

10 Ways to Support Children and Youth During or After a Wildfire

Wildfire season is a common and worrisome time each year in the Western United States. For those who work with children and youth, this list provides guidance in the event of a fire or the threat of a fire in your community.

Please note, these are suggestions based on the experiences of individuals who served children and youth during and after a wildfire*. Follow [disaster preparedness guidelines](#), listen to local authorities, and use your discretion as to the safety, timeliness, and appropriateness of the suggestions before implementing them in your own role and/or community.

- 1 Communicate!** If you are a leader of an organization, stay in frequent contact with your employees to make sure they are safe and to let them know how your organization is responding. If you work directly with children and youth, contact families to make sure they are safe and to provide a list of resources and/or available resources.
- 2 Know available resources.** Find or create a list of local emergency shelters, food banks, and other resources that could be helpful to families (e.g., the 211 call service available in some communities). This list can be shared within your organization and with local families.
- 3 Connect with other services and organizations,** both within the community (e.g., schools, local Boys and Girls Club) and beyond (e.g., Red Cross). Working together will increase your capacity for serving children and youth and can help you keep your focus on the specific services you provide.
- 4 When safe to do so, invite children, youth, and/or families to come together.** For some people, seeing familiar faces and spending time with others is a welcomed and needed activity after a traumatic event, such as a wildfire. If your organization is able to, provide a space (and possibly an activity, like a hosted lunch) for your children, youth, and families to come together and connect.
- 5 Keep routines as much as you can,** but be flexible within those routines. Maintaining some of the established routines (e.g., those found in schools, after-school programs, summer camps) can provide children and youth with predictability and familiarity during this stressful time. Within those routines, stay flexible and adapt to the current needs of the group (for example, still keep a schedule during the school day, but swap out or shorten the academic content time for social and emotional learning activities).
- 6 Expect to see new, different, and sometimes unexpected behaviors.** Everybody responds to stressful and traumatic events in different ways, including children and youth. You may see a change in behavior in the days, weeks, months, or years after a wildfire. This is not uncommon and, in addition to implementing the next three suggestions, it is important to know of the mental health resources available to children and youth in your community.
- 7 Provide different outlets for students to express and process their feelings.** Create the time and space for children and youth to process their feelings and/or share their experiences through different therapeutic activities, such as art, music, mindfulness activities, and yoga. If children and youth share with you, you may feel like you want to fix their problems (which may be difficult or impossible to do). Instead, you can acknowledge their feelings, thank them for sharing, and have a list of available mental health resources to share with parents if needed.
- 8 Create frequent opportunities for play and for fun.** Children and youth need to play and have fun! Build in time for activities that provide an age-appropriate fun distraction – whether it be building with Legos, playing games, or watching movies.
- 9 Learn about trauma-informed practices.** To help meet both the short- and long-term needs of children and youth who have experienced a wildfire, learn about trauma-informed practices that can be implemented in your organization. Multiple resources are available online for free, such as the [Children's Resilience Initiative](#).
- 10 Take time to take care of yourself.** As the saying goes, "You can't fill from an empty cup." It is important to give yourself the time, space, and permission to rest and to process this experience.

*These suggestions come from a larger research study done in collaboration between Dr. Lindsey Nenadal at California State University, Chico and the Boys and Girls Clubs of the North Valley. In 2018, the Camp Fire swept through communities in Northern California, bringing massive destruction and devastation. During the fire and in the years since it happened, community members and leaders have worked hard to meet the various needs of local children and youth. They have been sharing their insights as a part of a study focused on gathering tips and strategies to share with other communities in need. The full results of this study will be ready to share at the end of 2021. If you have questions about this document or about the larger study, please contact Dr. Nenadal at lnenadal@csuchico.edu.