



## Preparing Children after a Wildfire Damages Your Community

After a wildfire, parents question whether they should bring their children back to the impacted area, especially when they believe their home was destroyed. Although there is not a correct way for handling this situation, here is guidance to help you make your decision. Remember, you know your children best and how they cope in difficult situations. For most families, it may be best for children not to return and see their damaged home and neighborhood. Others may feel that this will help them heal. You may create different plans for each of your children.

- When it's safe to go back to your neighborhood, return for the first visit without your children to assess the conditions of your home and neighborhood. You could say: "We are going back to the house to see what has happened. I want you stay here while we check things out first. We need to make sure it's a good idea and safe for us all to return. We will be careful while we are there." Specify the timeframe when you are going to return. If you are going to be late or not be available by phone, call them as soon as possible to reduce their concerns.
- Before going into any burned areas, be informed about how to protect yourself and your family from health impacts. Check out [CDC guidance](#) or [Ready for Wildfire](#) for specifics.

Tell your children the truth about the damages. Younger children you may have to have several short conversations as they might not be able to hear all the information at once. Allow them to express their thoughts and emotions and ask questions but don't force them to talk. They need to be able to grieve for the things they lost.

- If you decide your children should not visit the area, let them know and why.
- If you decide to all go back together, describe what they may see in the damaged areas before you head out. Acknowledge that it may make them sad, angry, or scared. Tell them you're there for them. Explain that they may see or smell things that seem scary (i.e. smell of smoke, burned out structures), but that it is safe to return to.

To help children understand what to expect, consider taking pictures or videos of the area and your property when you go back to assess if it is safe for everyone. Some children may want to see what has happened without wanting to return. Others may want to visit and the images can help them to prepare for what to expect. In any case, visual material can help children understand the situation from a safe distance.

It is important to explore what your children expects to understand what your children expects when they return to their home. Ask what they hope to see or find and how they think they might feel when they see the damage. Many times children expect to find some of their missing belongings—if this is not possible, let them know beforehand and clear up any confusion they may have. Check in again to see if they still wish to visit.

- Be extra patient with your children. When returning to the house, continue to listen to what they need. If a child decides not to leave the car, that is ok. If they do want to take a closer look, you can encourage them to think about the positive memories they have alongside the sadness or loss to remind them that much of what makes a home is the people and experiences you had there and that they will always have those memories.
- Address any concerns they have about the safety of loved ones, pets, and livestock. Tell children honestly if a loved one or pet has died or is missing. Answer questions appropriately according to age and development, cause appropriately didn't say much. It is ok to say you don't know the answer. Know that it comforts children when parents keep communication open.

For more suggestions on how to support your children after a wildfire, download the [Help Kids Cope App](#) or review additional [NCTSN wildfire resources](#).

**SUGGESTED CITATION:** Brymer, M., Schreiber, M., Ross, L. (2020). *Preparing children after a wildfire damages your community*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.