



# Helping Children Deal with Loss and Trauma

## A Kids Friendly resource

(Developed on 1 March 2011 in response to the Christchurch earthquake. Updated in February 2012 as we remember Christchurch. This resource is a "work in progress")

### 1. Introduction

The way that we minister to children who are facing trauma is really important. Children need to be reassured about their physical safety, but they also need to understand where God is in the midst of their suffering and the suffering of others.

When traumatic events occur, such as the Christchurch earthquake, children can feel completely out of control and disempowered. They will almost certainly have fears about the event recurring and worries about their own safety and the safety of their family, pets and friends. Children may have flashbacks and find it hard to concentrate. Emotions, feelings and behaviour can be unpredictable, and their stress and anxiety can have physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, stomach aches and difficulty in sleeping.

During this difficult time children look to their parents to provide their primary support and reassurance. But the reassurance of their teachers, Ministers, church leaders, friends and other important adults, is also vital to their overall sense of well being.

### 2. Helping Children Deal with Trauma

It is important that children feel they are able to talk about what has happened. Make space and time for this to happen:

- Keep calm, reassure and comfort children.
- Give age appropriate information.
- Let them tell their stories and listen to them actively, repeating back what they say so they know you understand
- Help them to process their emotions and reassure them that these emotions are normal.
- Use words and pictures to describe their feelings.
- Get back into a routine as quickly as possible.
- Limit media exposure as children don't have the same perspective as adults.

For some more excellent tips for helping children deal with trauma we attach two articles taken from the Parents Inc website:

**Helping children after trauma** by John Cowan, Parents Inc. provides information on coping with stress and tips for parents to help children through difficult times.

**Supporting children through traumatic events** by Steve Taylor, Family and Youth Therapist is also an excellent article.

### **3. Children, Trauma and God**

The conversations we have with children about disasters and trauma are very important. When we talk with children post-trauma, we need to be aware that what we say could affect their beliefs for the rest of their life. We asked Kids Friendly minister Rev Pauline Stewart of St Heliers Presbyterian to share her thoughts and experience on this challenging but important task.

#### **Talking with older children**

Pauline: "Older children want to know the facts, so I always start by asking, "Tell me what you know," followed by, "How do you feel about what you know."

Often children will ask, "Why does God allow this?"

In responding to this I think it's really important to provide reassurance, then challenge their thinking a little bit, and then more reassurance."

#### **Talking with younger children**

"Little children generally want to know, "Does God care?"

- Does he care about the people who are affected?
- Does he care about them?
- Will they be crushed too?

They need reassurance that God is aware of the things that are going on, and that He does care for them and the people they love."

#### **Why is this happening?**

"It is natural for children to question why the traumatic event has happened, and wonder if God was involved in causing it. They need to be reassured that the reason people have died and are homeless is because of the *earthquake*, not because of God.

The earthquake was a natural occurrence. Most natural disasters are. In the same way that the moon orbits around the earth, and the earth around the sun, earthquakes are a part of the way our natural world works. They happen when the tectonic plates of the earth move and shift. God put these natural laws and systems in place when he created the world, and in fact earthquakes are occurring all over the earth regularly; it's just that they hardly ever hurt people. It makes God sad when they do."

## Where is God in all this?

"The question will arise, "Where is God in all this?"

"I explain to children that God is always with people, and God is working through us, and others, to minister and reach out to those who are hurting."

### Where is God in this disaster?

*I think there is God in the response, in the human hearts of those who are feeling and responding to this, the families and neighbors of the victims, and the rest of us, the bystanders, and us, too. The whole world is feeling it.*

*The disaster is. It happened to a "dear one," someone's "dear one," many dear ones. I open my heart and feel it. The place it touches in me, touches God.*

By Rodger Kamenetz, Jewish poet

*"This was not an act of God, it was the earth doing what the earth does. The act of God is us loving one another."*

(The Very Reverend Peter Beck, Dean of the Christchurch Cathedral)

## The Holy Spirit

"I try to reassure children by telling them, "God sends the Holy Spirit to make things right." I ask the children, "How do you think we can make this better in the power of the Holy Spirit?"

