

Managing Trauma with Infants and Young Children after the Christchurch Earthquake.

People often believe that infants are not really affected by natural disasters such as earthquakes because they are “too young to remember”. This couldn’t be further from the truth. The importance of the first three years to the overall development of the brain, and the now clear link between early experience and who we become as adults, means the infant and young child is potentially vulnerable to the stress of an event such as an earthquake. But with care and love from their parents/caregivers there is no reason why they shouldn’t get over it.

Of all the age groups, it is infants who are most susceptible to the lifelong effects associated with trauma because of the huge influence the environment has in the first three years on brain development. However, this does not have to be the case if parents and caregivers are able to respond in appropriate ways to help the child manage their fear and anxiety. This is a summary for parents of the key learnings from research. To begin, we need to address the urban myth that the baby is not affected because “they don’t remember”.

Will infants remember the Earthquake?

We now understand with much greater clarity how the memory develops, and that memory is functioning prior to birth. The early memory is more like remembering the *feeling* and emotional state, without being able to recall or describe the events. The infant’s brain has not

yet reached a point of development where they will fully understand the events, the causes and reasons for the earthquake, but they will have the ability to understand and *remember* fear and anxiety.

Because the infant can’t understand the traumatic event but still feels the fear this leaves the infant exposed and vulnerable to ongoing stress. The infant does not understand that the danger has passed, or even that it was the shaking ground that caused her to be stressed.

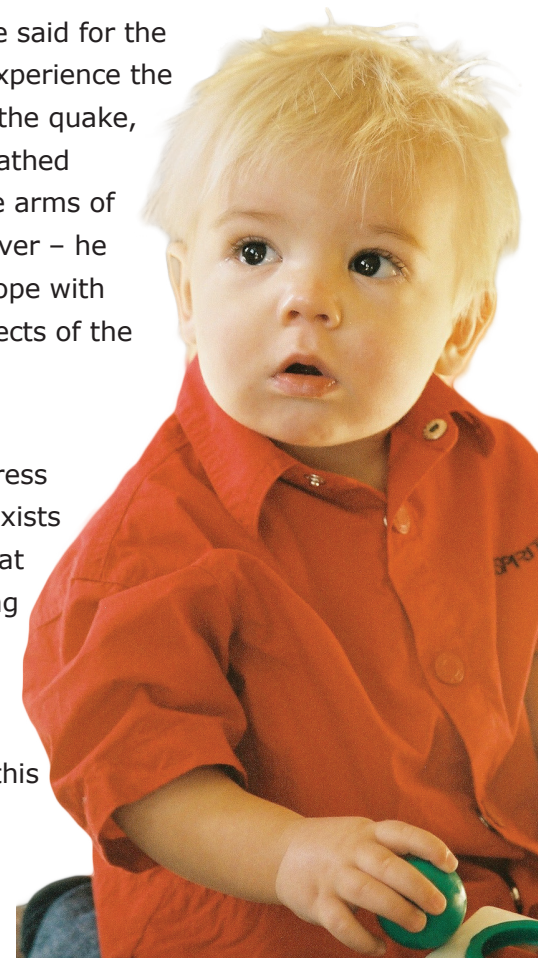
What about after the Earthquake?

It is fair to say that if the infant was asleep or in a situation that allowed them to feel safe and secure when the earthquake struck, then they were probably not traumatised by the quake itself.

The same could be said for the infant who *does* experience the fear and terror of the quake, but emerges unscathed and straight to the arms of his primary caregiver – he is more likely to cope with the immediate effects of the shaking ground.

It is however the environment of stress and anxiety that exists *after* the quake that is more threatening to the infant.

The baby needs his caregivers to protect him from this stress.



Babies need caring people not things

Babies are indeed more resilient to some aspects of the earthquake than adults. The baby is not hugely affected by the loss of the family home or all his belongings. These things have never been important to the baby because just about every single thing he needs for his healthy development is found in his primary caregiver (often the mother) and not in the array of gadgets, gimmicks, toys and possessions we learn to value as we get closer to adulthood.

