

# The Impact of Wildfires on Children

Beginning in March 2023, and with increased intensity starting in June, Canada has been affected by an ongoing, record-setting series of wildfires. All 13 provinces and territories have been affected, with large fires in Alberta, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec. Much of the northern hemisphere has experienced the worst summer on record related to wildfires including Greece, Spain and Hawaii.



We have heard daily news of families being displaced and urgently required to move from their homes as the fires relentlessly grew and moved in unpredictable ways. Everything was at risk and the very things that offered a feeling of safety and security for families were removed. What can we predict for the children impacted by these natural disasters? What can we predict for children who heard about the fires and whose play was impacted by smoke and poor air quality? What can we predict for children who were exposed to the stories of climate change and media, but who were not directly impacted by the wildfires?

## For Children:

- Increased feelings of insecurity
- Preoccupation with safety
- Separation Anxiety
- Generalized Anxiety
- Themes of loss and fear and confusion
- Emotion dysregulation

## For Parents:

- No matter where you are, re-establish daily routines for school, chores, play, meals and rest
- Limit how much you talk about the fires and potential loss, focus on here and now
- Limit children's exposure to media as it increases fear, confusion and anxiety
- Answer your children's questions in age appropriate ways
- When you don't know what will happen, don't make up a "happily ever after answer". Let your child know how people re-build and overcome disasters.
- Use empowerment stories and storybooks
- Give children important tasks to do
- Keep children active physically
- Engage children in play – encourage free play as this is how children process daily stressors

## For Play Therapists:

- Expect repetitive play scenarios
- Consider working between QIII Non-directive and QIV Co-facilitation (child led and joining in the play)
- Themes may be literal and linked to fire or something else non-literal such as fear of the dark
- Child's drive will likely be towards mastery and empowerment – you may see victim/offender play scenarios
- For highly sensitive children you may observe passivity or immobilization
- Movement play, sensory play, projective play and role play are all important considerations to assist children to engage and re-organize intrusive experiences
- Corrective messaging will be needed throughout the play therapy process
- Consult with parents throughout the process and provide activities for parents to engage in at home with their children
- Natural disaster events affect the neuroception of safety. Working with the ventral vagal system will be important – keep kids and parents feeling connected!
- Look for signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

### **Re-enactment Materials for the Playroom:**

- Emergency vehicles and a selection of other vehicles
  - sirens
- Emergency workers
- Buckets for water play
- Musical instruments to create sound
- Doll houses – more than one
- Baskets of trees/shrubs
- Nature basket- collect materials from nature
- Sensory baskets – including  
aroma therapy items and scents for grounding