

Helping Children Cope After the Maui Wildfires

Release Date: November 3, 2023

HONOLULU – Children who lived through Maui’s wildfires may feel trauma for years. Behavioral experts say families can take steps to help children process their emotions and anxieties to help them heal.

The wildfires that destroyed much of [Lahaina](#) left children with lasting trauma. Even after schools reopened, the stressors continued.

Here are the children’s own words, captured in news reports: “I want everything to be the same in Lahaina ... I miss my friends.” Another said, “I don’t know where we go after this.”

Because of the risk of lingering feelings of sadness and loss, the Hawaiʻi State Department of Health’s Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division advises parents to avoid bringing children back to their burned homesite when they first visit the damaged area.

The state’s experts say parents re-entering the burn zone need their own chance to grieve without further upsetting the children. By going alone, parents have more time to figure out the best way to explain to the children what happened.

Children look to their caregivers for support and to learn how to cope with adversity and trauma. Behavioral experts advise parents and caregivers to listen to the children, understand what they’re feeling and reassure them that their feelings of being scared make sense.

Behavioral experts note that parents and caregivers can help:

- Create a stable environment by establishing a regular routine
- Find ways to be present, connect, spend time together and have fun
- Remind children of ways they are staying safe
- Focus on the positive; identify small successes or strengths



FEMA

Page 1 of 3

- Ask children how they are doing and listen to their answers; let them talk when they feel worried but never force them to talk
- Allow and encourage children to ask questions; explain what happened honestly and clearly
- Reduce exposure to media images and stories about the wildfires
- Practice calming exercises together such as breathing or relaxation exercises.

How to Tell When a Child May Need Help Coping

Experts say that parents should observe their children for signs that they feel troubled after the wildfires. Some signs, such as nightmares, may be similar to those experienced by adults, but with an important difference: Children often lack the vocabulary to explain what is upsetting them.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, these normal signs of trauma could indicate a need for additional support if they last more than several months, worsen, or are severely impacting daily life:

- Feelings of anxiety, fear and worry about safety of self and others, including pets
- Increased fears and worries about separation from family members. Young children may become more clingy to parents, siblings, or teachers
- Changes in behavior such as increased activity level, decreased concentration and attention
- Increased physical complaints or irritability
- Prolonged focus on the wildfires
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Changes in school performance.

Help is Available

Free and confidential crisis counseling is available for your family through **Hawaiʻi Cares**, which you can reach at **800-753-6879** or **808-832-3100**. You may also call or text **Hawaiʻi Cares** at **988**.



You can also find help from experts at Hawai'i's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division. For consultations, families can visit the Lahaina Comprehensive Health Center, 1000 Kalia Place (just below Lahaina Civic Center). It's open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. seven days a week. You may also call **808-495-5113**.

Other Resources

- Visit [Re-Entry- Advice for Families with Keiki \(hawaii.gov\)](https://hawaii.gov/re-entry-advice-for-families-with-keiki/) for information on helping children cope in the aftermath of the Maui wildfires.
- **The American Red Cross** uses professional therapists to meet all survivors' emotional needs in the aftermath of a disaster. Call **800-733-2767** (or **800-Red-Cross**) to be connected to someone in your area.
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network** has several free resources on helping children cope after a devastating wildfire. Visit <https://www.nctsn.org>.

For the latest information on the Maui wildfire recovery efforts, visit mauicounty.gov, mauirecovers.org and fema.gov/disaster/4724. Follow FEMA on social media: [@FEMARegion9](https://twitter.com/FEMARegion9) and facebook.com/fema.



FEMA