

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE SUPPORT & TRAINING FOR AFFECTED SCHOOLS PROJECT

# RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

## SCHOOL RECOVERY TOOL KIT



This document is one in a series of resources within the Children's Futures: Positive Strategies for Bushfire Recovery project. The resources have been developed with advice from members of the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network (ACATLGN) after consultation with principals and teachers. They are evidence-informed to address the specific needs of school communities affected by the Victorian bushfires in February 2009 and are freely available online at [www.earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au/childrensfutures](http://www.earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au/childrensfutures)

## THE AUTHOR

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ACATLGN is a national collaboration to provide expertise, evidence-based resources and linkages to support children and their families through the trauma and grief associated with natural disasters and other adversities. It offers key resources to help school communities, families and others involved in the care of children and adolescents.

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# Introduction

Knowing your students is what makes you the person the community has turned to as a key support for bushfire affected students and in whom the community is placing their trust that you can aid children and youth in their recovery.

It's a big responsibility, especially when we acknowledge that many of you have your own bushfire-related challenges, losses and grief.

But the skills that teachers have are what children and students need to help them regroup, survive the fire experience psychologically and to make the best of the opportunities that come their way. In Victorian schools, kindergartens and child care centres - whether they be Independent, Catholic, Government, Steiner or any other - we have heard a lot about resilience and capacity building.

If you would like to read more about this refer to the reference list at the back of the manual.

Now is the time that the work you have done previously with your students and children will help them in their response to this huge challenge and, as always, we can continue to 'top up' resilience in the way we teach, interact with and model positive behaviour to our young charges. This doesn't mean we pretend that it didn't happen or that we haven't found it to be a horrible, tragic, scary, sad event. What it means is we show that people can endure such challenges and are especially able to withstand such hard times when those around them are supportive and caring. It is important to acknowledge that everyone will have their good and bad days and that there are things that we can do that will help us to feel less distressed.

We hope this resource is useful. It is based on a lot of experiences, both good and bad. We, the authors and informants, are teachers, psychologists, social workers, child care workers, parents, pre-school teachers, students, psychiatrists, therapists, principals and people who care.

No one document will 'do it all'. This is a start; feel free to add your own resources into it and if you are able, to share them with colleagues through the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network. [www.earlytraumagrief.edu.au](http://www.earlytraumagrief.edu.au)

The magnitude of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (February 2009) and the duration in which the threat continued across Victoria has meant that many of those who are 'helpers' have been affected directly themselves. Taking care of ourselves is not only sensible but models 'self care' to children.



# Self care

Before we can help others we need to help ourselves. As teachers we need to be seen to be practising what we are encouraging students to do. Congruence between our actions and our expectations is vital for trusting relationships. Whether you have been directly affected by the fires yourself or if you are teaching students and working with colleagues who have been affected, you will most likely be exposed to stories and information that are distressing. This can result in stress and distress. Taking time to firstly recognise this and then to adopt strategies that provide psychological resilience and reduce stress is not only important but professionally responsible.

## Signs of stress and vicarious traumatisation include:

- no energy or time for self
- disconnection from loved ones
- social withdrawal
- cynicism
- generalised despair and hopelessness
- nightmares
- difficulty controlling emotions
- pessimism and helplessness
- disordered sleep patterns.

## Strategies for looking after yourself

- Exercise - build it into your day, it is helpful both psychologically and physically.
- Sleep - make time for rest. Make it an important part of your day and recognise that you may need more rest than usual. If you are having difficulty sleeping, go back to good sleep hygiene habits of preparing for bed at the same time each night, get up at the same time and make sure your mind and your room are conducive to being relaxed and ready for sleep (ref. sleep beyondblue website).
- Keep alcohol use to recommended safe levels.
- Moderate your intake of caffeine.
- Avoid recreational and non-therapeutic drug taking.
- Make time for friends and pleasant events – connectedness helps keep balance and perspective.
- Seek expert mental health help.

## Stress management techniques:

- limit your exposure to stressful information and situations
- use relaxation strategies such as slow breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, positive thoughts
- build your resilience, focus on achievements
- build opportunities for recognising hope and positive strength, think of five things to be grateful for at the end of each day
- allow yourself sadness and grief
- allow yourself to be comforted.