You can make a list with the children and ask,

- Can we do these things?
- If not, who can?

Part of being a Christian is problem solving, and this empowers children to be part of the solution, God's hands and feet."

## Opportunities for prayer and reflection

"Allow children an opportunity to bring their prayer needs, and to pray for others. It can be helpful to hold a prayer service for children. We organised a candle service for our preschool children (see Small Miracles example service at the end of this resource.)

### Some other prayer ideas include:

- In a worship setting invite children (and adults) to write or draw their prayers on cards and peg them onto a line that you have set up in your church. At the end ask everyone to take one card and pray about it at home.
- Set up a prayer box that children (and adults) can put their prayers into, and members can be invited to take them home to pray.
- Invite children to draw and/or write their thoughts on paper and display them in your church foyer for others to reflect on.
- Invite children to light a candle from a larger Christ candle to remind them that Christ's light shines even in dark moments.

- At home spend time praying with your children for those suffering the effects of the disaster and for themselves if they are suffering or scared.

John Cowan, from Parents Inc., suggests that “turning children’s concerns into prayers, or hearing you echo back to them what they are feeling, can make them feel truly heard and loved, and help them through this time.” (*“Helping children after trauma” Parents Inc.*)

## **Remember the good things**

“It can be helpful to discuss with children some of the good things that happened at the time of the earthquake and continue to happen. Emphasize how people have coped, how people are loving and serving each other and things are being done to make help people.

But don’t minimise a child’s pain or try to get them to forget. Scars are important, and can be a good thing. They help us to remember. The scar reminds us of what happened, but also shows that we have healed and we can be okay again. Remind children that God gives us the strength to get through and rebuild.”

## **Provide Bible verses to encourage children and families**

“Children are not always good at searching around the Bible. It is good to provide some readily accessible verses for them, especially for older children.

Here are some examples:

- Romans 8:28: ***“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”***
- Romans 8:38-39: ***“I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love – not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!”***

## **4. Helping Children Understand and Process**

### **Working with Preschoolers**

Susan Piaggi, Head Teacher at Small Miracles Preschool (St Heliers Presbyterian Church, Auckland), shared her ideas on helping children process the Christchurch earthquake:

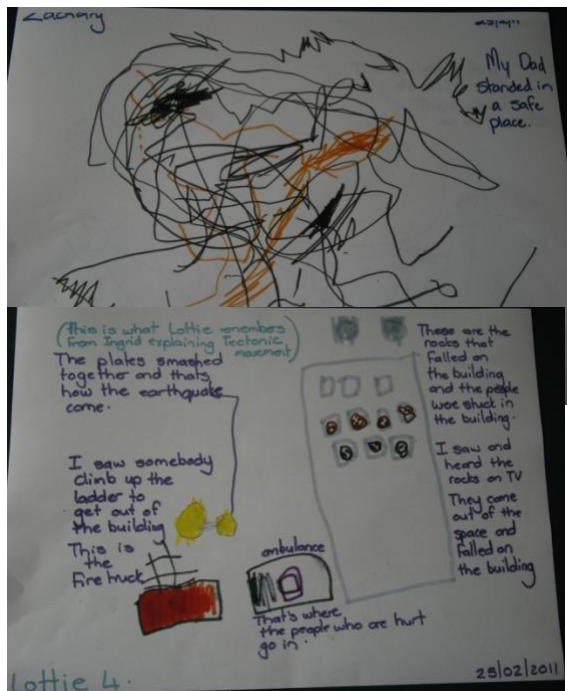
“Even though our children didn’t experience the earthquake firsthand, many of them have seen the news and picked up their parent’s anxiety. Then there are others don’t know anything about it. It is best to listen and talk with those who are thinking about it and help them process what they have seen, while making sure you don’t traumatise the children who are unaware of the event.

It is important for children to be provided with opportunities to draw pictures, tell stories (recorded in the children’s own words by a teacher if the children are too young to write themselves), and share at news time.

Talk with the children about how earthquakes happen, so they understand the natural science of what is going on. We watched a video on the topic, from the earthquake section of the DVD "Suzie's World: Wet Wild World, Vol 16", which is suitable for younger children.