He does not care if Mum and Dad are now unemployed due to the closure of their workplace. In fact for the baby this may be experienced as a huge bonus as the most important thing in the world to the infant are his Mum and Dad and they now have no place to go and are available to him much more often!

As a parent/caregiver how should I respond?

It is how his parents/caregivers respond to these challenging situations that is the most important. If his caregivers are consistently available to him, maintain (for most of the time in his presence) a sense of calm and wellbeing, and respond to his fears with a protective instinct that shields him from ongoing trauma and comforts/reassures him whenever this is needed, then the baby has all he needs to be resilient and flourish.

Parents sometimes worry that giving the child extra attention, affection and comfort will result in the child becoming 'clingy' and overly reliant on their parents. Some parents mistakenly leave their distressed child alone thinking that "he has got to learn". They assume that the more often the child is left to deal with distress by themselves, the better they will be at it. This is the exact opposite of what the current research expresses. In fact, the people who grow into the most secure and resilient adults are most often those who experience an early environment which is quick to relieve their stress. This helps the baby to calm

down quickly by comforting and reassuring them that they are safe and can rely on Mum and Dad to protect them.

This concept is summed up best by understanding that the less time a child spends in distress as an infant, the more resilient they will likely be as adults. So the infant who has parents and caregivers who usually respond to his stress by actively helping him to calm down are less likely to become a clingy child or insecure adult.

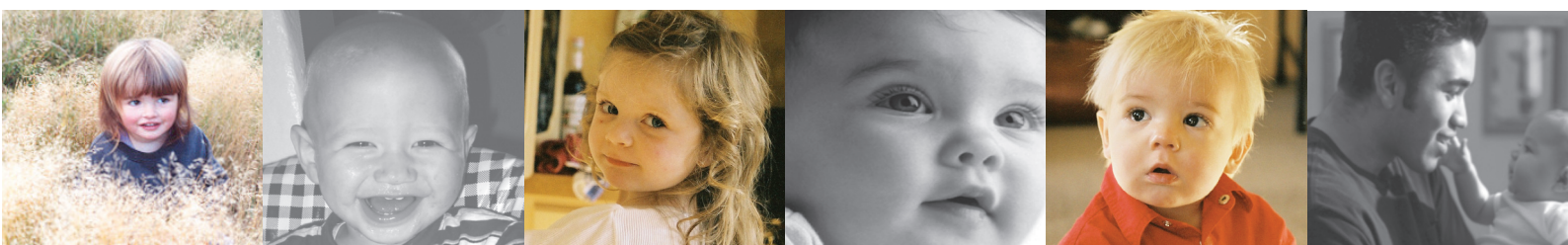
Supporting the parent/caregiver

It is likely clear to the reader by now that if we want to ensure the wellbeing of the infant, we need to make sure his parent/caregiver is well enough to respond to the infant in ways that will soothe the baby and ensure their wellbeing. It is therefore important that the wellbeing of the main parent/caregiver is a priority for the family.

While taking over the care of baby for short periods of time to allow the main parent/caregiver some time for self care is a wonderful way for family and whānau to support, we may discover that because the baby is also stressed they have an even stronger desire than usual to stay with their parent. Therefore taking over duties that don't distract from the carer's ability to be available to the baby (hanging out washing, preparing meals, cleaning the bathroom etc) will give the parent and the infant what they need.

Support and reassurance – what your children need

Generally speaking, the more emotionally supported a child feels the smaller the long term impact of the traumatic event. By responding to and assisting the vulnerable infant in ways that make them feel safe and emotionally cared for, parents and caregivers will greatly help to lessen the impact on your baby of any traumatic event.



Contact Brainwave for more information:

Telephone: 9 528 3981 Fax 9 528 3981. Email info@brainwave.org.nz Web :www.brainwave.org.nz