

Tips for teachers and parents – supporting toddlers

When a large earthquake happens, everyone’s feeling of safety is undermined. Reassure children that you will help keep them safe whether at the centre, at school or at home. You can help by re-establishing daily routines as soon as possible and comforting your child when needed.

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 different ways. 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 earthquake, 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 babies or toddlers and describes 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	Understand	Tips
<i>Has problems sleeping, doesn't want to go to bed, won't sleep alone and wakes up at night screaming.</i>	When children are scared they want to be with people who help them feel safe and they worry when you are not together. If you were separated during the disaster, going to bed alone might remind your child of that separation. Bedtime is a time for remembering because we are not busy doing other things. People often dream about things they fear and can be scared of going to sleep.	If you want, let your child sleep with you. This is OK. Let them know this is just for now. Have a bedtime routine such as a story, a prayer, cuddle time. Tell them the routine (every day), so they know what to expect. Hold them and tell them that you are there and will not leave. Understand that your child is not being difficult on purpose. This might take time, but when they feel safer, they will sleep better.

Concern/issue	Understand	Tips
<p><i>Worries something bad will happen to you. (You might also have worries like this.)</i></p>	<p>Children who cannot yet speak or say how they feel might show their fear by clinging or crying.</p> <p>Goodbyes might remind your child of any separation you had related to the disaster.</p> <p>Children's bodies react to separations (stomach sinks, heart beats faster). Something inside says, "Oh no, I can't lose her/him". Your children are not trying to manipulate or control you. They are scared. They might also get scared when other people (not just you) leave. Goodbyes make them scared.</p>	<p>If you're not in a position to always be with your child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for brief separations (store, bathroom) help your child by naming their feelings and linking them to what they have been through. Let your child know you love them and that this goodbye is different –you'll be back soon. "You're so scared. You don't want me to go because last time we weren't together you didn't know where I was. This is different and I'll be right back." • for longer separations have them stay with familiar people, tell them where you're going, why and when you'll come back. Let them know you will think about them. Leave a photo or something of yours and call if you can. When you come back, tell them you missed them, thought about them and did come back. You will need to say this over and over.
<p><i>Has problems eating, eats too much or refuses food.</i></p>	<p>Stress affects your child in different ways, including their appetite. Eating healthy is important but focusing too much on eating can cause stress and tension in your relationship.</p>	<p>Relax. Usually, as your child's level of stress goes down, their eating habits will return to normal. Don't force your child to eat. Eat together and make meal times fun and relaxing. Keep healthy snacks around. Young children often eat on the go. If you are worried, or if your child loses a significant amount of weight, consult a doctor.</p>
<p><i>Is not able to do things they used to do (like use the potty) or does not talk like they used to.</i></p>	<p>Often when young children are stressed or scared, they temporarily lose abilities or skills they recently learned. This is the way young children tell us that they're not okay and need our help. Losing an ability after children have gained it (like starting to wet the bed again) can make them feel ashamed or embarrassed. Caregivers should be understanding and supportive. Your child is not doing this on purpose.</p>	<p>Avoid criticism – it makes them worried that they'll never learn. Don't force your child – it creates a power struggle. Instead of focusing on the ability (like not using the potty), help your child feel understood, accepted, loved and supported. As your child feels safer, they will recover the ability that was lost.</p>

Concern/issue	Understand	Tips
<i>Is reckless, does dangerous things.</i>	It might seem strange, but when children feel unsafe, they often behave in unsafe ways. It is one way of saying, "I need you. Show me I'm important by keeping me safe."	Keep them safe. Calmly go and get them and hold them if necessary. Let them know that what they're doing is unsafe, that they're important and you wouldn't want anything to happen to them. Show them other, more positive ways they can get your attention.
<i>Scared by things that did not scare them before.</i>	Young children believe their parents are all-powerful and can protect them from anything. This belief helps them feel safe. Because of what happened, this belief has been damaged and without it the world is a scarier place. Many things might remind your child of the disaster (falling objects, aftershocks, ambulances, people yelling, a scared look on your face) and will scare him. It's not your fault – it was the disaster.	When your child is scared, talk to them about how you'll keep them safe. If things remind your child of the disaster and cause them to worry that it's happening again, help them understand what's happening now (like aftershocks) and what we are doing to be safe. If they talk about monsters, join them in chasing them out. "Go away monster. Don't bother my baby. I'm going to tell the monster boo and it will get scared and go away. Boo, boo." Your child is too young to understand and recognise how you protected them, but remind yourself of the good things you did.
<i>Seems hyper, can't sit still, and doesn't pay attention to anything.</i>	Fear can create nervous energy that stays in our bodies. Adults sometimes pace when worried. Young children run, jump and fidget. When our minds are stuck on bad things, it's hard to pay attention to other things. Some children are naturally active.	Help your child to recognise their feelings (fear, worry) and reassure your child that your family has an emergency plan and will practise getting to a safe place. Help your child get rid of nervous energy – stretching, running, sports, breathing deep and slow. Sit with them and do an activity you both enjoy – throwing a ball, reading books, playing, drawing. Even if they won't stop running around, this helps. If your child is naturally active, focus on the positive. Think of all the energy they have to get things done and find activities that suit their needs.
<i>Plays in a violent way. Keeps talking about the earthquake and the bad things they saw.</i>	Young children often talk through play. Violent play can be their way of telling us how crazy things were or are and how they feel inside. When your child talks about what happened, strong feelings might come up both for you and your child (fear, sadness, anger).	While it might be difficult for you, listen to your child when they talk about what they saw. As your child plays, notice the feelings they have and help them by naming feelings and being there to support them (hold and soothe them). If your child gets overly upset, spaces out or plays out the same upsetting scene, help them calm down, feel safe and consider getting professional help.

