The ongoing bushfire and smoke emergency:

Tips to reduce children and young people mental health concerns

As students return to school and a shocking bushfire season continues, the Public Health Association of Australian (PHAA) has issued advice to families and schools about how to support the mental health of children and young people.

“It is important to consider the heightened vulnerability of children and young people, especially as they generally don’t have the same level of agency or opportunity as other members in the community,” said Ruth Wallace, co-convenor of PHAA’s Child and Youth Special Interest Group.

“Being the passive recipients of these decisions limits their sense of agency, often resulting in feelings of helplessness and fear.”

“The effects of the bushfires on the physical health of children can range from mild irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, to breathing difficulties and asthma attacks from smoke inhalation.”

“The trauma associated with dislocation, loss of property, death in the community and exposure to upsetting content in the media can be highly distressing for children and youth. This includes all children across Australia, directly and indirectly affected by the bushfires.”

“It is important adults empower children to develop the skills in which they can advocate for themselves and their peers so that feel their voice is heard and their actions are valued,” said Dr Wallace.

Here are PHAA’s top five ways to empower children and young people at this time:

1. Give children and young people a voice – encourage them to make decisions that directly relate to them. For example, choosing a charity to make a donation to.

2. Active listening – hear what children and young people have to say and give them time to express their thoughts and feelings. For example, find some down time in their day to have a conversation about what’s happening, whilst making sure you show you are fully engaged in what they are sharing.

3. Encourage children and young people to pursue their interests – support them to follow avenues of action they are particularly passionate about. For example, if your child is very interested in supporting people affected by the bushfires, suggests ways they could help and provide them the tools to carry these out. This may involve helping them use a computer to donate money, collecting items that could be donated, or setting up a fundraiser at their school.

4. Encourage perseverance, resilience and integrity – it’s important to talk about these concepts to promote feelings of hope and strength. For example, share positive stories of communities that have been rebuilt after previous disasters or give examples of what is being done to help people currently affected by the bushfires.
5. Encourage a sense of helpfulness – encouraging acts of kindness and small deeds can give children and young people the opportunity to contribute within their capacity and make them feel valued. For example, you could suggest they call a friend who may be affected by the fires and ask how they are going. Alternatively, other acts of kindness that are not related to the bushfires.

“Schools are having to be proactive about supporting students as they return to school. Teachers are encouraged to also take up the tips,” said Dr Wallace.

Further, there are helpful resources available online. Here are a few links to resources that focus on children and young people during this national bushfire crisis:

- **Red Cross provides information** for communities, parents and caregivers about common reactions across different age groups following a distressing event, and strategies to support children and young people.

- **UNICEF** offers information on how to help children cope in Australia’s bushfire emergency.
• The Australia National University (ANU) has collected a large number of expert bushfire resources and research that help individuals working with communities affected by the bushfires, including teachers, schools, counsellors and parents.

The Public Health Association is the peak body for advancing public health in Australia. ENDS

For further information/comment:
Ruth Wallace, co-convenor of PHAA’s Child and Youth Special Interest Group: 0408 097190
ruth.wallace@ecu.edu.au
Toni Hassan (PHAA Media contact): 0426 207 726 thassan@phaa.net.au