

# How Fires Impact Kids (And How To Help)

"It's something your mother doesn't prepare you for: how to lose your history"

-Muffy Thorne, one of thousands who lost her home in the Oakland Hills fire of 1991, in an interview with the Los Angeles Times

The National Interagency Fire Center estimates nearly 7 million acres burned in fires in 2002. As a result of those fires, 2,381 structures were lost, including 835 primary residences. Even a few months ago it was easy to think that those statistics would never hit home. But now the recent fires have touched us all. Those of us who were lucky were only uncomfortable because of the poor air quality, inconvenienced by traffic detours, or assailed by the constant news coverage. Many others lost their homes, their sense of safety and for some, their loved ones.

National statistics suggest that 1 in 5 families will experience a fire in their home at some point in time. The people most likely to be injured in a fire are children and adolescents. Residential fires are the third leading cause of death for children.

Clearly children who were hit by the fires will be directly affected, but even those farther away will show symptoms of trauma. Sometimes they will be distressed by news footage or hearing adults talk about what is happening. Those who have friends who were directly impacted will be more likely to have reactions. The four biggest risk factors for children are: 1) if they were hurt or saw someone get hurt or die; 2) how much exposure they had to the trauma; 3) how close they were to the people affected and; 4) how their parents reacted.

After a fire, children are faced with the task of processing information that contradicts the world they knew as it relates to key issues like the safety of their home and parents' ability to provide care and protection. Kids have a difficult time assimilating schemata-dissonant information, or information that goes against a person's thoughts and beliefs. This difficulty can be manifest in children blaming themselves for the disaster, which is then heightened by a their natural tendency to regress to a more ego-centric worldview.

Kids who saw their contemporaries sleeping in shelters or being interviewed on television about their loss feel a heightened sense of anxiety. Those who lost homes or loved ones are most likely to have strong emotional reactions.

In studies of children who experienced the Australian bushfires, after eight months, 13% experienced dreams or nightmares and one third experienced persisting preoccupation with the fire themes 26 months after the event.

## Healing the Emotional Burns

Therapists have found that children are hesitant to discuss their feelings after a disaster because they are acutely aware of the emotional struggles their parents and other adults are experiencing. It is especially important that parents of children who have been affected by the fires to: learn how to



Dr. Jenn

—Dr. Jenn Berman

identify trauma-related behavior; encourage discussions regarding their feelings; assist them in getting back to their daily routine as soon as possible; and help them to develop new ways to manage stress. Many children, especially younger ones, are not able to verbalize their feelings and can benefit from play, which allows them to work through their unconscious fears. While some parents are frightened to see their children acting out the fires and destruction with their toys but this seemingly destructive play can expedite the healing process.

It is common for well-meaning friends to attempt to comfort fire survivors by telling them that although they lost their belongings — or even their homes — that they are lucky to have survived. While there is much truth to this

sentiment, it is important to acknowledge the emotional significance of losing personal goods that represent a lifetime of history, memories and hard work. We are very emotionally attached to the psychological support our homes provide and those who are able to take this into account are able to recover more rapidly.

## Preparing for the Future

In order to keep your family safe and lower your fire anxiety, it is crucial to discuss fire prevention and evacuation plans. It is also a good idea to teach your children general fire safety rules. Children start almost 100,000 fires annually, so it is especially important not to assume that they already know about fire safety. And last, but not least, make sure to change the batteries in your smoke detectors annually and test them monthly to make sure they are working.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. She has been on 48 Hours, NBC News, The Other Half, and many more. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at [www.DoctorJenn.com](http://www.DoctorJenn.com).

Photo: Dr. Clare Macaulay  
Seeing fires descending on their neighborhood can be very upsetting to children.



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