

How to Talk to Children About the Marshall Fire

Why Talk About It? The Power of Narration

We have two sides to our brain, the right and the left, that function very differently. The right side of our brain specializes in emotions, images and personal memories. The right side of the brain communicates by sending and receiving nonverbal communication such as eye contact, body posture and tone of voice. The left brain is logical, linear, literal and linguistical. It likes facts, words and order. Children, especially children under the age of 3, are right brain dominated. When children become upset, they become even more right-brain dominated. Narration supports the right and left side of the brain in more effective communication processes,¹ helping children understand what is happening and what will happen next, leaving them feeling safe and less anxious. More importantly, it is an opportunity for you and your child to connect.

What to include in your narrative?

1. Name the impact and what happened: “There was a very big fire. We could see and smell the smoke. There was lots of wind. We had to leave our home in a rush so that we could be safe from the fire. We were not able to take many things. We went to _____ (where did you evacuate?), so that we could be safe. Later that evening/morning we found out that our house burned, and we lost our things including our toys and clothes and all the things we love. We also lost our beloved pet. We will really miss these things.”

“There was a very big fire. We had to leave daycare in a rush so that we could be safe from the fire. We went to _____ (where did you evacuate?), so that we could be safe until we could go home. Later mom and dad came to get you from _____. Our house was safe, but many homes burned. It is really hard to see the places that burned.”

2. Name the Feeling: “You probably have big feelings about what happened. Sometimes you might feel sad. Other times you might feel mad. You still might feel scared and nervous. All those feelings are normal and okay.”
3. Provide Reassurance of Safety: “We are safe now.” “We can get new things and a new place to live, we can’t get another you.”
4. Name what is consistent: “Even though we are not at our home, mom and dad are still here.” “We will still play together and eat together.” “We still have our friends and family.”
5. Offer support and skills: “If you become upset, you can talk to me, you can take a deep breath and say to yourself, ‘I am safe’.”

¹ Siegel, D. J. & Bryson, T.A. (2012). *The whole-brain child*. New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks

How to use Narration

Some children may need to hear the story multiple times. They may even need to hear it multiple times a day! It may be helpful to share the narrative in the evening and in the morning. As you tell the narrative make sure that you pause to ask and answer questions. Be as present as you can. If the child does not want to talk about, that's okay. You can revisit it later.

Tips for Talking About Fires

1. It is okay to have your own feelings. Name those feelings, "Mom is really sad too." "Dad really misses his house too."
2. Increase how and when you are available to your child, physically and emotionally.
3. Be open to children's fears and worries.
4. Validate emotions and avoid jumping to problem solving.
5. Make space to hold and hug your child.
6. Try to keep as much of your routine as possible for example, such as keeping the same bedtime and mealtime rituals.
7. Limit news exposure regarding fire.²

Be Prepared for challenges

Know that with any change or transition there will be ups and downs. It is typical that children will experience challenging behaviors while adjusting. This can be frustrating for both children and adults. It is important to name the feelings that your child is experiencing. It can be helpful to say, "I know you are angry because of the fire, and we are going to get through this". Or "I know you are sad because you miss your room with all your toys."

Be their safe place

"The brain functions optimally when it feels both safe and connected. Children need to know that life is going to be different and that you will find a new normal together. Make safety and connection your top priority, especially in the first days; you can always add academics, chores and such later. Notice whatever your child is doing and join in their play. Go outside and play. Get down on the floor and play. Wrestle. Giggle. Snuggle. Hug, high five and enjoy. Connection isn't just good for your mood; it builds neural connections in your child's brain and increases cooperation."³

Call our Warm Line at (303)245-4418 for additional support.

² Children's Hospital, "Tips for Talking to Kids About Wildfires" <https://www.childrenscolorado.org/conditions-and-advice/parenting/parenting-articles/talking-to-kids-about-wildfires/>

³ Bailey, B. (2020). "COVID-19: Five helpful responses for families." *Conscious Discipline*. https://consciousdiscipline.com/covid-19-five-helpful-responses-for-families/?mc_cid=89fc7c1740&mc_eid=7b2ae2409a

