

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR BRETT McDERMOTT SPEAKS ABOUT THREE THINGS PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP CHILDREN WHO HAVE SURVIVED, WITNESSED OR LOST LOVED ONES THROUGH THE BUSHFIRES.

"I think there are three things parents should be doing now in the immediate aftermath.

The first thing is that in childhood, routines are very containing and give a very strong message that life is going on. So, even if you're dislocated, or lost your house, or living somewhere strange, and having to go to school at a different school, never-the-less if one can get back into family routines children find that extremely comforting. So a family routine might be getting out of bed, making lunch and heading off for school for the day. Even if it is a different or strange school, this is still very containing because all kids know that they are supposed to be sitting in class Monday to Friday at school. After school, if you have a family tradition of having dinner, then sitting down and watching the favorite family TV show together – then you should be doing that; because again that is a very normal thing to do. If you are in some dislocated place, you might need to find a family space where you can do things – just your family. These things can start to get you back into a family routine.

The second thing is that parents can start to look to themselves, to their own reactions. For instance, in the eyes of a primary aged child, some of the most important and competent people in the world are their parents: they go off every day looking contained and content and come home the same way. If parents are very distressed, we need to find some way that the distress can be somehow allowed and expressed - in a way that the children don't see that all the time. The children need, and this is not always that possible, to see positive and effective coping on behalf of their adult loved-ones.

The third thing - there's a bit of an old tale that, 'talking about things might stir them up'. There is actually no evidence that this is true. In fact mental health professionals and counselors will say, that if it's in a contained fashion then talking about things is actually very good. And, if you do talk about things then maybe you don't have to experience things like nightmares, or draw endless bushfire pictures (which is what little kids do), or endlessly talk about it (which is what some older children do). So talking about it is actually a very good thing. Now, you have to be able to talk about it – so again you have to be able to look at your own level of distress.

Some tips for talking about it include (i) sticking to the facts and (ii) be very matter of fact. For instance, we know that about 700 houses were lost – not 7,000 or 10,000. So we need to stick to the facts. We need to ground people in the fact that this disaster will end, as they do (and that we hope there will be some very positive learnings about that). Also there are a number of other good messages that can be given, such as the Australian giving response in terms of money has been fantastic, and all those volunteers have done just a magnificent job, doing the best that they could. Again, always talking about it in a measured and contained way is very helpful for children".

Another important factor for children is television. Dr McDermott, how do we best help children manage the bushfire images they may witness on TV?

"Images on television are a very interesting point and we have had some serious learnings that occurred after 9/11 and the tsunami. Some little children did not realize that in the 9/11 disaster that there were two skyscrapers that fell. They saw the images from so many angles and so often that they thought many, many, many skyscrapers fell. The same with the tsunami. Some children saw so many different images, over weeks, that little children thought that there wasn't one tsunami but there were actually hundreds of waves and people were still dying. So for the very young, that is the first few years of primary and pre-primary, we need to make sure they know that these images are historical – 'what happened' – and it's not still happening. One little trick we do with some children is to put the images on video tape and play the tape forward and backward, showing them that the images are on the tape – not actually in the real world.

Secondly, I would advise parents that of all the times when there should be active family participation in television viewing, around traumas is the time. So I would be very careful not to allow children to watch extensive news specials about the bushfires: without a parent being there; without a parent being able to sit with them, talk with them about it and; when they're stressed, either engage with that and talk about that, or say "that's enough for today". In other words either (i) terminate the experience or (ii) at least help them process the experience. But, as you can imagine for a small child whose cognitive ability is not that great, sitting through endless images that are incredibly distressing about things children care about (like other children and animals) this can be very traumatizing if not modified by parents."

Brett McDermott (B.MedSci., MBBS, FRANZCP, CertChildPsych., MD) is: Director, Mater Child and Youth Mental Health Service, South Brisbane, Queensland; Associate Professor, The University of Queensland; Director, beyond blue: the national depression initiative; and, By-Fellow, Churchill College Cambridge University UK. A list of Dr McDermott's recent publications can be found at www.kidsinmind.org.au.



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