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Easing children's fears as fires rage

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Once again our communities are confronted with devastating wildfires and the havoc they wreak on adults and children alike. Many of us in our community are facing great personal peril, and we all share a deep concern for those we know who are directly affected.

Words are inadequate to express our profound gratitude for our heroic, tireless firefighters, and the myriad community organizations that have also stepped up to help, including the sheriff's office, local police departments, public health workers, animal shelters and rescue workers, and all our neighbors near and far, affected by this emergency.

Among those working hard in these efforts are our school district leaders, who collaborate minute by minute to assess the impacts of the fire before deciding whether to cancel school, always mindful of the impacts on families and communities. No decision is made in a vacuum, and student safety must always be the factor that weighs most heavily. None of these decisions are simple.

It is important to recognize that the turmoil surrounding a crisis of this magnitude can affect children significantly. The overwhelming confusion of school closures, worried conversations, frightening images on the news, and people everywhere wearing masks can all take a toll. Young children often don't understand the depth and breadth of the crisis at hand, or the efforts underway to keep them safe. They can easily become frightened and stressed. Some might not want their parents to leave their side. Others may experience headaches or stomachaches, while some may express their fright in less obvious ways.

To help offset these fears, it is important to remember that our children take their cues from us. They are watching us — noticing our facial expressions, our tone of voice, and our anxious reactions to the constant alerts on our cell phones. As often as possible, it is important to take a moment to relax our own bodies and talk with our children in calm voices. This will help them feel more relaxed, safe, and connected.

If your child is old enough, you may want to share more information, explaining where the fire is, why the sun looks so strange, why there is ash falling from the sky, and how many brave people are protecting our community. By making sure that the fire does not become a

“secret” talked about only in hushed voices, you help children realize it is ok to share their fears, and it gives you the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings they may have about risk and danger.

Although life right now may seem chaotic with evacuations, school closures, interruption of daily routines, and the cancellation of holiday parades and performances, doing your best to let your child know what is coming next can be comforting. Knowing what to expect can help children feel more secure, both physically and emotionally.

Most importantly, remember that just like adults in times of crisis, our children may need more time to process information and more time to transition from one step to the next. They may need more comfort, more affirmations, and support. The best thing children can do is express their emotions, so it is important to create lots of opportunities for that to happen throughout the day.

Throughout this difficult situation, we remain enormously grateful for the firefighters, first responders, community members, businesses and neighbors who are working so hard, often under impossible conditions, to secure our safety and to extend a helping hand to each and every one of us. On behalf of the families and children who benefit from these critical efforts, we thank you all.

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