THOMAS FIRE: Parent Guidelines for Helping Children Impacted by Wildfires

(SANTA BARBARA, Calif.) – Wildfires cause emotional distress as well as physical damage. People may fear that their loved ones will be killed or injured. Families may be called on to evacuate on short notice, forcing people to make important decisions in minutes – whether to evacuate, where to go, when to leave, and what to bring with them (including pets). Families may live in shelters for days, not knowing if their homes and businesses have been saved or lost. Routine is disrupted and one’s sense of security is undermined. Children’s reactions to the wildfires and their aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, teachers, and other caregivers cope during and after the events. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. The reactions of children generally diminish with time, but knowing they are likely can help you be prepared to help your child. Common reactions of children may include anxiety, fear, worry about safety of pets and others. Changes in behavior may be observed as well as an increased focus on the fire.

How Can I Help My Child?

• Spend time talking with your child. This will let your child know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. Because during and after wildfires includes constantly changing situations, children may have questions on more than one occasion. Issues may need to be discussed more than one time. You should remain flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions and providing clarifications. If you have to evacuate suddenly, tell your child briefly where you are going and that you will answer their questions once you get to safety.

• You should answer questions briefly and honestly, but also ask your children for their opinions and ideas about what is discussed. For younger children, try to follow wildfire conversations with a favorite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.

Further information about children, families, and wildfires can be found at the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSNet.org.

Emergency Alert System: It is critical that people in Santa Barbara County register to receive emergency alerts. Sign up at www.AwareAndPrepare.org. If we can’t reach you, we can’t alert you.

Stay Connected: For ongoing updates, go to www.CountyofSB.org, follow @countyofsb on Twitter and Facebook, or call 2-1-1 from 805 area code, or 800-400-1572 outside of 805.