

Helping young children cope with trauma and stress in the wake of wildfires

Natural disasters can have short- and long-term effects on babies' and toddlers' physical and mental health.

Because babies and toddlers are entirely dependent on their caregivers, their well-being is inextricably tied to those who take care of them. Caring, attentive and supportive adults can help alleviate the traumatizing toll that experiencing a natural disaster can have on the child's developing brain.

- Wildfire smoke affects about 7.4 million children annually in the U.S.
- Children take cues from adults to determine if they're safe; uncertainty can cause emotional distress.
- Children dealing with stress and trauma associated with natural disasters may show changes in their behaviors or skills, disrupting routine and affecting developmental milestones.
- Air pollution caused by wildfires can stunt lung development and increase the risk of developing respiratory illnesses and other health conditions.

Babies and toddlers need support to weather natural disasters

The science is clear: the first three years of life are a time of unique opportunity and vulnerability in a child's life when the brain is growing more quickly than at any other time. The rapid development during this period means that early experiences have a dramatic and enduring impact on the child.

- Routines help young children feel secure, even in times of change and stress. Keeping routines, moderating tone and sharing information so children know what's coming next can help them feel safer and more secure.
- Parents and caregivers are central to promoting resiliency and healthy development; chronic stress and adversity increase the risk of physical and mental health disorders.
- Attentive caregivers can provide a cushion against stresses, challenges and adversity. When caregivers alleviate trauma, this creates a buffering effect that helps to mitigate the trauma's effect.

Children are at greater risk of the health impacts of wildfire smoke

- Young children are growing and developing, and they take in more air relative to their size.
- Wildfire smoke can cause symptoms such as chest pain and tightness, trouble breathing, coughing and dizziness.
- Long-lasting physical effects can include higher risk for respiratory issues like asthma and bronchitis.

Grief, stress and anxiety can cause traumatizing emotional distress for babies - but caring adults can help alleviate the impact

- The most important psychological needs are air, food, water, sleep and shelter. Lacking any of these can create chronic, unrelenting stress for parents and caregivers, which can make children feel less safe and secure.
- Research shows that stress from extended trauma can harm a child's developing brain, potentially leading to life-long difficulties in overall development. Caring, attentive and supportive adults can help alleviate the traumatizing toll.
- More so than at any other age, babies' and toddlers' interactions with the adults around them and the type of activities and resources they engage in continually shape their brains. Babies rely on their caregivers not only for their basic physical needs but also for their social and connection needs.
- Natural disasters can have broad and deep effects on mental health because of the amplifying nature of news and social media. Layers of traumatic events create shared anxiety and stress at a societal level, which children sense from the adults around them.
- In addition to being attentive and providing consistent interactions that can buffer against the impact of trauma, it's critical that caregivers are aware of their own mental health and well-being. They need the capacity to be attuned, consistently meet their child's needs and nurture healthy attachment.

Additional Resources

- [Coping After a Natural Disaster](#)
- [Coping with Trauma and Stress in the Face of Wildfire: Tips for Early Childhood Professionals](#)
- [Trinka and Sam: The Big Fire - A free disaster resource developed jointly with the National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Help Kids Cope](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control: Wildfires and Your Safety](#)
- [Helping Children and Families Cope After a Disaster](#)

ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all babies and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, the organization has advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals and policymakers.

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