## CASE STUDY

John is a principal of a medium-sized secondary school with boarders and day students. On 7 February 2009, the Kilmore East Fire started about three kilometres from his school. Tracking the fire's progress on the internet and radio, he headed over to the school from home (about 35 minutes travel time) to ascertain the threat to the school and the student boarders who were onsite. Tracking the threat was difficult, with conflicting reports common. While at school, he received a call to say that his own home and family were under imminent threat warnings. Unable to be totally sure that the school was safe and knowing the fire was heading for his home and family, John was caught with an unenviable choice.

## CASE STUDY

Sue is a teacher at a small rural primary school, having recently graduated from university. The fires burnt her family home, her rented premises and the homes of many of her students and colleagues. University didn't prepare her for this!

## REFLECTION

Think about what you were doing during the fires.

What was the most difficult part of the fires for you?

What have been the positives for you?

# Creating a supportive school environment after a disaster

The experience a child has in a naturally occurring disaster is dependent upon the type of disaster and the events that unfold. Responses vary when the event is a naturally occurring disaster compared to something like 9/11, where people caused death and destruction. Research has found that 'people-perpetrated events' like 9/11 are more likely to result in trauma than events like flood, bushfires and drought. Whether there was time to prepare or if the threat was over a sustained period of time and whether children were at risk or if they were sent to friends and relatives away from the immediate threat, are all factors that influence that child's experience of the event and their subsequent perceptions and responses.

There are two core experiences that children who experience a disaster share: (1) the experience of the disaster itself and (2) the changes and challenges to everyday life that is caused by the disaster.

The challenges that occur in everyday life after a disaster like the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria are often referred to as 'secondary adversities'. The way in which a family, community or school copes with the aftermath of the fires can influence how a child copes with the events.

## The event

Many children had varied experiences during and after the fires. For some the threat was contained to 7 February while for others the threat period extended over a number of weeks. Many children witnessed and experienced frightening and life-threatening situations. There was loss of life, pets, injury, and loss of homes, business and community. Some children and adolescents didn't feel directly or personally at risk from the fires but provided ongoing direct support to friends while the fire threat was near. They spent sustained periods of time listening to cries of terror and despair, providing comfort and support through text messages and the internet.

Disasters can cause changes to day to day living conditions and result in long term difficulties.

## Secondary adversities

Disruptions to day-to-day life, predictability and how one views the world are common consequences after a disaster. Changes in living conditions or location can mean that just getting to school is difficult and stressful. Many children have had to relocate home, school or both.

## The Impact of trauma on learning

Natural disasters such as the recent bushfires not only change the way in which children view life, safety and the environment, but may also result in them finding it difficult or impossible to concentrate, pay attention, remember new information and behave in a manner conducive to learning.

Secondary stressors such as having lost school books and notes, having to attend different schools or live elsewhere, family and parental stress and disruption to school routines are all additional hurdles to being ready and receptive to new learning.

The heightened arousal levels evident in some students or the apathy that comes from being overwhelmed, depressed, tired and worried that you may see in others, means that teaching is very difficult. Traumatized children are not easy to categorise, the symptoms of their trauma are varied, just as their experiences of the bushfires are.

Trauma is not the event itself, but rather the way in which a person responds to the event when it is overwhelming and beyond the person's ability to cope.

Research supports what teachers have been observing, that children who have experienced traumatic events, who live in stressful households are likely to find it difficult to concentrate, remember or be organised. Sometimes language skills can be affected as well. This makes it hard for the student to explain to others what the challenge is and to learn in a language-centred classroom.

Some children demonstrate inappropriate behaviours, develop learning problems or respond by withdrawing, becoming anxious, depressed, perfectionist or self-harming and suicidal.

A child who has experienced the unpredictability of the bushfire and for whom the safety of their world view has been compromised begins to see the world in a different way to their peers.

When children see a threat to their safety and that of people they care for, their brain releases a complex set of biochemical and neurological events that we know as a 'stress response'. The stress response prepares the body for flight, fight or freeze reactions to the event. This is a normal response to the threat and is part of what we do to survive. Unfortunately, some children (and adults) are unable to turn off this response after the immediate threat has passed. The heightened levels of arousal and emotional responses remain at a level that interferes with the ability to flourish in the day-to-day tasks, particularly the classroom environment. Those parts of the brain active in the fearful state are different to the parts activated when calm and available for learning.

