

Resources for Parents Navigating the California Wildfires

Use the resources below to guide your child through processing a natural disaster experience.

Talking To Yourself

VALIDATE YOUR EXPERIENCE:

You are going through something unimaginable; there is no “right” way to feel or think. Phrases like these can help you name, process, and validate what’s coming up for you right now.

- “This feels scary. It’s okay to feel that way.”
- “Yes, I feel powerless. And that’s really hard.”
- “I’m allowed to feel upset, I’m allowed to cry, I’m allowed to scream into a pillow, I’m allowed to feel everything I’m feeling.”
- “I wasn’t expecting this. I didn’t want this to happen.”

ACCESS YOUR STURDINESS:

This is incredibly hard, *and* you will get through it. These mantras are here for you as you process what’s happening.

- “This is a really hard moment in my life ... and I will get through it. I will.”
- “It’s okay if I don’t know how I will figure this out. That makes sense, and I don’t have to know right now. That doesn’t mean I won’t get there.”
- “A very large part of me feels shaken. That makes sense. And there is still another part of me that knows I will be able to get through it.”
- “I’ve gotten through hard things before, and I will get through this hardest thing right now.”

Talking to Your Kids

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- **Information doesn't scare kids nearly the way the lack of information does.** Right now, your kids are experiencing a ton of somatic sensations, images, worries, and freneticness. In the days, weeks, and months ahead, they'll either process what they've experienced, or those experiences and bodily memories continue to float around in the body, "unformulated." We want the former, not the latter. So, when it feels right (no rush!), talk about it. Hearing real words like "fire," "evacuated," "destroyed our home" or "power outages" will help solidify what happened. And they'll piece things together at their own pace, slowly processing it by putting it into play, drawing, etc.
- **I cannot emphasize enough: there is no rush.** In fact, time helps a lot of kids. So there's no urgency to "process," but also, there's no reason to avoid it. You know your kid best—trust your gut about when to discuss and when to lay off.

OTHER HELPFUL THOUGHTS:

- **There's no easy way to talk about such hard topics.** It's not going to be "perfect." Your kid doesn't need it to be. Give yourself permission to revisit and amend whenever you need to. You can say, "Yesterday when we were talking, I said X... I wish I had said Y instead," or "I avoided talking about something I want to talk about more directly now..."
- **Take it slowly.** You can say things like, "I want to answer that question. And I will. But first I want us both to prepare for how we will both probably have big feelings as we talk. And that's ok."
- **Speak to the violation of expectations:** "We didn't expect this to happen," "No one imagined this," and "This is such a surprise" are super helpful in validating your kid's experience.
- **Be ready to name your emotions:** "Yes, you're seeing Mommy cry. I'm sad because of the fire that destroyed our home. We are safe, and I am sad. Both are true."
- **Be ready to label what your kid overhears:** "Ah, I think you heard me talking to Grandma about how we had to leave our house and how we found out that the fire destroyed it. What's it like for you when you hear me talk about it?" It's okay if they don't have an answer...just asking sets the stage for connection!
- **Your kid may shut down when you try to "talk about it", and that's okay.** Feel free to say, "We don't have to talk about it. I'm not afraid to, and at some point, we will. And that doesn't have to be now." Or "I know. It was.. a lot. Big scary things that happen are hard to think about and talk about," and then pause there. That can be enough. You're respecting your child and showing them that you're there when they're more ready.

SCRIPTS FOR OLDER KIDS:

For everyone:

- “There’s no easy way to explain what’s happening. I am going to do my best.”
- “I know this is very sudden, scary, and unexpected. We are safe—we are all okay and will continue to be okay, AND it’s normal to feel scared, mad, and uneasy.”

If you evacuated:

- “We didn’t expect this to happen. We expected to live in our home and stay there and for our home to be safe. And then, all of a sudden, we learned that things weren’t safe. So Mom and Dad got you and your brother and left to make sure we stayed safe. And we did, but our house did not stay safe.”
- “There are so many things we will miss. There are so many things that are gone. I feel so sad about these things.”
- “Here’s something tricky that I am going to explain to you because you’re a smart kid. Mom and Dad feel sad, and Mom and Dad are still your strong parents who can take care of you. I can feel sad and be strong. I can cry and go on with my day. Both are true.”
- “There are things I know and things I don’t know. Here are some of the things I know: we are safe. We are a family. We will stay with you and your brother. We will get through this together. Here are some of the things I don’t know: how long we will stay at Uncle (name)’s house. What your schooling will be like. What, if anything, happened to our home. And for everything I don’t know, I promise you’ll be the first person I come to when I know more.”

If there is smoke and you haven’t yet evacuated:

- “Yes, you’re seeing smoke around us and a black sky. That means that there is a fire nearby, and the smoke from the fire has been blown into our neighborhood. That doesn’t mean the fire is here. I promise you that if we need to leave our home, we will. I’m paying very close attention, and I take my job of keeping us safe very seriously.”
- “We are packing bags now in case we need to leave our home. It’s my job to prepare us as best I can, and that’s what I am doing. We are safe, and if we need to leave, I will tell you. I love you. We’re going to be okay.”

When your kid is anxious, worried, hyperventilating:

- “I’m here. I’m right here with you. We are going to get through this.”
- “I know you want me to make it all better, and the truth is. I can’t. But what I can do is be here with you. What I can do is have you feel my heart and feel how it’s beating slower than yours. See? This stinks, and it’s scary, AND we are

safe. We are. You can feel my breathing. You can feel my hand against your back. We are going to get through this.”

- “It makes sense you’re anxious. That’s the right way to react to a sky full of smoke, and a large fire you can see, and so many unexpected things happening. And listen to me: We are going to be okay. We are. Our okay is different today than it was yesterday, and it’s still true. We are going to be okay. I’m right by your side.”

EXTRA IDEAS FOR TODDLERS:

- **Show the series of events with blocks.** Don’t force it. “We were here (a block or a house from blocks that represents your home), and there was a big fire nearby, so Mommy and Daddy kept the family safe by leaving (show leaving). And our home... it didn’t stay safe, so it was a really good decision to leave. Now we are here (new location) and we will all stay together and stay safe and stay as one family.”
 - “We had to leave so fast. We (name some events that happened)... and then we got to this house. And it is safe. And we can stay.”
- **Make a list of Same and Different:** “Here, you have a room with a blue rug. At our home, you had a red rug. That’s different. Here you share a room with your brother. At our home, you had your own room. That’s different. Here you have mommy and daddy kiss you before bed. Ah! That’s the same.”

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR:

- **Clinginess and Sleep Struggles:** If your kid is acting particularly clingy or struggling to sleep through the night right now, that makes sense. Right now, they feel like their world has been turned upside down, and all they know is that safety came from being right next to their parents. Proximity to you literally saved them. So allow them to “cling” or cuddle or be held when they want. Expect resistance at bedtime. Lay with your kid as they fall asleep—they may even want to sleep in bed with you. They won’t need this forever. They do need it now. Allow it.
- **Picky Eating:** Also, be on the lookout for other areas where your kids cling to control. You may notice your kid rejecting certain foods and becoming a picky eater. Why? It’s a way for them to feel in control during an out-of-control time. Similar to sleep, allow it. Expect it. If your kids want only pasta for dinner, it’s fine. They won’t always be this way.