TE KOROWAI AWHINA
Awhinatia nga tamariki – Supporting Children

Children have their own ways of dealing with trauma according to their stage of development. Often their response is not what may be expected and may not show up for some time. Parents and others often worry and frequently are not sure of the best way to help them. This sheet outlines the common reactions of children who experience traumatic events or hear about them happening to their family or friends, and it suggests ways of helping them.

The whanau

The family is the most important part of a child's life. Parents give them their security and confidence. What trauma means to children depends to a large extent on how their parents react to it. Often this is more important than what happens to the children themselves.

Parents can help their children by sorting out their own reactions and feelings. Do not be surprised if children's reactions seem out of keeping with their experiences, they may be reacting to family members' distress. Children (even infants and toddlers) always know more than adults give them credit for. They are aware of many things they cannot put into words for us. Children think about things a great deal even when they are not talking about them, but they can only put them in perspective with adults' help.

Children need to make sense of things that happen. Children often don't have all the facts and their thinking is not yet mature so they use imagination to fill the gaps. Often this results in misunderstandings, which they may keep to themselves, especially if they are frightening. What they imagine is usually more frightening than what really happened.

The child's experience

Don't assume that you know what the child understands about a crisis or trauma, but find it out by talking and listening to the child and observing their behaviour. According to their stage of development, children may only take in some aspects of the situation. Their understanding is often limited, fragmentary or even distorted.

Reassurance is important, but does not help until the child has an accurate idea of the event and its causes, and their misconceptions have been corrected. Parents also need to find out what reassurance the child needs. This is not always what children ask about at first.

When someone they know is involved in a trauma, children may be distressed and imagine how it would have been for them to be involved in the trauma, but they usually express these feelings indirectly. They may feel their own security is threatened and that it could happen to them, however unlikely this may be. Sometimes, the trauma makes it harder to deal with other ordinary problems. Children don't usually tell adults about these things because they may feel too self-conscious, are afraid or can't put them into words. This can lead to misunderstanding or conflict between adults and children.

Children's reactions may appear at the time of crisis or later. Sometimes they manage very well when the trauma is in everyone's mind and only later start to worry, become difficult or feel as though they cannot handle their responsibilities. It can take months for things to build up to the point where parents or teachers realise a child may be having problems or needs extra help. By this time the trauma may seem less significant to adults. It is common for children to hold back their own needs and difficulties until they sense their parents are over the worst, and it feels safe for them to relax and start reacting.

Common tamariki reactions

These are some of the changes that can be seen in infants and children under stress:

- sleep problems, nightmares, reluctance to go to bed or get up
- changes in dressing, eating and toilet habits
- irritability, uncooperative, listless or bored
- clinging to family or familiar things, needing objects for security
- unable to cope with change or ordinary problems
- reverting to immature behaviour or habits they had previously grown out of changes in relationships with parents, becoming more demanding, possessive, withdrawn, or uncommunicative
- relationships with brothers, sisters and peers become more difficult. Often there is an increase in conflict, competition, aggression or withdrawal within these relationships preoccupation with the trauma; wanting to talk about it, playing it out, wanting to see where it happened
- excessive concern for others; holding back their needs to protect adults and anxiety about loved ones
- reduced school performance, concentration or ability to play constructively overactive behaviour, restlessness or dissatisfaction
- small ailments or injuries are exaggerated or used to get comfort and security transitions such as from preschool to school may be more difficult. Often there are problems at the start or end of daily activities
- exaggerated reactions to small crises. This may be an expression of their distress about the incident which often they don't fully understand.

How to help

It is better to discuss with children what has happened. Giving them the facts (but without unnecessary detail) helps prevent their imagination taking over.

Encourage them to express emotions. Fear and sadness are their way of coming to terms with what has happened. Hold them or stay with them, offer support while they are upset and then talk about it afterwards.

Keep communication open by asking questions to find out what they are thinking or imagining. Tell them how adults feel and what the actions of adults under stress mean. This will prevent children blaming themselves.

- Reassure them about the future, especially the small details of life which are such an important part of their world.

- Encourage them to continue to be children, to play, explore and laugh when they want to, even though the adults may not feel like it. Children are often able to take their minds off the trauma better than adults.
- Maintain routine and familiarity to help children see that life is secure and predictable.
- Reduce change of any type to a minimum. When change is necessary, take time to prepare children for it.
- Keep them informed of how their recovery is going and what to expect.
- Don't make this the time to correct bad habits, don't overreact to unusual misdeeds or bad behaviour. Talk about the behaviour with the child; they may need to let their tension out somehow.
- Give children time to sort themselves out with your support, don't expect it to be over quickly.
- Keep track of the child; remember what she or he does and says, try not to let lasting changes in temperament and behaviour creep up without noticing.
- Make time for just being together. Take time out and reestablish recreational activities and outings as soon as you can. Pleasure is an important part of healing.
- Re-involve the child in chores and responsibilities as soon as they are ready to cope with them again.
- Take seriously all their concerns, complaints and questions. They may be trying to express something important which they don't have the right words for.
- Parents need to get support to work through their own reactions, so they can help their child.

Summary: Brief tips for parenting after a disaster

Be a caring parent.

- Parents and guardians play a major role in ensuring the safety and well-being of their
- children. Although you may be under more stress after a natural disaster, it is important to
- continue caring for your children. Children are strongly affected by your reactions.

Keep your children safe.

- You must know where your children are and who they are with at all time.

Establish routines.

- Establishing new routines is especially important when normal ones are disrupted. If you are
- in a shelter and unable to return home, establish routines such taking a family walk, eating
- meals together, or reading a bedtime story.

Take a time-out.

- When you feel overwhelmed, take a time-out. Take a few deep breaths, count to 10, or take
- a walk alone.

Ask others for help.

- Ask trusted friends, family members, and other parents for help if you feel overwhelmed.

When to seek help

- The best gift you can offer children is **understanding**. Don't hesitate to seek advice if you do not understand any aspect of your child's behaviour or if you have any concerns. A little help early can save a lot of heartache.