Some children who have been affected by the fires will have difficulty in processing information and maintaining control over behaviour and emotion.

## Factors influencing a child's response to challenging events

### Characteristics of the child

Age and developmental stage  
Prior history  
Intelligence  
Personality style, coping style and resilience  
Cultural understanding of trauma

### Characteristics of the environment

Immediate reactions of caregivers and those close to the child  
Type of and access to support  
Attitudes and actions of first responders and parents  
Sense of safety after the initial threat has passed  
Community attitudes  
Cultural and political context

### Characteristics of traumatic event(s)

Frequency, severity and duration  
Degree of physical harm/violation experienced and witnessed  
Level of terror  
Persistence of threat  
Proximity to the event

Whether a child develops a trauma reaction to the event is dependent upon a number of factors that include the nature of the experience, the characteristics of the child and the way in which the community, family and school respond. Even children in the same family who share the same general experience of the bushfire will have different responses based on their individual personalities, developmental levels and relationships.

# Trauma in the classroom

What helps children who are having difficulty with these tasks is creating a classroom and school environment that is consistent, with predictable routines and familiar trusting relationships with teachers.

Many of the difficulties that children who have experienced the bushfires are exhibiting can be linked to their levels of arousal or hyper-arousal, the anxiety that the event might occur again, the difficulties in processing information that comes from being preoccupied with remembering the threat and events and being primed to look for signs of danger in the current environment

Academic learning requires the child to be able to pay attention, organise information sequentially, understand, remember and produce work. Students must also be able to attend to the non-verbal messages within the classroom.

Stressed, distressed and traumatised children can find it difficult to concentrate in the classroom because anxiety and fears are frequently competing for headspace with the classroom expectations. Unexpected noises, smells and expectations are often enough to trigger an overwhelming rush of arousal that is uncontrollable. The child does not choose to be flooded with these feelings; it is a physiological response that is beyond their control.

In the attempt to dampen the intensity of these feelings some children become detached, disinterested and emotionally removed from the events occurring around them. It is not uncommon for children to develop somatic or bodily symptoms such as stomach aches, headaches, aches and pains and generally feeling exhausted. In fact, dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic event is exhausting both physically and mentally.

It is important for teachers to know what might trigger a particular student to become hyper-vigilant or hyper-aroused. This is not always immediately obvious. Many will have observed the levels of anxiety increasing among the class when the fire siren sounds or if there is the smell of smoke. Some triggers are less obvious (even the child may not be able to name what has unsettled them). Working out triggers will take very careful observation and record keeping. Behavioural records that check track of what happened before the response, during the response and after the event (ABC behavioural checklist) might help to hone your observations. Your school counsellor can help with this process.

After the fires, it was impossible to get back to routine. Many times in a day our classroom was visited by dignitaries, celebrities and sporting personalities. It was impossible to get the children settled. We all just wanted a normal day...

It was seeing the really full school backpack that got to me. It reminded me of having to evacuate when the fire was around the house. Mum said we could only take what would fit in our school backpacks.

# Behaviour management

Stress responses and trauma can result in children being unable to control their emotions and behaviour. Being able to see that the child's behaviour is a consequence of their physiological and emotional responses to the event rather than perceiving it as malicious can make it easier to be patient and calm. Modelling the behaviours that you would like the child to display is important and at times very difficult.

Younger children may play out the distressing event (s) repeatedly. Traumatic play is often a non verbal way of trying to understand the event and to make sense of it. Sometimes a child loses the ability to play in any other way; this is an indication that the child needs further assistance. Creative play is vital for development. Children who are 'stuck' with the same play routine soon lose friends who become bored with the repetition, and this further alienates the child.

## Ten tips for creating a trauma-sensitive classroom

### 1. Look after your own emotional needs

Many of the staff in schools have had direct experience of the fires themselves and are experiencing a similar range of reactions and stressors as the children in their class. This can make it difficult to focus on the needs of the child. As adults, we have a wider range of coping skills than are available to children and know that we can survive adversity. Children often haven't learnt through experience prior to the fires, that they too have these coping capacities.