We had an earthquake drill so children feel secure that they know what to do to keep safe.

Here are some examples of the children's stories from Small Miracles Preschool which we displayed in our church foyer to help others too:



"My Dad standed in a safe place. These are all the cracks in the buildings and roads. A guy fell in the mud. There was a grey whirl pool."  
by Zachary, 3 (whose father was in Christchurch at the time of the earthquake)

"The plates smashed together and that's how the earthquake came. I saw somebody climb up the ladder to get out of the building. This is the fire truck and ambulance. That's where the people who are hurt go in. These are the rocks that falled on the building and the people were stuck in the building. I saw and heard the rocks on TV. They came out of the space and falled on the building."  
by Lottie, 4.

Our ministers also held a short service in the church for our preschool children. See below:

### **Candle Service for preschoolers at St Heliers Presbyterian Church**

Rev. Pauline Stewart ran a Candle Service to help the children of Small Miracles Preschool process the Christchurch earthquake and pray for others.

She started by lighting a big candle saying: "Children even though this room (the church sanctuary) isn't dark, if it was, the candle would be the brightest thing in the room. Jesus is like the candle.

At this time, some people feel like they are in the dark because of the earthquake. When we light a candle we are saying, "Jesus, can you shine for all of the children and adults who are very sad and feel they are in the dark."

The children then came up one by one to light a candle, with two adults to help them, and two adults remaining further back with the rest of the children.

At the end of the service, Pauline prayed with the children, and then lead them in praying for all the children and people of Christchurch.

Pauline gives the following advice for running a preschool service:

- Make sure you have adults to help when you are involving candles.
- Remember there is no hurry. Reassure everyone that they will get a turn.
- Make sure you move slowly, talk in a calm voice, with conviction. Let your actions be deliberate and slow.
- Don't tell the children to sit still, just say, "I've got something very important to tell you." They will understand the gravity and sit still of their own accord.
- Always mention the Holy Spirit, that God sends to make things right.
- For small children, get them to put their hands together in prayer – this helps them to focus, and builds the ability for quiet thought and meditation.
- Little children can repeat a prayer after you if you break it into small chunks.
- Finish with reassurance, and pray with the children, saying: "Now I'm going to pray for you."

## **Partnering with Christchurch churches**

Cate Burton of St Paul's KatiKati wrote today to share a wonderful idea:

"Our church has formed a connection with St Margaret's in Bishopdale, Christchurch. Last Sunday we wrote prayers, recorded messages and drew pictures that we have put together and will be sending down to St Margaret's. I think that this connection will be helpful for both our children and adults to process what they are feeling."

## **Thinking of and responding to the people of Christchurch**

Cheryl Harray of Flagstaff, Dunedin wrote:

"As part of our children's day 'Fun in the park' this Sunday (6 March, 2011) I am organising calico banners with a big heart shape and the words 'Love and affection to Christchurch from Children's Day Dunedin 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2011. The public, especially children will be invited to do a painted handprint to go inside this heart and write their first names. I am going to prepare at least 4 as we are expecting 1 or 2000 during the day. Will have photos of the whole day and make sure we get some of the kids doing this to add to a bit of a story. Many of the activities through the day are free. There will be collection points for Christchurch and any profits are going to Christchurch as well."

## **Kids in Mission**

The children of St Ronan's of Eastbourne responded to the devastating February Christchurch earthquake with empathy:

Like the little boy who offered his lunch to feed the five thousand: "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" (John 6:9), the children of St Ronan's "Power Hour" first offered what they had.

"We decided we wanted to give our offerings from Power Hour to help the people in Christchurch," says 10 year old Amber-Rose Sales, "but then it grew into something bigger!"

Friends Amber-Rose, Mia and John Warman and Bridie Bagnall were soon joined by Sophia and Leo Cotsilinis. In April they discussed the idea of putting on a Fete to raise extra funds and involve the whole church.

"We wanted to make the things ourselves to help raise more money," says Mia, 10. "We came up with lots of ideas. We made biscuits, fudge, cupcakes, cards, and we even grew plants and seedlings to sell." As well as this, people could give a donation to have a photo taken as an "angel" and to float a prayer candle at the "prayer wishing well".

