



TIP SHEET #3

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Don't overlook the quiet child after bushfires

A study of 800 primary school children after the Ash Wednesday fires discovered most children to be quiet. They didn't appear to be unusually anxious. But, their apparent good behaviour is really more a sign of their anxiety and their unwillingness to try and challenge their environment, which is an important part of growing up.

Look for posttraumatic symptoms in children even years after their bushfire experience

After Ash Wednesday, children who were quiet at initial assessment, at two year follow-up were: more restless; unable to settle; preoccupied with the fire and what they'd been through; were seen as behaving badly on occasions; being more irritable; and difficult to manage. There's almost a slow trajectory where their difficulties become a problem with time.

Disasters particularly difficult for adolescents

For adolescents disasters are particularly difficult because as adults: we have our careers; we have our relationships; we have our families. Using the metaphor of a railway – the train gets derailed off the track, but as adults the track is there and the carriage can be put back on the track. For adolescents, they are actually building the line in front of them as they go, and the train is following, and then, the whole track gets cut off when a disaster happens.

Observe for separation anxiety

"Another thing that needs to be watched in children is the emergence of separation anxiety, because the fears of loss and the experience of loss will manifest themselves in the child's sense of independence. I've seen people now as adults who've got terrible separation anxieties, arising from what happened in the bushfires".

Professor Alexander MacFarlane

Alexander MacFarlane is Professor of Psychiatry and Head of the University of Adelaide Node of the Centre for Military and Veterans' Health. Dr MacFarlane, an international expert in the field of PTSD, is Specialist Adviser to the Australian Centre for Post Traumatic Mental Health and Chair of the Mental Health Consultative Group for the Australian Defence Force.

"When professionals see children they need to look very carefully at the parents"

Assess for posttraumatic impact on parenting

For example, some parents, after Ash Wednesday (due to their own post-traumatic anxieties), became overprotective of their children. As a consequence, children were less likely to get out into the world and explore. Conceptually children really don't understand what disasters mean and what they are. The parents have to interpret for the child. If the parent is conveying the general message that the world is a terribly dangerous place, then that developmentally impacts upon the child.