



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Health and Wellness

Preparing for a Wildfire



What is a Wildfire?

A wildfire is an unplanned fire in a natural area such as a forest or grassland. Although most wildfires occur in the western part of the United States, wildfires can occur anywhere. Wildfires can occur at any time of the year but are more likely to occur during the hot, dry months of the summer and fall. High winds can cause a wildfire to travel quickly and to change direction rapidly.

How Head Start Programs Address Wildfires

Preparing for any emergency is composed of three parts: preparedness, response and recovery. To learn more about creating an emergency plan consult the [Emergency Preparedness Manual for Early Childhood Programs](#).

Any Emergency Plan Should Be:

- All-hazard
- Specific to the child care center
- Relevant to natural, technological and man-made disasters that may occur in the location of the child care center
- Able to be implemented during the hours of operation of the center
- Coordinated with state licensing and emergency officials
- Read, reviewed, and practiced at least every six months



General guidance on preparing for wildfires often includes the directive to purchase and store disposable respirator masks. Masks are ineffective for children and dangerous for children 3 years and younger. They do not fit children's small faces, and additionally, they can be a choking and strangulation hazard.

Preparation

The preparations that are recommended by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies jointly with Save the Child are outlined in the publication, *Protecting Children in Child Care During Emergencies Recommended State and National Regulatory and Accreditation Standards for Family Child Care Homes and Child Care Centers*.

Generally, these recommendations include the following eight planning directives:

1. Develop and maintain a written emergency plan.
2. Maintain the information needed to protect children's and staff's health and safety during emergencies.
3. Develop and implement plans and procedures for communicating with families before, during and after emergencies and for reuniting children with their families.
4. Be prepared to evacuate the child care facility, shelter in place, or lock down the facility.
5. Have and maintain the equipment, supplies and materials needed to care for and evacuate children and staff during emergencies and to communicate with parents, staff members and community agencies during an emergency.

6. Prepare and train staff members to protect children's health and safety during an emergency.
7. Protect the health and safety of children and adults with special needs and chronic medical conditions during an emergency.
8. Protect program information and assets to help ensure the child care program can continue to provide child care after an emergency.

Extensive guidance on accomplishing each of these eight planning steps is available in the [Protecting Children in Child Care During Emergencies](#).

Response

When a wildfire is burning in the area near your program, be prepared to respond quickly if local authorities issue an evacuation order. The [National Interagency Coordination Center](#) provides predictive services and other information on wildfires in your area.

Even if a wildfire is not threatening local structures, the smoke from a wildfire can remain in the air for long periods of time. Young children are uniquely vulnerable to the smoke, toxins, and ash that are released during a wildfire because their lungs are still developing. Further, early childhood is a critical period when toxins can negatively affect development. Young children breathe more air for their bodyweight than adults and tend to be more active than adults (which requires more rapid breathing). This means children's lungs take in more particulates from smoke than adults. Therefore, it is important to minimize children's exposure to smoke whenever possible.



Children with asthma or other breathing disorders are at particular risk from the smoke and toxins produced by wildfires. Symptoms caused by inhaling smoke, which may occur even in children who do not have breathing problems, are:

- Chest tightness or pain
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Coughing
- Burning or stinging of the nose, throat, and eyes
- Dizziness or lightheadedness

To prevent breathing problems in young children in the presence of wildfire smoke, consider keeping doors and windows tightly shut, limiting outside activities, and purchasing air cleaners that can help reduce the level of particulates in the air. Air conditioning that limits fresh air intake is also helpful. Information about using [portable air cleaners](#) to reduce smoke from wildfires is available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Often, it is not feasible to entirely limit outdoor activity while smoke is in the air because a wildfire may burn for weeks or even months. In these cases, it is possible to time outdoor activities based on when air quality is best. You

can sign up for air quality alerts from [AirNow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov), which may help with planning.

Recovery

After the wildfire has passed, and first responders or local agencies determine it is safe to return to the facility (if an evacuation was ordered), recovery may begin. Recovery extends from the end of the emergency to the time when the needs of staff, children, and families are met. It can last for a few days, weeks, months, or even years.

Recovery includes:

- Repairing or rebuilding the facility and restoring services
- Meeting the needs (physical, health, emotional) of children, families, and staff
- Providing a supportive and caring environment that brings normalcy back into children's lives

Environmental Recovery

Structures may be burned in a wildfire or may experience smoke damage. Assessing damage includes inspecting indoor and outdoor facilities. After local authorities restore services (if necessary) and approve return to the facility, children should only return when ash, debris, and all smoke damage has been mitigated.



