma and may display a range of reactions including loss of attention, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, withdrawal from lesson content or even dissociation. Children may become more anxious, show signs of depression, a decline in physical health, and/or become emotionally dysregulated. This is not surprising when the world as they know it has been blown apart and their sense of safety and security has been greatly compromised.

Not surprisingly, parents are often less available to provide support during this time because they are likely to be experiencing many of the same trauma signs as their children and they are faced with a multitude of practical and logistical tasks. Thus, children may rely more on their peers for this support. At the same time, they may feel different and isolated from their peers and find it more difficult to relate to them. Activities that they once shared and enjoyed with their friends such as writing posts on social media, may now seem trivial and meaningless.

Here is a list of possible signs and scenarios and how you can help. Our hope is that with the best possible support, the greater the children's chances of healing and recovery.

1. Students may react to certain triggers for days, weeks, months or even years. These triggers include sirens, helicopter noise, hot windy days and smoke but can be more subtle triggers such as smells, tastes, images and so on. You may not always be able to anticipate when a student will be triggered but understanding that triggers may occur will better prepare you.
2. Some students may be reluctant to return to school after the fires, particularly if schools have been closed or damaged during the fire period. Students may have more difficulty separating from their families, feel anxious about seeing their peers and returning to the 'normal' routines of school life. They may feel conspicuous if they are in mufti and it can take time to replace uniforms and books. Parents may consider peer support to accompany their child/ children to school on their first day back.
3. Consider a plan for the beginning of the school term or year. It may be beneficial for willing students and their families

adversely affected by the fires to meet prior to the commencement of school. This may foster a sense of solidarity and provide the space to work through current and potential school issues, preparing them better for their first days and weeks back at school. Please note that if students and their families prefer not to attend meetings, this needs to be respected.

4. Singling out students was a common issue for all students. Well-meaning teachers would often approach students in the playground or halls and ask how they were coping. This was done in front of their peers and caused embarrassment and unwanted attention. Children were also withdrawn from the middle of a lesson to pick up a donation or attend a counselling session. Whilst these acts were well-intentioned, they became a negative experience for students.
5. Following on from this, it's important to be mindful that for the first twelve months and beyond, not all students wish to be identified as a survivor/victim of the fires. At some schools, teachers asked students to stand up in assembly if they had lost their homes without consulting or

preparing students. This was a mortifying experience for many students. Whilst we acknowledge that an event of this scale needs to be addressed at a whole school level, students need to be given warning and able to choose to attend or not attend such situations.

6. Assessment tasks need to be altered. Following a natural disaster, students may not have the capacity in the short-term to approach or complete complex homework or assessment tasks. Our suggestion is to tier homework with basic tasks for those struggling and optional extras provided for those wanting additional work. Whilst written tests are valuable evidence of work knowledge and understanding, consider verbal assessments as a suitable and effective alternative. Some of our students were forced to write about the fires! We believe that it is essential to provide options here, with a list of other topics to write about.
7. There shouldn't be a division between those who lost their homes and those who didn't. Many students with partial property damage were often overlooked and in one way or another, the whole community is affected. Some students who hadn't suffered personal losses reported feelings of guilt and helplessness.
8. All teaching staff, students and parents need to be made aware of additional supports available to them. For example, where assessment tasks are compulsory, students may be able to request extra time, extra breaks and apply for special consideration for the HSC. Parents may not be on top of this stuff and may need someone to assist them with filling out application forms. They may also need regular prompts and reminders as they have

many other issues they are dealing with. We would also recommend having a link to the school website in any correspondence that is sent out.

9. Schools could work closely with the P&C Committee to help organise free lunches for children adversely affected by the fires.
10. Some students may need additional support from professionals trained specifically in trauma work. If counselling sessions are held at school, consideration needs to be given to the time and physical location of the appointment to ensure a student's privacy is being respected. It may be wise to organise appointments before the start of a lesson rather than pulling students out of classes.
11. Be sensitive to the content you show or discuss in classes and assemblies.
12. Self-Care and a note to executives – You may find yourself in the difficult position of supporting students whilst facing your own grief, loss and trauma. Teachers can feel just as isolated as students without adequate support. Executives need to provide additional support for teachers who have been adversely affected by the fires. The simple gesture of allowing teachers to leave school during RFF/ assembly times to attend to paperwork, counselling, appointments and so on helps in a small way. Lessen the load and consider playground duty rosters to allow staff to leave early. Staff training days involving fire extinguisher use or trauma counselling for students may be difficult for staff members who have experienced loss. Teachers may also benefit from EAP (Employment Assistance Program) or external supports.

Call **1300 651 728** to enquire about adult, children and family counselling options

Call **02 8624 8600** for assistance with food and financial support or assistance to access the supports that have been made available by the Federal and State governments as part of the Bushfire response

The following information has been compiled by Deborah Horner, Primary Teacher at Penrith Anglican College and Linda Johnston, Counsellor at Anglicare, who both suffered significant losses after the 2013 Winmalee bushfires. Whilst caring for their own school-aged children, they continued in their professional roles of supporting students and clients respectively. This resource and suggestions are presented in collaboration with Anglicare.

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