

When talking to kids about fires, keep it simple

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By

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The Central Texas wildfires have been inescapable — the acrid smell of smoke, the dirty haze on the skyline, the images of flames and evacuating families, and tales of friends and family who have evacuated or lost their homes.

How do you talk to young children about an ongoing disaster like this? Experts say to keep it simple and don't make promises you can't keep.

"The best thing in these types of situations, especially with younger kids, is to ask them if they have any questions," said Seanna Crosbie, director of program services for the Austin Guidance Center. "A lot of times they have very specific questions that can be very simple to answer and allay most of their concerns. Otherwise you might wind up giving them more information than they need and raise their anxiety level."

Be watchful for any changes in behavior that might signify anxiety: changes in sleep or eating patterns, fears about being separated or a fixation on safety concerns. Reassure them that they are OK. But if you have to evacuate, "don't promise them that their house or their room will be fine. Do tell them that we are leaving in order to be safe and keeping everyone safe is the most important thing," she said.

Austin family and child therapist Katie Malinski said that when it comes to media consumption, parents are the best judge of how much is too much.

"If possible, it is good to limit media exposure, especially for smaller kids who may not be able to process large amounts of information," Malinski said.

If there is a risk that your home might be near a wildfire, share with kids concrete things the family can do to be safe.

"Say, 'The city keeps a list of numbers and will call if the fire comes near,' or talk about the family's emergency plan. Some kids like to put their feelings into action. If they want to pack a bag, let them," Malinski said.

Older children might want to help others who have been affected, Malinski and Crosbie agree. They can't fight fires, but they can bake cookies or donate clothes and toys to those who have lost their homes.

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