Supporting Children, Families and Staff During Recovery

Recovery from a wildfire includes addressing the health and mental health of children, families, and staff. Children, families, and Head Start staff may experience stress, grief, and trauma. Responses to a disaster such as a wildfire varies depending on the individual and the response may last in the short-term or for the long term.

Work with local agencies and partners to ensure that all affected children receive needed health and mental health services as quickly as possible. If any children who are newly homeless enroll in the program, quickly ascertain children's health status and immediate needs.

Recovery information is best included in the preparedness plan so that staff are familiar with the materials available for helping families through wildfire recovery. Some options include:

- [Psychological First Aid](#), an evidence-informed approach for assisting children and families after a disaster. The field manual includes handouts for parents, caregivers, and children birth to 5.

- [Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers After a Disaster](#), is a handout that lists common reactions of very young children after an emergency, ways to respond to those reactions, and examples of things to say to infants or toddlers.
- [Helping Your Child Cope After a Disaster](#) is a tip sheet that provides families and staff with tools to help a child after a disaster or crisis.

Tips for Working with Families

The best way to help families through a wildfire is to prepare families before one occurs.

Emergency communication protocols. Families should receive written notification of several methods of communication with the program, the program's evacuation procedures, and pick-up locations. Testing the emergency communication systems (text, voice calls, emails) is helpful so families and staff are aware of the processes.

Family home preparation. Instruct families on [preparing for a wildfire](#).

Share recovery resources before a wildfire occurs. Periodically, provide recovery information for families so they have an understanding of the types of local and national resources that are available to them after a wildfire. For example, SAMHSA offers a voice or text [disaster distress helpline](#) staffed by trained counselors.

Family Disaster Plan and

V. IF YOU EVACUATE

Take with you:

- Medicines and first aid kit
- Flashlight, radio
- Important documents
- Blank
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For Your Family Newsletter

Tailor the messages below to include in your family newsletter.

Why plan for a wildfire? A wildfire can cut off your power or water supply and threaten safety. Young children are less able to deal with the effects of wildfire such as smoke and stress, particularly if an evacuation is ordered.

Listen to the weather service for instructions.

The National Weather Service issues a **Fire Weather Watch** when weather conditions may lead to a wildfire. This means families should be alert and prepared. A **Red Flag Warning** means that a fire is occurring or likely will occur in the next 24 hours. Local authorities may issue an **evacuation order**. Be prepared to leave immediately to keep from being trapped by advancing fire.

Plan for how to stay informed if there is a power outage. Consider having a battery-operated radio or a hand crank radio.

Create an emergency supply kit that can be grabbed immediately or stored in the car. Make a list for those things that cannot be stored in a bag. In an evacuation, remember the five P's:

People (and pets),

Prescriptions,

Papers (important documents such as birth certificates or health forms),

Personal needs (items that are immediately necessary such as diapers, glasses, cash, cell phones and chargers, food), and

Priceless items (irreplaceable mementos or valuables).

If possible, create a “clean room” in your home. The smoke from wildfires burning far from your home can harm your child. Local authorities may ask you to stay inside. Choose a room with no fireplace and few windows and doors, such as a bedroom. Use a portable air cleaner with a HEPA filter in the room. Avoid smoking, burning candles, cooking with oil, or running the vacuum cleaner (unless it has a HEPA filter) in the house during this time.

If there is an evacuation, and you return home, make sure children do not clean up ash. Ash can travel long distances and is particularly harmful if breathed. Clean up any ash carefully, wetting it first. Do not use a blower or a vacuum to remove ash. Children should not be around ash when it is being removed.



Resources

Resources Available on ECLKC

[Emergency Preparedness Manual for Early Childhood Programs](#) (Information for preparing a disaster plan, checklists, tools and tips for families)

[Emergency Preparedness](#) (tip sheets and links to other resources)

Other Resources

[Wildfire Smoke Fact Sheet](#) (handout for families from the EPA)

[Wildfire Preparedness Tips](#) (handouts for families from the National Fire Protection Association)

[Wildfires and Indoor Air Quality](#) (information for families about indoor air and wildfires)

[Resource Guide: Emergency Preparedness and Response Resources for Child Care Programs](#)

[Children in Disasters: Teachers and Childcare](#) (general information on disaster preparedness for child care provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)



NATIONAL CENTER ON Early Childhood Health and Wellness

View other topics in the Embracing Health and Wellness Series on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health-services-management/article/embracing-health-wellness-series>

Our Goal: To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within the areas of medical and dental care access, health awareness, healthy active living, emergency preparedness, and environmental safety to support healthy outcomes and school readiness for young children and their families.

Contact Us: The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness welcomes your feedback as well as your suggestions for topics for future resources! Please forward your comments to: health@ecetta.info or call us at 888-227-5125.

School readiness begins with health!