



# Talking with your children about the Maui wildfires

Many people were affected by the tragic loss of life and property caused by the wildfires on Maui. Children and adolescents may be especially impacted by these events. They often have difficult and stressful feelings during times of change and disruption. It's important for parents to be ready to help if they see signs of stress. This is true whether a child has been directly affected by the fires, or has seen them on television or heard people talk about them.

## How children respond to trauma

Children often show signs of stress after experiencing or hearing about a traumatic event. Signs may include sadness, tantrums, aggressive behavior, or behavior typical of when they were younger. Children may want to stay home from school or away from friends. Common reactions for children and teens can also include heightened awareness of any changes in the environment around them. This could involve a fear of storms,

wind, and sudden loud noises; difficulty being separated from parents or pets; and being quiet and withdrawn or not wanting to talk about the tragedy.

Other normal – and usually temporary – responses include nightmares or being afraid to go to sleep or to sleep alone. Children may also show stress through bodily discomfort, such as headaches, stomachaches,

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constipation, or diarrhea. And there may be changes in how much children eat, how hungry they are, and how much they sleep.

## Healing takes time

Healing takes time for most children. Keep in mind that you don't have to "fix" how your child feels. Try to help your child understand and cope with what happened. Some children may need professional help. If signs of stress don't go away after a few weeks – or if they get worse – consider talking to a mental health professional who's trained to work with children. With the right help and support, over time your child will become more comfortable and secure.

## How children may respond based on age

### Through 2 years old

Infants may react to high stress and trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled. It may be difficult for them to be separated from their parents or pets.

#### How can you help?

- Practice self-care. The biggest influence on children of this age is seeing how their parents cope and take care of themselves.

### Preschoolers (3 to 5 years)

Traumatic events can make preschool-aged children frightened, confused, and insecure. They may have many questions and limited

understanding of what's happened. And they may wonder why things can't go back to the way they were.

#### How can you help?

- Stick to regular family routines.
- Make an extra effort to give comfort and support.
- Keep close to children whenever possible.
- Let your child sleep in your room for a limited time.
- Encourage your child to express feelings through play, drawing, puppet shows, and storytelling.
- Make a safety plan.

## Elementary school children (6 to 8 years)

School-aged children are often worried about their and their family's safety, including any family pets. If family members or pets are missing, they may feel extra emotional distress, fear, and anxiety. It may also be difficult for them to be separated from their parents or pets.

These children may be afraid of more fires. And they may relive or reenact events they experienced or saw on television. They may also be afraid that something will happen to them or their family and friends. Children in this age group sometimes ask questions that may not have clear answers. For example, they may want very black-and-white answers about where lost loved ones or possessions have gone.

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## How can you help?

- Avoid or limit media exposure.
- Give children extra attention.
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out.
- Listen to your child when they want to talk about what happened.
- Encourage your child to express feelings through talk and play.
- Create activities or small tasks that are structured, but not too demanding.
- Explain how people helped each other during the fires.

## Preadolescents and adolescents

**Preteens (9 to 11 years):** Preteens may have heightened emotions. That's because they understand the reality of the situation but may not be able to imagine things getting better.

**Teens (12 to 17 years):** Teens may feel heightened anxiety, grief, despair, and disillusionment. They may also express their fear and sadness through anger and shorter tempers. Without clear guidance and a path forward, they may become more withdrawn and sadder.

## How can you help?

- Avoid or limit media exposure.
- Give children extra attention.
- Be there to listen to your child. But don't force them to talk about their thoughts or feelings.

- Encourage your child to share what they and other children are talking about.
- Encourage your child to take part in physical activities.
- Support the return to regular activities when possible.

## What parents can do

**Be honest with your children.** Children cope better if parents, teachers, and other adults answer their questions as honestly as possible, support them, and help them work through their experiences. Be mindful of age appropriateness. Young children haven't developed their own coping skills. They depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times.

- **Encourage questions:** Encourage children to ask questions about what happened. Try to answer their questions honestly. If you don't have all the answers, it's OK to admit that. Promise to give more information when you can.
- **Normalize emotions:** Let children know it's OK to feel scared, sad, angry, or confused. Explain that these feelings are natural in a challenging situation.
- **Maintain routines:** If possible, create daily routines to make things stable and predictable for children. Routines can help them feel more secure during times of uncertainty.

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- **Practice self-care with your child:** Engage in self-care for both you and your child. Do activities that reduce stress and anxiety. Examples include deep breathing, exercise, or spending time with loved ones.
- **Be aware of timelines:** Children respond to trauma in different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event. Others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, then begin to show signs of stress or trauma later. Know the signs of stress that are common at different ages. This will help you recognize problems and respond appropriately.
- **Limit news watching:** Try not to watch too much news. Younger children won't be able to verbally express discomfort. But they may show it by looking away or squirming when they see traumatic images. A good response would be: "That looks scary. I'm glad we're safe where we are right now." Be ready to honestly answer any questions or respond to any comments your child has. But don't give them more information than they're asking for.
- **Limit adult conversations about what happened:** An important way for most adults to deal with a traumatic event is to talk about it with family or friends. But some conversation is inappropriate for younger children. Watch what you say in front of children. Never assume they're not listening or don't understand what

you're saying. Children can take bits and pieces of conversations and create misunderstandings that often are scarier than the reality.

- **Watch for marked stress:** Some children may show a great deal of anxiety, especially if they have a family member who lives close to where a tragedy or disaster happened. Their concern may show up in physical and emotional symptoms like bed wetting, sleep problems, changes in eating habits, fear of being alone, or even regressive behavior. Regressive behavior is when a child starts to act like they're younger than they are. For example, a toddler who's potty trained may start having bathroom accidents. If behavior like this lasts more than a few weeks, your child may need professional help. Talk to your pediatrician for recommendations on how to manage the situation.

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## Resources and support

### Kaiser Permanente mental health and addiction support

Call us Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

- Maui and other Neighbor Islands:  
**1-888-945-7600**
- Oahu: **808-432-7600**

### For after-hours care, call the Crisis Line of Hawaii:

- Maui and other Neighbor Islands:  
**1-800-753-6879**
- Oahu: **808-832-3100**

### For 24/7 advice, call:

- **1-833-833-3333 (TTY 711)**

### Hawaii CARES 988

Hawaii CARES 988 is a 24/7, free support service for help with crisis, mental health, and substance abuse. If you or a loved one needs mental health or addiction crisis support, you can call or text **988** (TTY **711**). You can also chat with a trained crisis counselor at the [National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) for free, confidential support. The lifeline is provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.