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INFANT MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND



CHRISTCHURCH EARTHQUAKE

Letter from the Infant Mental Health Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (IMHAANZ)

DEAR PARENTS WITH BABIES AND TODDLERS,

We are so sorry that your lives have been turned upside down as a result of the recent earthquake in Christchurch. As if the previous earthquake in September wasn't enough. While many people are suffering, we wanted to write to you especially. To experience such tragedy and the ongoing stress of that while also being so deeply connected with the mind, soul and body of your children is an enormous challenge.

As you already know, your young child looks to you for guidance, reassurance and comfort; you make their world safe. They don't know that you can't control environmental events. From their perspective, you are the almighty magician who makes their world right. Your baby, even in the face of recent events, does not change this view. You are it. We are very much thinking about you as you help make sense for your baby of what has and is happening.

We want to invite you to hold onto your baby's view. We encourage you, in the chaos and

rubble, to linger with your baby. Take a few more seconds to watch their face, listen to their chatter. Even if they don't talk yet, take more time to listen to their babble, and then to wonder what they are saying to you.

After listening, talk a little bit more to them. You can talk about what you are doing, where you are going, what's happening next. You might tell your young child about how you're feeling and wonder about their feelings. If you are not so practiced at this, a good way to start is to ask yourself "when my child looks at me, what do they see, what might they be thinking?"

For example, if you hear an ambulance or a police car, or a loud noise that makes you jump, makes you frightened, your baby will most likely also become frightened or unsettled. You are their emotional map. We know even if you wish not to respond like this, these involuntary frights are going to happen for a while. However, what you can do at these times is to begin to talk very gently to your baby, use a soothing voice and say something like – "oh yes mummy/daddy did a big jump and got scared with that noise, you might have felt scared too. It's ok now". Keep the message simple and based on the here and now moment.

It may be that it seems you are just talking to yourself and your baby isn't listening. It could just be that they are still coming back from getting a fright. You may have to wait a bit for them to turn to you. Let them know that you are there, gently talking, let your voice be an anchor for them, telling them (and yourself) that it is ok, it was a scary memory. If they could speak they might say "thanks for waiting for me, I did get scared... thanks for telling me it's ok now". With practice their return to you will be faster.

That you patiently wait for them to return to the relationship with you is a cue to them, that even in this time of trauma and recovery, you can be focused on them. Your connection with them is important to your young child. Given space and support, even at these times, they can continue to grow healthy with you.

Your baby / toddler is healing with you and healing of this kind takes a lot of listening and waiting. We so want you to know that every day as you walk through this mess and this unfolding tragedy, there are people thinking especially about you and your babies.



IMHAANZ is an affiliate of WAIMH

©Foley, M., Guy, D., & Zwimpfer, L. (2011). Dear parents with babies and toddlers: Letter one. Infant Mental Health Association of Aotearoa new Zealand (IMHAANZ).



AFTER A DISASTER : Helping Young Children Heal

Young children, toddlers, and preschoolers — even babies — know when bad things happen, and they remember what they have been through. After a scary event, we often see changes in their behavior. They may cry more, become clingy and not want us to leave, have temper tantrums, hit others, have problems sleeping, become afraid of things that didn't bother them before, lose skills. . . . Changes like these are a sign that they need help. Here are some ways you can help them.

Safety – Focus on safety first. Your young child feels safe when you. . .

- Hold him or let him stay close to you.
- Tell her you will take care of her when things are scary or difficult. With children who are learning to talk, use simple words, like saying “Daddy’s here.”
- Keep him away from frightening TV images and scary conversations.
- Do familiar things, like singing a song you both like or telling a story.
- Let him know what will happen next (to the degree that you know).
- Have a predictable routine, at least for bedtime: a story, a prayer, cuddle time.
- Leave her with familiar people when you have to be away.
- Tell him where you are going and when you will come back.

Allow expression of feelings

- Young children often “behave badly” when they are worried or scared. Children can “act out” as a way of asking for help. Remember! Difficult feelings=Difficult behavior.
- Help your child name how she feels: “scared,” “happy,” “angry,” “sad”. Tell her it’s OK to feel that way.
- Show your child the right way to behave, like saying “It’s OK to be angry but it’s not OK to hit me. “
- Help your child express anger in ways that won’t hurt, using words, play, or drawings.
- Talk about the things that are going well to help you and your child feel good.

Follow your child's lead

- Different children need different things. Some children need to run around, others need to be held.
- Listen to your child and watch his behavior to figure out what he needs.

Enable your child to tell the story of what happened during and after the disaster.

- Having a story helps your child make sense of what happened and cope better with it.
- Children use play to tell their story. For example, they may throw blocks to show what the disaster was like. They may separate toy animals to show how they were separated from you.
- Join your child in showing and telling not only what happened, step by step, but also how you both felt.
- As you tell the story, follow your child’s lead. When the story is difficult, your young child may need breaks: running around, being held, playing something else. This is OK. He will come back to the story when he is ready.
- It can be hard to watch your children’s play or listen to their stories. Get support if it is too hard for you to listen without becoming upset.

Ties — Reconnect with supportive people, community, culture and rituals

- Simple things like a familiar bedtime story, a song, a prayer, or family traditions remind you and your child of your way of life and offer hope.
- If you belong to a group, like a church, try to find ways of reconnecting with them.
- You can help your child best when you take care of yourself. Get support from others when you need it.

Your Child Needs You! This is the most important thing to remember.

- Reassure your child that you will be together.
- It is common for children to be clingy and worried about being away from you.
- If you need to leave your child, let her know for how long and when you are coming back. If possible, leave something that belongs to you, or a picture that your child can have.
- Just being with your child, even when you can’t fix things, helps your child.

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For more information, please visit the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Web site at www.NCTSN.org.