

Arson Fires: Tips for Parents on Media Coverage

While the media (television, radio, print, internet) can help inform and educate you and your children about the impact of arson fires, media coverage, unfortunately, also has the potential to upset and confuse. As parents, you can protect your children by helping them understand media coverage while limiting their exposure to distressing images. Children and families who suffer loss in the fires are the most vulnerable to negative effects from excessive media viewing.

Understanding Media Exposure

- Media coverage can produce increased fears and anxiety in children.
- The more time children spend watching coverage of the fires, the more likely they are to have negative reactions.
- Graphic images may be particularly upsetting to children.
- Very young children may not understand that the coverage and repetition of images from an earlier event is a replay. They may think the past event is happening again.
- Excessive exposure to media coverage may interfere with children's recovery.

What Parents Can Do to Help

- Limit Your Children's Exposure to Media Coverage
 - The younger the child, the less exposure s/he should have.
 - You may choose to eliminate all exposure for very young children.
 - Play DVDs or videotapes of their favorite shows or movies instead.
 - Consider family activities away from television, radio, or internet.
- Watch and Discuss with Children
 - Watch what they watch.
 - Discuss the news stories with them, asking about their thoughts and feelings about what they saw, read, or heard.
 - Ask older children and teens about what they have seen on the internet in order to get a better sense of their thoughts, fears, concerns, and point-of-view, and to address any rumors or false information.
- Seize Opportunities for Communication
 - Use television news or newspaper images as opportunities to open conversation. Be available to talk about their feelings, thoughts, and concerns, and let them know of family plans to keep them safe.

- Clear Up Any Misunderstandings
 - Don't presume you know what your children are thinking; ask if they are worried and discuss those worries with them, reassuring them as needed.
 - Ask questions to find out if your children understand the situation accurately and clarify any confusion.
- Monitor Adult Conversations
 - Watch what you and other adults say about the fires or the media coverage in front of the children; children often listen when adults are unaware and may misconstrue what they hear.
- Let Your Children Know about Community Efforts
 - Reassure your children that the firefighters and police are working very hard. This will give them a sense that adults are actively taking steps to protect them, their home, their pets, and their neighborhood.
- Educate Yourself
 - Learn about children's common reactions to fires. (see NCTSN Parent Guidelines for Helping Children Impacted by Arson & Fires).
 - Know that many children cope well, but some may have continuing difficulties. These reactions vary with age and exposure to the fires.

When Your Family is Part of the Story

- Know Your Limits
 - Decide if it is a good idea for you or your children to talk to the media. While it's natural to want to tell your story, the media may not be the best place to do so.
 - Think about what you are willing and not willing to discuss. You have the right to set limits with reporters.
 - Ask the reporter for the purpose of the story and its content.
- Protect Your Children
 - Make sure the reporter has had experience working with children in the past.
 - Talk it over with your children before they are interviewed. Assure them that there are no wrong answers.
 - Let them know they can say "no" to any question and they can stop the interview at any time.
 - Be present when your child is interviewed. Stop the interview if s/he becomes upset or distressed in any way.
 - After the interview, discuss the experience with your children. Praise them for doing a great job and listen carefully to any concerns they have.
 - Prepare your children that the final media story may be very short or may be edited in ways that do not reflect their experience.

Further information about children, families, and fires can be found at the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSN.org.