

Tips for teachers and parents – supporting children

When a large earthquake happens, everyone’s feeling of safety is undermined. Reassure children in your care that you will help keep them safe whether this is at an early childhood education centre, at school, or at home. You can help by re-establishing daily routines as soon as possible and reminding children about your safety plan.

Children might become confused and fearful and they might not be able to understand or process their feelings. Helping children feel safe takes time and patience and reassurance from the important adults in their lives. When children are scared, such as during an earthquake, they also want to be with people who help them feel safe and they might worry when they are not together.

How do children react and what should I do?

All children are different and will show stress in a different way. It is common for children to revert to behaviours they have previously grown out of eg, sucking their thumb, wetting themselves, becoming clingy.

How children react will depend on their experience of the quake, their age, their understanding of what has happened, parental support, the degree of change and loss and their exposure to media.

The chart below lists some common concerns or issues experienced by children and how parents, caregivers or teachers can respond.

Remember, if you need practical help or someone to talk to right now, contact:

- Government Earthquake Line, 0800 779 997
- Counselling and Family Support, 0800 777 846
- Relationship Services, 0800 735 283.

Concern/issue	Responses	Tips
<i>Confusion about what happened.</i>	Give clear explanations of what happened whenever your child asks. Avoid details that would scare your child. Correct any information that your child is unclear or confused about regarding present danger. Remind children that there are people working to keep families/whānau safe and that your family/whānau can get more help if needed. Let your children know what they can expect to happen next.	<p>Say, “We need to keep practising our drills and we have a safety plan.”</p> <p>Continue to answer questions your children have (without getting irritable) to reassure them the family/whānau is safe.</p> <p>Tell them what’s happening, especially about issues regarding school and where they will be living.</p>

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<p><i>Feelings of being responsible. School-aged children might have concerns that they were somehow at fault or should have been able to change what happened. They might hesitate to voice their concerns in front of others.</i></p>	<p>Provide opportunities for children to voice their concerns to you.</p> <p>Offer reassurance and tell them why it was not their fault.</p>	<p>Take your child aside. Say, “After an earthquake like this, lots of kids and parents too keep thinking, ‘What could I have done differently?’ or ‘I should have been able to do something?’ That doesn’t mean they were at fault. I think we need to take a break from the TV right now.”</p>
<p><i>Fears of recurrence of the earthquake and reactions to reminders such as the tremors and things falling down.</i></p>	<p>Help children identify reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the earthquake and the reminders that occur after it. Reassure them, as often as they need, that they are safe. Protect children from seeing media coverage of the earthquake as it can add to their fears and slow down their recovery.</p>	<p>When they recognise that they are being reminded, say: “Try to think to yourself, ‘I am upset because I am being reminded of the earthquake because it is shaking or things have been broken, but we have a safety plan. I think we need to take a break from the TV right now”</p>
<p><i>Re-telling the event or playing out the earthquake over and over.</i></p>	<p>Permit children to talk and act out these reactions. Let them know that this is normal. Encourage positive problem-solving in play or drawing.</p>	<p>Say, “I notice you’re drawing a lot of pictures of what happened. Did you know that many children do that? It might help to draw about how you would like your school to be rebuilt to make it safer.”</p>
<p><i>Fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings.</i></p>	<p>Provide a safe place for them to express their fears, anger, sadness, etc. Allow children to cry or be sad. Don’t expect them to be brave or tough.</p>	<p>Say, “When scary things happen, people have strong feelings like being mad at everyone or being very sad. Would you like to sit here with a blanket until you’re feeling better?”</p>
<p><i>Sleep problems including bad dreams, fear of sleeping alone, demanding to sleep with parents.</i></p>	<p>Let your child tell you about the bad dream. Explain that bad dreams are normal and they will go away. Do not ask the child to go into too many details of the bad dream. Temporary sleeping arrangements are okay; make a plan with your child to return to normal sleeping habits.</p>	<p>Say, “That was a scary dream. Let’s think about some good things you can dream about and I’ll rub your back until you fall asleep. You can stay in our bedroom for the next couple of nights. Then we will spend more time with you in your bed before you go to sleep. If you get scared again, we can talk about it.”</p>
<p><i>Concerns about the safety of themselves and others.</i></p>	<p>Help them to share their worries and give them realistic information.</p>	<p>Create a worry box where children can write out their worries and place them in the box. Set a time to look these over, problem-solve and come up with answers to the worries.</p>