After making posters and advertising the event for several weeks leading up to the fete, the children decorated the morning tea room with red and black balloons and set up their stalls.

"It was amazing the way the congregation rushed into morning tea after church and immediately over to the stalls," says Power Hour coordinator Susan Connell. "It was like the first day of sales after Christmas! The children were stunned at the response and the amount of money that was raised."

All in all the children were able to present a cheque for \$639.20 (including \$150 from mainly music) to St Paul's Trinity Pacific Church in Christchurch which was badly damaged in the earthquakes. They also packed and sent a box of goodies, including Sunday School prizes, a Bible, craft materials and 20 knitted beanies (from the St Ronan's Beanie Knitters group).

The congregation at St Paul's were overwhelmed by the generosity and love they received from the children and the whole church of St Ronan's. "Words fail to express our gratitude and appreciation for what the Power Hour children have given our congregation," says Rev Lapana Faletolu of St Paul's.



## Remembering Christchurch (2012)

# Remembering Christchurch

*22 February 2012*

We took the children up to the church today for a quiet time to reflect and think about the people of Christchurch one year after the big quake. Pauline spoke to the children about the Earthquake and the sadness in Christchurch. She explained to them that it helps these people to know that the rest of New Zealand are thinking of them. At 12:51 we heard the Church bell ring once at St Philips Church and then we had a moment of silence as we thought about Christchurch. The children were very good and sat quietly throughout. Finally we all lit a candle of remembrance.





## Other helpful resources:

**Skylight** [www.skylight.org.nz/Earthquake+Aftermath+Support](http://www.skylight.org.nz/Earthquake+Aftermath+Support) has many links to useful sites and resources, including activities for children that could be good for use at home, school or in children's programmes.

Skylight (2012) has developed some material to support those anywhere in NZ seeking to mark the first anniversary of the February 22<sup>nd</sup> earthquake including including "Kids Friendly" worship services and prayers.

## Children's Ministry Today [www.childrensministrytoday.com](http://www.childrensministrytoday.com)

has a Sunday school lesson plan entitled: *What do you tell your children when they are afraid? How can you encourage your kids to wholeheartedly trust God?* The plan includes games, activities, Bible stories and real life stories, and costs \$10 US.

**Seasons For Growth** is a programme aimed to help children explore feelings, memories, loss and grief.

## Children's books recommended by Delia, Seasons For Growth

- Will My Rabbit Go To Heaven? by Jeremy Hughes
- Badger's Parting Gift by Susan Varley
- Memory Flowers by Donna Ellis
- Brodie by Joy Cowley

## Websites:

[www.mineduc.govt.nz](http://www.mineduc.govt.nz)

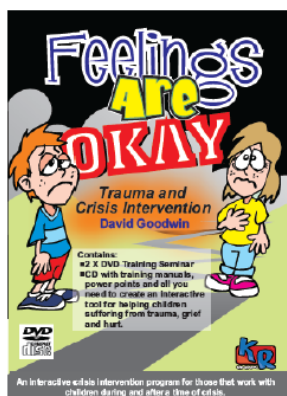
[www.health.govt.nz/yourhealth-topics/emergency-management/managing-stress-emergency/helping-children](http://www.health.govt.nz/yourhealth-topics/emergency-management/managing-stress-emergency/helping-children) - a good resource for helping children deal with trauma

[www.trauma.pages.com/chld-res.htm](http://www.trauma.pages.com/chld-res.htm) (autistic spectrum)

[www.relate.org.nz](http://www.relate.org.nz)

## Training DVD from Kidsreach ([www.kidsreach.org.nz](http://www.kidsreach.org.nz)):

# CHILDREN IN TRAUMA



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power points and all you  
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and hurt.

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## **Acknowledgements:**

We thank the ministers and preschool teachers of St Heliers Presbyterian Church for helping us with this resource. Thanks too to our wonderful children's ministry leaders for sharing their stories: Cate Burton of KatiKati, Cheryl Harray of Flagstaff, Susan Connell of Eastbourne.

This is a "work in progress". Please share your ideas and experiences with us so we can add to and improve this resource by contacting us:

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