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Help available for young bushfire victims

The emotional impact of last week's tragic bushfires is significant, with Kids Helpline seeing a 68 per cent increase in calls from children and young people from affected areas.

Kids Helpline General Manager Wendy Protheroe said it is crucial to be able to access counselling and support during this time of devastating grief and loss, and the national counselling service has been prioritising calls from regional Victoria.

"These children and young people have experienced unprecedented loss in their lives – the tragic loss of family, friends and loved ones, homes and prized possessions," she said.

"Some have also experienced physical injuries, others are struggling with a sense of guilt that they survived or their homes came through the fire unscathed while those around them were destroyed.

"These children and young people have experienced events that most adults cannot conceive of and their lives will never be the same. Many will be experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms both now and for months to come, and will need to access continued support."

Kids Helpline is available 24 hours a day, with trained and experienced counsellors ready to help the young begin to come to terms with the tragedy.

"These children will need extensive support, often more than loving family and friends can provide," Ms Protheroe said.

"They may experience anger, fear, anxiety, overwhelming grief and sadness or even say they are numb and can't feel anything.

"Face-to-face counselling will be important for many, but emotions don't know the boundaries of office hours. Thankfully, Kids Helpline can be there anytime a young person needs to talk."

Kids Helpline's suggestions for parents to support their children during this time include:

1. Recognise and accept their feelings – they can be experiencing many feelings that may even change from hour to hour, help them understand it is OK to feel this way.
2. Encourage them to express their feelings – let them cry, talk about their loss and even laugh. Writing a letter or journal, painting or other creative outlets can also help.
3. Encourage them to talk with someone they can trust - a parent, friend or counsellor can help them express their hurt, fear and grief.
4. Hold or take part in ceremonies – funerals, memorials and other rituals and ceremonies can help young people share their grief and being to accept the end to part of their life.
5. Help them recognise that the feelings will eventually pass.

"Healing will take time," Ms Protheroe said. "Above all parents need to be patient and recognise that everyone in the family may be grieving and also need help and support."

Kids Helpline, Australia's only national children's counselling service, provides 24 hour counselling services to young people aged 5 to 25 years – free call 1800 55 1800 or online at www.kidshelp.com.au.

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