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<i>Altered behaviour. Unusually aggressive or restless.</i>	Encourage your child to engage in recreational activities and exercises as an outlet for feelings and frustration.	Say, "I know you didn't mean to slam that door. It must be hard to feel so angry. How about we take a walk? Sometimes getting our bodies moving helps with strong feelings."
<i>Complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches, muscle aches for which there seem to be no reason.</i>	Find out if there is a medical reason. If not, provide comfort and assurance that this is normal. Be matter-of-fact with your child. Giving non-medical complaints too much attention might increase them.	Make sure your child gets enough sleep, eats well, drinks plenty of water when it's available and gets enough exercise. Say, "How about sitting over there? When you feel better, let me know and we can play cards."
<i>Closely watching a parent's responses and recovery. Not wanting to disturb a parent with their own worries.</i>	Give children opportunities to talk about their feelings as well as your own. Remain as calm as you can, so as not to increase your child's worries.	Say, "Yes, my ankle is sprained, or cut, but it feels better since the doctor wrapped it. I bet it was scary seeing me hurt, wasn't it?"
<i>Concern for other victims and families/whānau.</i>	Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden your child with undue responsibility.	Help children identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (eg, clearing rubble from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).
<i>Cries a lot.</i>	Your family/whānau might have experienced difficult changes because of the earthquake and it is natural that your child is sad. When you let your child feel sad and provide them with comfort, you help your child even if they remain sad. If you have strong feelings of sadness, it might be good for you to get support. Your child's well-being is connected to your well-being.	Allow your child to express feelings of sadness. Help your child name their feelings. "I think you're sad. A lot of hard things have happened." Support your child by sitting with them and giving them extra attention. Spend special time together. Help your child feel hopeful about the future. It will be important to think and talk about how your lives will continue and the good things you will do, like going for a short walk, cooking together, reading stories, playing ball games, make believe or playing with friends. Take care of yourself.

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<i>Misses people you are no longer able to see after the earthquake.</i>	Even though children do not always express how they feel, be aware that it is difficult for them when they lose contact with important people. If someone close to your child died or is injured, your child might show stronger reactions to the earthquake. Some children will not understand death and might think that the person can come back. If you are concerned about your child it might be helpful to seek help from a professional.	For those that have moved away, help your child stay in touch in some way (for example, sending pictures or cards, or calling). Help your child talk about these important people. Say, "Even when we are apart from people, we can still remember and talk about them." Acknowledge how hard it is not to be able to see people we care for. It is sad. Where someone has died, answer your child's questions simply and honestly.
<i>Misses things you have lost because of the earthquake.</i>	When an earthquake brings so much loss to a family/whānau and community, it is easy to lose sight of how much the loss of a toy or other important item can mean to a child. Grieving for a toy is also your child's way of grieving for what you had before the earthquake.	Allow your child to express feelings of sadness. It is sad that your child lost their toy. If possible, try to find something that would replace the toy or important item that would be acceptable and satisfying to your child. Distract your child with other activities.
<i>Not understanding about death. Children sometimes don't understand that death is not reversible. They might for example have magical thinking and might believe their thoughts caused the death. The loss of a pet or toy might be very hard on a child.</i>	Give an age-appropriate, consistent explanation that does not give false hopes about the reality of death. Don't minimize their feelings over a loss of a pet or a special toy. Take cues from what your child seems to want to know. Answer simply and ask if they have any more questions.	Allow children to participate in cultural and religious grieving rituals. Help them find their own way to say goodbye eg, by lighting a candle or saying a prayer for them. "No, Pepper won't be back, but we can think about him and remember what a silly doggy he was. I know you miss him very much." For more information on grief and death and how to support children see: www.skylight.org.nz

Source: *Psychological First Aid Operations Guide, 2006.*
<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/manuals/psych-first-aid.asp>