# Wildfire Curriculum **Trauma Informed Teacher Information**

## Introduction:

This guide is designed to support teachers in using trauma-informed teaching practices when using the University of Nevada, Reno Living With Fire Program wildfire curriculum. Many people across Nevada have direct or indirect trauma associated with wildfire that may make it challenging for them to engage with these lessons. Even if a community or household has not burned, the threat of wildfire alone can be traumatic. Below are several resources and strategies that can be used to improve engagement with these lessons, and more importantly, help students cope with wildfire-related trauma.

Below are excerpts from the National Association of School Psychologists’ “Helping Children After a Wildfire: Tips for Parents and Teachers,” which is a helpful resource geared towards parents and teachers.

“Natural disasters can be traumatic for children and youth. Experiencing a dangerous wildfire can be frightening even for adults, and the devastation to the familiar environment (i.e., home and community) can be long-lasting and distressing. Often an entire community is impacted, further undermining a child’s sense of security and normalcy. Wildfires present a variety of unique issues and coping challenges, including the need to relocate when home and/or community have been destroyed, the role of the family in lessening or exacerbating the trauma, emotional reactions, and coping techniques.”

“Children look to the significant adults in their lives for guidance on how to manage their reactions after the immediate threat is over. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children and youth cope in the aftermath of a wildfire by remaining calm and reassuring children that they will be all right.”

“Unlike other natural disasters such as earthquakes, there is often some warning of an advancing wildfire. However, depending upon the wind and terrain, the direction and spread of a wildfire can change abruptly. The amount of warning can vary from one neighborhood to the next. While some people may have hours (or even days) to evacuate, others will have only a few minutes to gather their belongings and leave their homes. Even if evacuation is not ultimately necessary, preparing for the possibility can be frightening for children, particularly if they are seeing images of homes burning nearby on television.”

“Most children will be able to cope over time with the help of parents and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions. The severity of children’s reactions will depend on their specific risk factors. These include exposure to the wildfire, personal injury or loss of a loved one, relocation from their home or community, level of parental support, the level of physical destruction, and pre-existing risks, such as a previous traumatic experience or mental illness. Symptoms may differ depending on age but [in adolescents] can include: . . . sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.”

## How to Incorporate Trauma-Informed Teaching Into This Wildfire Unit

Overview: Below are several suggestions of how you can help support students with wildfire-related trauma. Included below are several other trauma-related resources for your reference. Most of the trauma-informed pieces of these curricula, described in the next section, are centered around giving students with low to moderate trauma the opportunity to discuss and share their thoughts about wildfire. It is important to recognize that such discussions may not be appropriate for students with substantial trauma. In those cases, we highly recommend working with your school counselors to provide appropriate support for those students.

* Recognize that wildfires can be traumatic for adults as well as children.
	+ It is essential that teachers and staff be given permission to take care of themselves in order to ensure that they will be able to help their students. Many of the same techniques shared in the resources below can be used by adults in advance of working with children. Additional resources for adults and further guidance on trauma-informed care for children are provided in the resources linked at the end of this document. School personnel (including your school crisis team members) should have the opportunity to receive support from a trained mental health professional. Providing crisis intervention is emotionally draining, and caregivers will need an opportunity to process their crisis response. This could include teachers and other school staff if they have been serving as crisis caregivers for students.
* Connect with your schools’ counselors ahead of implementing this unit to let them know students may need additional counseling assistance. Where possible, see if they can have additional availability during the lessons in case any immediate needs arise.
* Identify students who may have higher levels of wildfire-related trauma and may need additional support from school staff and counselors.
* Give students the opportunity to discuss wildfire. See the trauma-informed discussion guide below.
	+ Depending on the situation, teachers may be able to guide this discussion in class, or students can meet with the school psychologist or other mental health professional for a group crisis intervention. Classroom discussions can help children share their thoughts and questions about wildfire. They also encourage students to develop effective means of coping, discover that their classmates share similar questions, and develop peer support networks. Teachers should not be expected to conduct such discussions if children are severely impacted or if they themselves are distressed.
* Share empowering actions students can take to increase their preparedness for wildfire. In addition to giving students the opportunity to share their questions and feelings about wildfire, one of the goals of this curriculum is to empower students to take actions that reduce their risk to wildfire. Although wildfires can be frightening events that make students feel like they have little agency to influence fire-related outcomes, there are many things a household can do in advance of wildfires that affect fire-related outcomes. The full scope of all these potential actions is beyond what a student could do for homework; however, sharing these materials and assigning one action to students is a great way to help their households on a path toward becoming more prepared for wildfire. More information on how to prepare for wildfire can be found at [www.livingwithfire.com/get-prepared](http://www.livingwithfire.com/get-prepared).

