

Supporting children through traumatic events

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The recent earthquake in Christchurch was a cataclysmic seismic event.

In all of this chaos, the child looks to and seeks out the parents, the two people in the child's life who are truly experts on both the child and the child's welfare.

It is this parental expertise that is the child's greatest protective factor in a crisis, and to be truly useful in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake, counsellors, psychologists, and other related helping professionals are charged with working alongside and being guided by parents regarding what is in the best interests of their children. There is no "formula" that is going to suit every family, or every child, and each family and child's needs are going to be both unique and fluid. What may be required to reassure a child on Monday might be quite different to what is required to reassure the same child on Saturday.

What follows is a summary of what may be some useful and supportive ideas for parents dealing with the Christchurch earthquake:

- In the first instance, a child will need to know that the "big people" (parents, loved ones, and other adults) in their lives are OK, and that somehow, the "big people" are confident that they and the family are going to be OK as well. The physical space around the family will need to be as secure as possible and constant verbal and non-verbal reassurance and comforting touch will be essential. Parents can normalise the feelings of frightened, scared children by affirming that being frightened and scared in an event such as an earthquake are exactly the right feelings to be having. The children will be looking to gauge how best to respond to what is happening around them – and their reference point will be their parent's reaction.
- Assisting children to prepare for unexpected events (e.g. aftershocks, collapsing buildings, ambulance and police sirens, the sight of injured people) before such an event has transpired can be a useful exercise in helping children re-orientate, and reassures them that their parents have an awareness of occurrences even before they happen, while instilling confidence that there are people all around them who are helping other people, and who know what to do.
- Talking to your children about what they are going to do once the crisis is over (e.g. go back to school, play sport, be with other members of the family) can also be a reassuring exercise, by defining the crisis in the mind of the child as having an "end".

- While the family will naturally talk about their respective experiences of what has just happened, it is important to impose a limit on discussions that involve continuously “reliving the event”.
- Parents are encouraged to show empathy towards any behaviour in their children that is regressive or out-of-character as such a response is most often reactionary and temporary – such behaviour is understandable and quite normal in a crisis situation.
- As soon as is reasonably possible, engage the children in familiar and structured activities. A good starting point could be discussing as a family what safety measures and plans could be useful in a similar situation, and involving the children in the preparation and collation of a safety survival kit for the home.

It is clear that traumatic experiences such as the Christchurch earthquake will disrupt the “natural rhythm” of a person’s life, and the nervous system can feel like it is frozen in over-drive. Any intervention that can successfully “re-calibrate” the nervous system out of a state of hyper-arousal and to a “steady state” is probably a good intervention. Parents will know best as to what needs to be done to achieve this with their children, and are encouraged to trust their judgement, and to seek help that works alongside them, as opposed to in place of them.