

## Helping children to get through

**NZAGC president Rose Blackett tells her story of the Christchurch earthquake, and offers advice on how best to help children deal with the experience.**

On the day of earthquake, I was in my second-storey office at school, about to join a SENG meeting online. When the quake began, I couldn't physically move because of the shaking, so I could only call out to the girls across the corridor to get into the doorway. They were so brave, clinging together and trying to reassure each other. When the shaking stopped, I went straight over and led them by the hand out into the playground to join other groups of girls.

A few of the girls were very upset, but we raided the boarding house for duvets and biscuits and settled them down. We were singing songs and waving to the big monsoon buckets being flown overhead, although the adults amongst us realised there must be fires burning in the city centre. The reality struck home when the girls' parents began arriving. Some had walked for three hours through the rubble to reach the school, not knowing whether their children were safe, and they looked like war victims – utterly traumatised.

I stayed at school until the last child had been collected. My husband, Rob, meanwhile, had been in his office in the city when the quake happened, next to the Pyne Gould building. He saw that building collapse. Rob walked to Christ's College to collect our son, Tim, and then on to Rangi Ruru College to collect our daughter, Sophie. For quite a few hours I had no idea whether any of them were alive.

When we got home, the mess in our house was a foot high. Possessions everywhere, the piano on its side, broken jars and bottles, and no power or water. It took us two days to clean up enough to move back in, during which time we stayed with my sister. We still don't know how extensively the house is damaged or whether we can stay here long term.

Gifted children are particularly sensitive to events such as disasters because they feel things so strongly. They're prone to anxiety and tend to worry to excess. It's important for parents to act confidently in front of their children even if they're not feeling it, and to keep a close eye on their reactions. For example, children may be filled with fear about whether another earthquake will occur. Just like adults, their reactions will vary; some will really want to talk about it, while others will be very quiet. It's important to answer any questions they have while taking care not to frighten them. For instance, it's better not to say that there could be another big quake; instead, explain that the aftershocks are just the earth settling back down again. If there is another earthquake, you can face that when the time comes.

Other tactic if children don't want to talk, is to encourage them to draw, or write a song or a poem. If they can find an outlet for their fears that way, it can be helpful.

We're being pretty honest about the fact that people are missing. A big hurdle will present itself when the children get back to school and find that their classmates' parents, relatives and friends may have been killed or injured. People have told us that they are treating children who have had limbs amputated and that reality will set in when the schools reopen. During the quake itself, the schools seemed to have coped extremely well and the kids were incredible. If you can stop the initial wave of hysteria, then they seem able to draw on considerable reserves of courage.

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I think it's important to limit children's exposure to reports about the disaster. The visual images being portrayed by the media are at the extreme end of what's happening and if children see them over and over, then that becomes their reality. Instead, turn off the television and try to have dinner as a family, and play board games or other familiar activities.

If you are able to get back into your home, encouraging children to sleep in their own beds as soon as possible is also important. The idea is to aim for normality. That said, little ones who are waking up in the night should be allowed to sleep in their parents' bed. If you've got water, try to keep up with self care, even if it's just having a shower. If you don't have water, try to find a family who does. I know that if someone came knocking on our door asking to have a shower I would certainly invite them in.

Trying to help others is also a way to distract your children. A few days after the earthquake we went out to call on a friend who has a little one with Downs' Syndrome and three other children. To get there, we had to walk through all the sludge in the streets, which is piled up everywhere. It looks like volcanic ash and stinks like sewage.

We discovered that our friend had no water, was shell-shocked and had not slept since the quake. We brought the children home to be comforted, have a bath and get time to play. I asked my son, Tim, who's 16, to help me look after the littlest one, Joe. He said, 'But I can't do it. I don't have your mothering instincts.' I replied, 'Tim, you need to find your fathering instincts, right now.' And he was gorgeous with that little boy. Helping someone else took his mind off what had happened.

A lot of people are leaving the city and re-enrolling their children at schools elsewhere – in Auckland, for example, or near their holiday house if they have one. At the moment we're planning to stay but that may change depending on when the schools will reopen. Tim is in Year 12 and can't afford to be out of school if it turns out to be months.

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing is that even now, after all that's happened, none of this seems real.