Even if you are not affected by the fires, working with traumatised children is challenging and by hearing the stories of fear and despair you may become vicariously traumatised.

It is not uncommon for teachers to feel some of the anxiety, helplessness and anger that their traumatised students feel.

Refer to the self care section

### 2. Create a safe classroom and school environment

A safe classroom environment is one that is predictable, organised and that has clearly stated, reasonable expectations. Established routines that are explained, outlined and kept to are reassuring and allow children to negotiate their day of learning with confidence.

Beginning each day with having the timetable written on the board and talking students through the tasks and processes will set out sequentially the goals of the day and allow for a sense of achievement at their completion. A visual or pictorial timetable is especially helpful for those who are having difficulties with processing language.

Changes to the plan can and will happen, but it would be useful to call together the group and explain in advance what will change and why.

### 3. Help children to regulate their emotions so that they can learn

In addition to having a calm classroom, teaching children strategies to self calm is useful and conducive to creating a positive learning atmosphere. Sometimes for there to be calmness there needs to be opportunity for movement and the expenditure of energy. Children who are in a state of constant hyper-arousal may find that a game that allows for running around or even being able to get out of their seat and hand out sheets for a class task allows them to resetttle. NB make sure the game isn't startling and that children are aware of the rules and know what to expect.

After each burst of activity, an opportunity to take some calming breaths, relax and consciously prepare for learning is a way to teach children to develop a productive state of mind and to take control of emotions. Talking about feelings, having posters around the classroom that provide works for feelings and emotions and cueing students into their

Traumatised children do not like unexpected surprises or sudden changes, it makes knowing what to expect in the day a priority. Transitions can be especially difficult and need a lot of explicit preparation.



feelings are all strategies that develop emotional literacy and help children to understand their own and others feelings. If a child is inappropriately emotional it is important to first let them calm down before helping them to identify their feelings.

#### **4. Believe that the child can achieve academic success**

The temptation to expect less from children after the fires is common. Although the capacity for concentration may be impaired it can be re-developed through good teaching strategies, support and time. Make all expectations clear, break tasks down to subsets and provide supportive and clear feedback during and after each subtask to monitor that the child is on task and has understood the task correctly. Scaffold the task and the skills required to achieve learning. Acknowledge successes and provide explicit feedback on what has been achieved.

#### **5. Restore a sense of control and personal efficacy**

Provide a place to calm down such as a 'peaceful corner', where children can regain emotional control safely or remove themselves to a quiet space to regain composure and reduce stimulation. Sometimes having taped music or a jigsaw puzzle or even plasticine where agitated hands can work the plasticine are calming activities. In secondary schools, zoning out with an iPod, drawing or a game of basketball are all strategies that students have found useful.

#### **6. Build strengths and capacity**

Take opportunities to remind students of their strengths. Planning actions and activities bring a measure of control and a sense of personal control to the day-to-day life. Provide students with opportunities for informed choices, beginning with a limited range of options and building capacity for decision making and self-efficacy.

Every child has strength. Identify the strength and allow the child to experience success. Take the opportunity to show the child that they can generalise the skills from that success to other areas of their learning and life. Sometimes they will need help to make the connections and generalise the skills.

#### **7. Understand the connection between emotion and behaviour**

A child that has difficulty regulating emotion is frequently impulsive and challenging. The program of 'Stop, Think, Do' is a good mantra for teachers of bushfire-affected students. Stop and think about where this behaviour is coming from, was it evident before the bushfires? Respond calmly and clearly. These children must be accountable for their behaviour but require teaching, reminders and clear boundaries and expectations that are stated in a variety of modalities and enforced consistently. Respond to the underlying emotions rather than the behaviour.

#### **8. Be hopeful and optimistic**

Many children experience a sense of loss of trust in the world after the fires; they believe that because a terrifying thing has happened, they can no longer dare to hope that life can be happy and safe again.

