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Helping Children with ASD Adjust to the Major Fires

Dear Parents:

This is a stressful time for all of us, includes our children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), with the fires raging across Southern California. No matter if children with ASD understand or are aware of what is happening around us, they sense that the adults around them are anxious, fearful and overwhelmed. Additionally, their anxiety increases as their routines, schedules and living situation are disrupted during the fires (e.g., schools are closed, other family members might be staying in your home, and your family might be evacuated from your home). We would like to offer some suggestions for you to help your child to adjust to the changes and the stressors related to the Major Fires.

Tips and Suggestions for All Children with ASD:

1. Establish structured activities throughout the day to keep the children occupied.
2. Establish routines wherever you and the children are. Use picture and written cues to help them comprehend and adjust to the new routines.
3. Provide visual (i.e., written and picture) cues to help the child fully understand the new structure, routine and what is happening around them.
4. Create as much normalcy as you can to help the children feel safe and calm.
5. Decrease task demands. Also, provide them with visual cues with task demands to assist with full comprehension and attention when task demands are given.
6. Make sure you gain their attention before addressing them. Always address and interact with the child in a calm manner.
7. Provide the child with sensory and calming activities (e.g., taking a walk, listening to music, deep pressure, etc.) throughout the day and whenever you notice that the child is becoming anxious or overstimulated.
8. Provide the child with a safe and calm area to go to when he/she becomes anxious or overstimulated.
9. Use social stories to help them understand their living situation, school situation, and other changes occurring around them.
10. Pair visual cues with information you provide the child regarding the fires and the child's personal situation.
11. Provide increased warnings (paired with visual cues) for transitions and changes. Provide them with as much time to prepare for changes in the environment and transitions as possible, especially with changes in living situation.

Tips for Older and High Functioning Children with ASD:

1. Provide factual information regarding the fires. Adjust the information according to the child's cognitive and developmental level.
2. Reassure them that they will be taken care of and the adults will help keep them safe.

3. Redirect them to ask questions and provide them with factual information regarding the fires and their situation whenever you see the child becoming anxious and acting out inappropriately due to the anxiety.
4. Teach them about fires and how fire fighters fight fires.
5. Tell them what is being done to keep him/her safe from the fires.
6. Provide the children with solutions to topics that cause them anxiety and then role-play the solutions with them to further assist with comprehension and for them to retain the information provided.
7. If the child repetitive asks questions due to heightened anxiety, write down the answers to their questions. Go over the responses with them and allow them to keep the written response. Redirect the child to the written response whenever they repeatedly ask the same questions.
8. Provide them with opportunities to help other people and to become functional in this time of crisis.
9. Constant input and exposure to information about the fires can increase fear and anxiety. Decrease their opportunity of watching and gaining information regarding the fires from the media will help decrease anxiety.

Tips for Parents with Children with ASD:

1. Minimize your own anxiety. Your children are in tuned to your emotional state. Stay calm whenever you are with your children to also help them remain calm.
2. Be aware of worsening allergies and asthma conditions due to the air condition. Allergies and asthma can contribute to acting out behaviors.
3. You might need to provide explanations to your child and give instructions in simpler terms than what the child typically understands due to heightened anxiety. Just like us, when we are anxious we tend to misunderstand or not hear auditory information.
4. You might need to utilize behavioral strategies that you previously utilized when the child is younger and with less skills due to heightened anxiety. Again, like us, we regress in our behavioral and emotional functioning whenever our anxiety increases significantly.

Watch Out for Signs of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

The PTSD symptoms to watch out for are: (That are different from previous levels of functioning)

1. Hypervigilance (i.e., an enhanced state of sensory sensitivity accompanied by an exaggerated intensity of behaviors whose purpose is to detect threats)
2. Flashbacks (i.e., nightmares or thought intrusion about the event)
3. Reliving the traumatic events and actively avoiding similar situations in which the trauma occurred (i.e. in the home, school, etc.)
4. Nightmares and difficulty sleeping
5. Irritability or outbursts of anger
6. Intensified psychological distress and physiological reaction to related cues.

If you see these symptoms in your children, yourself or other family members that are lasting for more than 1 month seek professional assistance to address these issues.

We hope you find these tips helpful. Please let us know how else we can assist you during this time of need.

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Sincerely,

Sandy Shaw

Sandy Shaw, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist
Director of AIM



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Social Stories to Help with Understanding of the Fires

Dear Parents:

Below are 2 social stories written to help High Functioning Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders to understand what is happening in regards to the fires. The purpose of the social stories is to explain what is occurring around them, to know what they can expect and what to do when they become anxious about the fires.

The first social story is titled: Fire

This is to help children who are able to stay in their homes understand what is happening around them and to help decrease their anxiety about the fires.

The second social story is titled: Fires and Leaving My House

This is to help children and their families who needed to leave their homes and may or may not be able to return understand what is happening around them. It also addresses why they are not in school and whether or not they would be able to return to their homes.

Parents are to modify the social stories according to the child's cognitive ability and developmental level. Additionally, parents should individualize the stories by inserting personal information to further help the child understand and attend to the stories. Inserting pictures and putting the story in a book format could also heighten interest and attention to the stories.

Instructions for Use:

1. Read the story to the child at the beginning of the day.
2. Read the story to the child whenever he/she becomes anxious about the fires.
3. Question the child about the content of the story to increase comprehension.
4. Role-play and review the contents of the story with the child to assist with comprehension.

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Fires

There have been fires burning around my house.

A fire can be dangerous when it is not burning in the fireplace or in a camp fire.

My family and I watch the news and see fires burning in and around _____ County/my house.

I see smoke in the air and it can be hard to breathe.

I will not go to school when the fires are burning around _____ County (or "my house) so that I can stay away from the fires and stay safe.

The fire fighters and policemen will let us know when the fires are put out so I can go back to school.

Mommy and Daddy will take care of me and make sure that we are safe from the fire.

We are going to be OK.

When I feel scared or confused, I will ask my parents to tell me what is happening and to ask my parents for help.

This way, I know what is happening and know that I am safe from the fires.

AIM
applied interventions
& methodologies

The End

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Fires and Leaving My House

There have been fires burning around my house.
A fire can be dangerous when it is not burning in the fireplace or in a camp fire.
My family and I watch the news and see fires burning in and around _____ County (or "my house").
I see smoke in the air and it can be hard to breathe.
To help my family and I stay safe, we had to leave our house for a while.
We are staying at _____ while we wait for the fire fighters to put out the fires.
We will be safe from the fires while we stay at _____.
I will not be going to school while we stay at _____.
The fire fighters and policemen will let us know when it is safe to go back to our house and start going back to school.
(For families with houses that were affected by the fire, change the wording to: "The fire fighters might tell us that our house is not safe to go back to. To help my family and I stay safe, we will find another house to live in. Mommy and Daddy will take care of me and make sure that we are safe no matter where we live.")
When I feel scared or confused, I will ask Mommy & Daddy to tell me what is going to happen and to ask them for help.
This way, I know what is happening and also feel safe while waiting to go back home (For families with houses that were affected by the fire, change the wording to: "This way, Mommy and Daddy can tell me what is happening and where we will be living.").
Mommy and Daddy will make sure that we all stay away from the fires and stay safe.
We are going to be OK.

The End