

Parent Guidelines for Helping Children Impacted by Arson & Fires

Arson fires cause emotional distress as well as physical damage. Children may fear that their homes or the homes of family members and friends will be destroyed or that they or their loved ones may be injured or killed. Their sense of security is undermined and children may grapple with anger and blame knowing that the fires were set intentionally.

For families directly affected by an arson fire, daily routines may be disrupted for weeks or months. Families may experience financial hardship as well as problems with housing and transportation, and work-related and/or school-related problems.

Children's reactions to arson fires and their aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, teachers, and other caregivers cope with what is happening. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. Below are common reactions parents may see in their children. These generally diminish with time, but knowing that these reactions are likely can help you to be prepared to help your child.

Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (including pets):
 - Children may have increased fears and worries about separation from family members, including not wanting to go to school
 - Young children may become more clingy to parents, siblings, or teachers
- Fears of new fires starting
- Distress and anxiety with reminders of the fires (e.g., burning smell, sounds of sirens, burnt buildings, news reports)
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increased activity level
 - Decreased concentration and attention
 - Increased irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Angry outbursts
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Prolonged focus on the fires (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children's "play" may focus on the fires)

- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Changes in school performance
- Regressive behaviors in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
- Increased chance of high-risk behaviors in adolescents (e.g., drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors)

How Can I Help My Child?

- *Spend time talking with your child.* This will let your child know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. Children may have questions on more than one occasion. Issues may need to be discussed more than one time. You should remain flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions and providing clarifications.
- *You should answer questions briefly and honestly, but also ask your children for their opinions and ideas about what is discussed.* For younger children, try to follow conversations about the fires with a favorite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.

Things I Can Do for Myself

- *Take care of yourself.* Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating well, sleeping well, and getting exercise.
- *Listen to each other.* Parents and other caregivers should provide support for each other during this time.
- *Put off major decisions.* Avoid making any unnecessary hasty major decisions during this stressful time.

Things I Can Do for My Child

- *Be a role model.* Children will take cues of how to handle situations from their parents. Modeling calm behaviors will be important during this time.
- *Encourage your children.* Help children help take care of themselves by encouraging them to get appropriate rest, exercise, and diet. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and physical activities.
- *Let your children know about family plans to keep them safe.* For example, let children know about the home's smoke detectors and the family evacuation plan if a smoke detector goes off. This may need to be repeated many times.

- *Maintain routines.* Even in the midst of what is happening, children feel more safe and secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, stick to everyday routines (including mealtimes, bedtime, etc.).
- *Maintain expectations.* Stick with family rules, such as rules about good behavior and respect for others.
- *Limit media exposure.* It is important for you to protect your child from overexposure to images of the fires, including those in newspapers, on the internet, or on television.
- *Be patient.* Children may need a little extra patience and attention during these times. They may need added reminders or extra help with chores or homework as they may be more distracted.
- *Give support at bedtime.* Children may become anxious when they separate from their parents, in particular at bedtime. First try to spend more time with your child at bedtime with such activities as reading a book. It's okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep with you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a set future date.
- *Monitor adult conversations.* Be aware of what is being said during adult conversations about the fires and their aftermath. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily about something they do not understand.

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