Modelling optimism and encouraging them to see the strengths and coping skills they have and are using will engender a sense of personal efficacy and future. It is not uncommon for traumatised children to have a foreshortened sense of future, believing that they will die early and continue to struggle in life. Reminding them of their strengths and providing opportunities for setting goals and achieving them will help them to take a positive view of their lives. Remember optimism can be taught and that it is contagious. (Refer to Seligman)



## **9. Use a variety of teaching and learning strategies that allow for repetition, reinforcement and different learning modalities**

Use multiple ways of presenting instructions, allow the children to repeat the instructions or to brief their neighbour on the task, to reinforce what is required. Using both written and auditory presentations will minimise the likelihood of children feeling unable to process the information and becoming overwhelmed or disengaged. If a student does 'lose track' of the task, a written summary will allow them to check back and re-engage.

Rehearsing new learning, vocabulary and concepts will also be helpful. Putting information in context will facilitate the child being able to sequence the information and to continue to scaffold each concept upon the previous, leading to coherent knowledge and learning. For some children who are struggling with impaired learning capacity after a traumatic event, school is one big closed activity, with the gaps being out of context and unfillable. They will benefit from being able to be cued in to where to find the information.

## **10. Engagement, social connection and trusting relationships that are built on respect and positive regard**

Being part of a social group is protective and can help people overcome adverse events. After the fires, communities and school communities were changed, with some people leaving the area where their supports were.

School provides a community of care for children and it is through the relationships that children have with friends and teachers that they can begin to recover from and make sense of the events.

Some students (and staff) come to school for normality. They don't want to have to talk about the fires and their impact but would rather have a normal school day of learning and play. Being sad and dealing with the emotions and consequences of the fires takes a lot of energy and head space. Not talking about the fires doesn't mean that the child isn't thinking about them or is being unusually avoidant. It just may be that they want to not be identified as a bushfire victim in every sphere of their lives. It's okay to ask the student quietly what their preference is.

For some students, their teacher is an adult in whom they can confide and ask difficult questions. Many children express the view that they don't want to upset their parents or further stress them by asking questions or saying that they are struggling. This is when a trusted relationship with an adult at school will allow the child to gain the help and support they need.



# Keeping track of your students

Knowing what the impact has been on your children is the key to knowing whether their reactions are within the 'normal' or 'worrying range'. Some students and children have always been 'all over the place' and hard to get on task. For others, this behaviour has only been evident since the fires and is out of character.

Mapping information is an important way to keep track and to make observations over a period of time that can allow you to make informed decisions about how that child is travelling.

Just like you keep running records or an assessment log, noting behaviours is another form of data collection that can inform objectively your sense of a child.

Before coming to the Victorian Bushfire Support and Training for Affected Schools Resources for Teachers School Recovery Training Session take some time to reflect on your class or group. The following document is designed to guide your observations and record keeping.

This should:

- a. keep your observations recorded
- b. allow you to track and observe changes in children's behaviour
- c. provide you with anecdotal evidence when speaking with parents and mental health professionals
- d. allow you to reflect objectively on children's development post fires
- e. provide a record of the time after the fires for children as they move on from the experience
- f. provide a framework for your monitoring of children.

Complete the record of event forms for your group of students. Be mindful of professional confidentiality and privacy requirements. These are records that are summarising a child's life experience; treat your observations and their stories with respect. If these are your thoughts or a hunch, record it as such. If the observations have been reported to you, note who told you and the date.



# Observation sheets

<p>Date</p> <p>Child's name</p> <p>Your name</p>	<p>Date(s)</p> <p>What do you know about their fire experience?</p>
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Date	Their story	What their parents have told you?	What others have said?	Child's worst moment(s)

<b>Pre-existing concerns or observations</b>	<b>Post-fires observations</b>		
<b>Behavioural</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Behavioural</b>
<b>Academic</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Social</b>	

<b>Family since the fires</b>	
<b>Assessment/Academic progress/ Developmental progress</b>	
<b>Behavioural record</b>	

<b>Record of discussions</b>			
<b>Person with whom interview held</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Key points</b>	<b>Action to be taken</b>



## **Adapted from**

Massachusetts Advocates for Children, Helping Traumatized Children Learn,  
Supportive School Environments for Children Traumatized by Family Violence.  
[http://www.massadvocates.org/uploads/Gf/UQ/GfUQpE26bVAtZ54Hz3hSnQ/Help\\_Tram\\_Child-Med.pdf](http://www.massadvocates.org/uploads/Gf/UQ/GfUQpE26bVAtZ54Hz3hSnQ/Help_Tram_Child-Med.pdf)

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