Concern/issue	Understand	Tips
<p><i>Now very demanding and controlling. Seems stubborn, insisting that things be done their way.</i></p>	<p>Between the age of 18 months to three years, young children often seem clingy or controlling. It can be annoying, but it is a normal part of growing up and helps them learn that they are important and can make things happen. When children feel unsafe, they might become more clingy and controlling than usual. This is one way of dealing with fears. They're saying, "Things are so crazy I need control over something."</p>	<p>Remember your child is not clingy, controlling or bad. This is normal, but might be worse right now because they feel unsafe. Let your child have control over small things. Give children choices over what they wear or eat, games you play, stories you read. If they have control over small things, it can make them feel better. Balance giving them choices and control with giving them structure and routines. They will feel unsafe if they run the show. Cheer them on as they try new things. They can also feel more in control when they can put their shoes on, put a puzzle together, pour juice.</p>
<p><i>Has tantrums and is cranky. Yells a lot more than usual.</i></p>	<p>Even before the disaster, your child might have had tantrums. They are a normal part of being little. It's frustrating when you can't do things and when you don't have the words to say what you want or need. Now, your child has a lot to be upset about (just like you) and might really need to cry and yell.</p>	<p>Let them know you understand how hard this is for them. "Things are really bad right now. It's been so scary. We don't have your toys or TV and you're mad." Tolerate tantrums more than you usually would and respond with love rather than discipline. You might not normally do this, but things are not normal. If they cry or yell, stay with them and let them know you are there for them. Reasonable limits should be set if tantrums become frequent or are extreme.</p>
<p><i>Hits you.</i></p>	<p>For children, hitting is a way of expressing anger. When children can hit adults they feel unsafe.</p> <p>It's scary to be able to hit someone who's supposed to protect you. Hitting can also come from seeing other people hit each other.</p>	<p>Each time your child hits, let them know that this is not OK. Hold their hands, so they can't hit, have them sit down.</p> <p>Say something like, "It's not OK to hit, it's not safe. When you hit, you are going to need to sit down." If your child is not old enough, give them the words to use or tell them what they need to do. Say, "Use your words. Say I want that toy." Help them express anger in other ways, such as playing, talking and drawing. If you are having conflict with other adults, try to work it out in private, away from where your child can see or hear you. If needed, talk with a friend or professional about your feelings.</p>

Concern/issue	Understand	Tips
<i>Says, "Go away, I hate you!" Says, "This is all your fault."</i>	The real problem is the earthquake and everything that followed, but your child is too little to fully understand that. When things go wrong, young children often get mad at their parents because they believe they should have stopped it from happening. You are not to blame, but now is not the time to defend yourself. Your child needs you.	Remember what your child has been through. They don't mean everything they say – they're angry and dealing with so many difficult feelings. Support your child's feeling of anger, but gently redirect the anger towards the earthquake. "You are really mad. Lots of bad things have happened. I'm mad too. I really wish it didn't happen, but even mums can't make earthquakes not happen. It's so hard for both of us."
<i>Doesn't want to play or do anything. Seems to not really have any feelings (happy or sad).</i>	Your child needs you. So much has happened and they might be feeling sad and overwhelmed. When children are stressed, some yell and others shut down. Both need their loved ones.	Sit by your child and keep them close. Let them know you care. If you can, give words to their feelings. Let them know it's OK to feel sad, mad or worried. "It seems like you don't want to do anything. I wonder if you are sad. It's OK to be sad. I will stay with you." Try to do things with your child, anything they might like, such as reading a book, singing and playing together.
<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 and understand why they might feel that way. "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.
<i>Misses people you are no longer able to see after the earthquake.</i>	Even though young 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. If the reactions appear to be strong and to last longer than two weeks, it might be helpful to seek help from a professional. Young children do not understand death and might think that the person can come back.	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 have positive feelings about them by remembering and talking 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.