## Trauma-Informed Student Wildfire Discussion

Overview: This activity is a great way to introduce students to wildfire and help them cope with low to moderate fire-related trauma. Keys to making this discussion effective are allowing students to feel heard, with opportunities to share their thoughts, feelings and questions about wildfire and following up with student questions throughout the wildfire unit to grow their fire knowledg and empower them to take fire-preparedness actions.

#### Before Starting the Wildfire Unit:

* Contact school counselors to make them available to students who may need support.
* Inform parents of the upcoming unit on wildfire and inquire about any context relevant to their child participating in lessons.
* Tell students that the upcoming lessons will be related to wildfire and that you understand that this is a topic people may have scary or difficult feelings about, and make students aware of the school counselor resources they have available to them.

#### At The Start Of The Wildfire Unit:

During the first 15 minutes of this wildfire related unit, we have allocated time for a trauma-informed introduction to the topic of wildfire.

#### Lesson Flow:

* Welcome **(1 minute)**
	+ Hello students, Over the next few days we be using materials that focus around wildfire in Nevada. It is important to recognize that wildfire can be a scary and stressful occurrence that affects Nevadans each year. As we move forward with these lessons, it is important that we are all respectful and understanding of each other’s thoughts and feelings about wildfire. If at any point during these lessons you need a break or would like someone to talk with, you can [direct students to how to meet with school counselors]
* How do students feel about wildfire? **(5 minutes)**
	+ On a piece of paper, or anonymous digital board such as a Padlet, ask students to write how they feel about wildfire. When you think of wildfire, how does that make you feel? If students are sharing their thoughts on paper, see if there are any volunteers who want to share what they wrote, but have sharing be optional.
* Generate questions about wildfire **(4 minutes)**
	+ Ask students to come up with and write out questions they have related to wildfire. Students can either generate questions individually or work with a partner sitting next to them.
* Share wildfire related questions and build a class question bank **(5 minutes)**
	+ Have students each contribute 1 question they have about wildfire to a class question bank. Doing so via a Padlet or Google/Microsoft form is a great option for displaying questions. Group similar questions together and post them to a shared board.
	+ Tell students that during these lessons they will learn answers to many of these questions and that as a class we will build answers to most of those questions.

#### During the Wildfire Unit:

* In the last few minutes of each class, take some time to see if students have answers to any of the class questions about wildfire.
* It is great to set a tone of students answering their own questions here to give them a sense of empowerment and agency related to wildfire.

## Additional Trauma-Informed Educator Resources:

* Oregon State University Extenion Service “Trauma-Informed Toolkit: A Resource for Educators”
	+ <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/catalog/files/project/pdf/em9348.pdf>
* National Association of School Psychologists “Helping Children After a Wildfire: Tips for Parents and Teachers”
	+ <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/natural-disaster-resources/helping-children-after-a-wildfire-tips-for-parents-and-teachers>
* National Child Traumatic Stress Network “Wildfire Resources”
	+ <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/disasters/wildfire-resources>
* National Institute of Mental Health “Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Disasters and Other Traumatic Events: What Parents, Rescue Workers, and the Community Can Do”
	+ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-disasters-and-other-traumatic-events/>