

Dear Parents and Carers-

We hope that you and your loved ones have been safe during these unprecedented fires. We want to be sure that you know that The Help Group is here to support you in any way that we can. We have gathered some information we want to share, to help you provide support for your neurodivergent child during catastrophes like wildfires. Times like this can be especially challenging due to heightened sensory sensitivities, difficulty with change, and increased anxiety. However, parents can take several steps to ensure their children's safety, comfort, and emotional well-being:

## 1. Preparation and Routine

- **Create a Plan:** Neurodivergent children often thrive on routine and structure. Work with them to create a clear emergency plan with visual aids if necessary. Include specific steps to follow if evacuation is needed. You can develop a visual plan for your children to follow to help reduce the need to process a lot of language during such a stressful time.
- **Practice Emergency Drills:** Rehearse evacuation plans regularly, focusing on the steps involved, such as packing important items, leaving the house, and going to a safe location.
- **Prepare Sensory Tools:** Ensure that your child has access to sensory tools that help them self-regulate, such as noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, weighted blankets, or calming apps.

## 2. Addressing Sensory Needs

- **Noise Sensitivity:** Wildfires may bring loud sirens, helicopters, or emergency broadcasts. Noise-canceling headphones or earplugs can help manage this sensory overload.
- **Air Quality:** Smoke from fires can be especially distressing for children with respiratory issues or those sensitive to air quality. A good-quality air purifier or N95 masks may help, and parents should monitor indoor air quality to keep the environment as safe as possible.
- **Tactile Sensitivity:** Ensure that your child has access to comforting sensory items (e.g., favorite soft clothing, textured objects) during evacuations or shelter stays.

## 3. Emotional Support

- **Communication:** Talk to your child about the situation using age-appropriate language. Visual supports (e.g., pictures, charts) can help them understand what's happening. Validate their feelings and reassure them about their safety.
- **Limit Exposure to News:** While staying informed is important, constant exposure to traumatic news coverage can be overwhelming. Protect your child from graphic images and disturbing content. Provide information in a calm and controlled way.

- **Predictability:** As much as possible, keep daily routines the same. Provide frequent updates about where you are and what is happening, even if there are few changes. Keeping consistent sleep and meal schedules helps children feel safer.

#### 4. Create a Safe and Familiar Space

- **Familiar Items:** Bring along comforting items (blankets, favorite toys, sensory objects) to help your child feel more secure during evacuation or at a shelter.
- **Calming Space:** Set up a quiet, calming area in a shelter or at home if evacuation isn't necessary. This space can include soft lighting, noise-canceling headphones, familiar scents, and favorite calming activities (e.g., drawing, listening to calming music).

#### 5. Social Support and Sensitivity

- **Stay Connected:** Children with neurodivergent conditions often need support from a trusted adult. Make sure there's someone they feel comfortable with—be it a parent, therapist, or trusted family member—who can be available for reassurance during stressful times. School-based, outpatient and Lumina therapist are available to you during this time.
- **Behavioral Strategies:** Use coping strategies your child is familiar with, whether that's breathing exercises, specific calming routines, or visual schedules. Focus on what helps them regain a sense of control.

#### 6. Medical and Therapeutic Support

- **Medication/Medical Needs:** If your child is on medications or has specific medical needs, ensure you have enough supplies for the evacuation or shelter period. Include prescriptions, medical records, and a first aid kit.
- **Therapists or Specialists:** If your child works with a therapist or specialist (e.g., an occupational therapist, behavioral therapist), ask if there are additional coping strategies that can be incorporated into their emergency plan. Virtual sessions may be an option if in-person visits are disrupted.

#### 7. Post-Catastrophe Care

- **Re-establish Routine:** Once the immediate danger has passed, it's important to return to normal routines as quickly as possible. Structure and predictability will help your child adjust.
- **Allow Time for Processing:** After the event, children may need time to process their emotions. Be patient and offer opportunities for them to express their feelings through conversation, art, or other forms of self-expression.

- **Monitor for Changes:** After a catastrophe, children may experience an increase in anxiety, behavioral regression, or changes in sensory sensitivities. Keep an eye on any changes and seek professional support if needed.

## 8. Community Resources

- **Support Groups:** Look for local or online support groups for families with neurodivergent children. These communities can offer advice, resources, and emotional support during difficult times. The Help Group's Parent Support Group is open and ready to help. You can contact them at [clechner@thehelpgroup.org](mailto:clechner@thehelpgroup.org) to receive the link to join sessions.
- **Crisis Services:** Many communities have services dedicated to supporting families in crisis, including counseling and resource distribution. Research and connect with any available resources before an emergency happens.

## 9. Stay Calm and Lead by Example

- **Model Calmness:** Children often take cues from their caregivers. If you remain calm and collected, it can help your child feel more secure in the midst of chaos.
- **Self-care for Parents:** Parents need to take care of themselves to best support their children. This may include seeking respite, leaning on your support network, and ensuring that you're getting enough rest.

By considering the unique sensory, emotional, and behavioral needs of neurodivergent children, parents can create a proactive and supportive environment to help them navigate the stress of catastrophes like wildfires. Remember that The Help Group is here to help and you should feel free to reach out to us for any support needs you have.