Concern/issue	Understand	Tips
<p><i>Misses things you have lost because of the earthquake.</i></p>	<p>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 (blanket) can mean to a child. Grieving for a toy is also your child's way of grieving for all you had before the earthquake.</p>	<p>Allow your child to express feelings of sadness. It is sad that your child lost their toy or blanket. If possible, try to find something that would replace the toy or blanket that would be acceptable and satisfying to your child. Distract your child with other activities.</p>
<p><i>Helplessness and passivity. Young children know they can't protect themselves. In an earthquake they feel even more helpless. They want to know their parents will keep them safe. They might express this by being unusually quiet or agitated.</i></p>	<p>Provide comfort, rest, food, water and opportunities for play and drawing. Provide ways to turn spontaneous drawing or games about the earthquake to include something that would make them feel safer or better. Reassure your child that you and other grown-ups will protect them.</p>	<p>Give your child more hugs, hand-holding or time in your lap. Make sure there is a special safe area for your child to play, with proper supervision. In play, a four-year-old keeps having the blocks knocked down by the earthquake. Asked, "We are going to rebuild Christchurch on safe land and have safer buildings. Can you rebuild and make it safe from the earthquake?" they might quickly build a double block of thick wall and say, "The earthquake won't get us now." You could respond with, "That wall sure is strong," and explain that we're doing a lot of things to keep us safe.</p>
<p><i>General clinginess/fearfulness. Young children might become more afraid of being alone, being in the bathroom, going to sleep or otherwise separated from parents. Children want to believe that their parents can protect them in all situations and that other grown-ups such as teachers or police officers, are there to help them.</i></p>	<p>Be as calm as you can with your child. Try not to voice your own fears in front of them. Help children regain confidence that you aren't leaving them and that you can protect them. Remind them that there are people working to keep families/whānau safe and that your family/whānau can get more help if you need to. If you leave, reassure them you will be back. Tell them a realistic time in words they understand and be back on time. Give your child ways to communicate their fears to you.</p>	<p>Be aware when you are on the phone or talking to others, that your child does not overhear you expressing fear.</p> <p>Say things such as, "We have an emergency plan and we will keep practising it and people are working hard to make sure we are okay."</p> <p>Say, "If you start feeling more scared, come and take my hand. Then I'll know you need to tell me something."</p>
<p><i>Confusion about the danger being over. Young children can overhear things from adults and older children or see things on TV or just imagine that it is happening all over again. They believe the danger is closer to home, even if it happened further away.</i></p>	<p>Give simple, repeated explanations as needed, even every day. Make sure they understand the words you are using. Find out what other words or explanations they have heard and clarify inaccuracies. If you are some distance from the most affected areas, it's important to tell your child that the danger is not near you.</p>	<p>Continue to explain to your child that the earthquake tremors will continue for awhile but we will practise our drills and safety plan. Things might continue to fall down for a while.</p>

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<p><i>Not understanding about loss. Early childhood-age children might not understand that losing things or having things damaged cannot be replaced immediately. The loss might be missed greatly. The loss of a pet might be very hard on a child.</i></p>	<p>Give an age-appropriate, consistent explanation that does not give false hopes about regaining their possessions. Don't minimise their feelings over a loss of a precious toy or pet. Take cues from what your child seems to want to know. Answer simply and ask if they have any more questions.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p><i>Not talking. Being silent or having difficulty saying what is bothering them.</i></p>	<p>Put common feelings of children into words such as anger, sadness and worry about the safety of parents, friends and siblings. Don't force them to talk, but let them know they can talk to you any time.</p>	<p>Draw simple, happy faces for different feelings. Tell a brief story about each one eg, "Remember when the water or the bricks came into the house?" Say something like, "Children can feel sad when their home is damaged." Provide art or play materials to help them express themselves. Then use feeling words to check out how they felt. "This is a really scary picture. Were you scared when you saw the water or the bricks?"</p>
<p><i>Fears the earthquake will return. When having reminders seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing something that reminds them of the earthquake.</i></p>	<p>Protect children from things that will remind them as best you can.</p>	<p>"Even though the earth is shaking again, that doesn't mean the big earthquake is happening again. We will keep practising our drill and our safety plan." Keep your child from seeing/hearing television, radio and computer images and accounts of the earthquake that can trigger fears of it happening again.</p>
<p><i>Returning to earlier behaviours, eg, thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, baby-talk, needing to be in your lap.</i></p>	<p>Remain neutral or matter-of-fact, as best you can, as these might continue awhile after the disaster.</p>	<p>If your child starts bedwetting, change his/her clothes and linens without comment. Don't let anyone criticise or shame the child by saying, "You're such a baby."</p>

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