



# Tips for Home-Based and Center-Based Caregivers of Young Keiki to Support and Interact with Keiki after the Maui Wildfires

This tip sheet is designed for home-based and center-based providers/caregivers who are working with children ages 2-5 years, in light of the recent Maui Wildfires.

First, remember that keiki DO understand that something very scary happened, and that they feel the stress of the ones closest to them. As littles, their mental health is dependent on the mental health of the adults around them. Many adults in Hawaii are stressed, scared and uncertain right now, so are our keiki. As is true for grown ups - keiki could all use a little more kindness, tenderness, security, and comfort during this time of rebuilding.

Second, know that "How you are is as important as what you do," as Jeree Pawl has said. And, as Carmen Norona adds, "Who you are, impacts how you are, which is as important as what you do." Right now, the most important thing you can do is to be a safe place for our babies and young children. You don't have to know exactly what to say or what to do in order to create a space for them to be held by you (both emotionally and physically). Remember, part of being a safe place for children is taking care of yourself. Please ensure that you have ways for you to decompress, reflect, and connect with what fills YOUR cup.

Mahalo For Being a Part of Creating a Resilient Community 



## TIP #1: BE PRESENT

### Breathe

- Our first resource is our nervous system. Young children need to “borrow” calmness from our calm minds, hearts, and bodies. Children must co-regulate before they can self-regulate.
- Keiki will feel safe when we ourselves are calm and confident and regulated – check in with yourself often. How are you feeling? What do you need to become or remain regulated?

### Be with them

- We don't need to fix, change or teach right now. Being fully present with each keiki and attuned to them is the healing work.
- Be on the floor with them, in the play structure, in the chair next to them at lunch – proximity to safe and calm adults can offer a feeling of security for keiki.
- There are many things that we as adults are still needing to talk about and process. Save those conversations for when keiki are not present. Use the time with keiki to build connections with them – truly be with them.

### Reestablish the “protective shield”

- When keiki experience danger/trauma, their protective shields are often damaged – they may feel as if someone or something did not keep them safe. They are often fearful that it will happen again. They will need adults in their lives to reassure them that they will keep them safe, over and over again, many times each day.
- When keiki become escalated, they may demonstrate their emotions through certain behaviors (e.g., kicking, screaming, hitting, throwing their bodies or hitting their heads where bodily injury is possible):
- Help them keep their bodies safe by either removing them from other keiki or having the other keiki leave the area.
- If possible, hold the child firmly yet gently so they can “borrow” your calmness – your calm voice talking to them and your calm body.
- Acknowledge their feelings, and let them know “I am going to help you keep your body safe. I know things are really hard right now. We are safe together.” This will help them regulate themselves better – to calm down, or perhaps even become sleepy.
- We want to be extra aware of a child's safety at this time – children may increase their “impulsive or risky behaviors” to test how the adults around them will respond to those behaviors.
- If possible, increase your adult to child ratio, identify keiki who may need more individualized support, and link them with a staff member who can consistently respond to the child.

### Routine And Structure

- Predictability is important when lots of things are changing. Establishing a consistent schedule for the day can help keiki know what to expect. Visual schedules of the day's routines, for example, can be helpful to talk about upcoming activities, tasks, etc.
- Narrating to keiki as to what is coming next can be very helpful in letting them know what to expect. Knowing what to expect can decrease fear and anxiety of the unknown.
- Remember, however, that while we want to maintain consistency in our daily schedule and routines, we also want to be flexible to address the changing needs of our keiki.



## TIP #2: PLAY

**Play is how keiki make sense of their experiences, figure out the world around them, and learn new things.**

**Keiki may reenact or play out recent experiences related to the wildfires - whether they actually experienced the fires directly or not (e.g., overheard adults talking about the wildfires). Examples of this might include:**

- Playing “fire” in the dramatic play area
- Playing with dollhouses and dolls and having the dolls scream “fire!”
- Talking about death and dying
- Talking about a “fire team” and a “water team”
- Talking about/drawing pictures of fire-breathing monsters
- Pretending they can't see “because of the smoke” or saying the sun was “covered by smoke clouds.”



### **When children “play fire” or other trauma themes:**

- Respond:
  - Join in their play rather than discourage it - if they invite you to play with them, go along with their ideas and let them tell you what to do next.
  - Acknowledging their play lets them know that you are a safe person to “talk” to.
  - Narrate their play - be a “sports caster” for what they are doing, such as “you are playing fire,” or “you are in the house and it's on fire.” This helps them know you understand and can witness their experiences.
  - Let them move on when they themselves are ready. Often, keiki will play out a danger theme and then move right on to “normal play” - let them.
- Validate:
  - Reflect the feelings you notice in the play - “the house is on fire, that must have been scary” or “you're running from the fire monster, that sounds scary.” Naming these feelings will increase their “emotional literacy” - it will help them identify the physical sensations of the emotions they are having which can eventually help them cope with those emotions.
  - Help keiki connect their feelings and emotions to their bodies - “when you're scared, what does it feel like in your body?” This is a co-regulation strategy that will help to give the child a sense of control.
  - Believe them, even the “make believe”. Keiki will interweave fantasy and reality. Don't correct them. Go along with it! “The monster started the fire? WOW, what happened next?”
- Reinforce that they are safe now:
  - Introduce coping skills- “When I am scared, I like to take a few breaths, can you do that with me?”
  - Sometimes, play, as in life, may not have “happy endings.” Some keiki may need their play to end with people being “all burned” or “dead.” Be okay with that, at least in the moment. Remember that play is their way of making sense of their world and what is happening around them..



AIMH HI

Association for Infant Mental Health Hawai'i

## TIP #3: LISTEN AND OBSERVE

### Keiki may be telling us with their behavior that they need us. Keiki who experience a traumatic event are known to:

- Regress in some of their development - a child may no longer perform skills that were once "mastered." (e.g., a child who was potty trained is now having "accidents," a child who was previously sleeping at nap time now will not lie on the mat).
- Be more irritable or aggressive
- Have a hard time following simple instructions or directions
- Be more clingy or hard to soothe
- Need more sleep, or have trouble sleeping
- Want to eat more, or less, or not at all

### Listen to what keiki behaviors are telling you:

- I need to feel safe
- I need you to help me calm my body and co-regulate me
- I need more support
- I need your help
- I need your patience
- I am unsure, uncertain, confused, overwhelmed, tired, hungry, scared
- I don't like the way I feel or how this feels

### Let keiki lead the conversation about their experiences

- Don't be the one to bring up the fire or their experience first
- Stay curious, but don't push a keiki to talk, share how to feel or share about their experience
- Some keiki may talk about their experience a lot, some not at all
- If keiki do bring it up, reflect back what you hear: "Your school is gone, and now you're here"
- Believe them, even when what they say may sound silly. Keiki will interweave fantasy and reality. You don't need to correct them, or teach them - just listen.
- Focus on their experience, not yours. You don't need to "relate" to them by sharing your story - just be with them while they share with you.

## TIP #4: REFER

There will be times when keiki or their parents/caregivers are showing you that they need more support than what you are prepared to provide them. This is where the larger network of providers comes in to provide the child and family with specialized care. Building a relationship with the families you work with will be crucial in linking them with providers in the community

If you are unsure where to go, please feel free to email us at AIMH HI ([erika@aimhhi.org](mailto:erika@aimhhi.org)), and we will do our best to locate a provider who meets the needs of this family or will point you in a direction that may help them.

