

Advice for adults and parents 4: What to do with children

- Regular routines are helpful. While you might relax routines, such as bedtimes, when children are highly distressed, try to re-introduce those routines as soon as possible. Make good use of favourite toys, stories or activities to help children feel settled.
- When children are back at school, teachers will be doing the same. They will find a balance between enabling children to process the events and to providing safety and security through regular routines.
- Expressing creativity through art and craft activities, singing, playing and listening to music, poetry and story writing, drama, dance, play and physical expression are all ways in which children can immerse themselves to process their feelings safely.
- Keep them occupied – often the conversations they have and questions they ask while they are finger painting, making a card or going for a walk can be very valuable because you get an insight into what they are thinking without re-traumatising them.
- Keep children away from re-runs of the events on television news and from the hype on social media. Research from the US found that some children who repeatedly watched the 9/11 planes crashing into buildings ended up with a form of mild trauma.
- It is important that children do not keep revisiting the matters they find distressing. Try to distract them with other activities, favourite toys, happy conversations or an occasional treat.
- Watch how individual children react – it may change from day to day and over time. One child might be very emotional and then move on – another might be very quiet but then display unusual behaviour at a later date.
- If a child has been strongly affected they might exhibit behaviours such as clinginess, bedwetting, withdrawal, lethargy or acting out. Keep calm and monitor these behaviours. If these behaviours continue for a prolonged period or start to impact on school or home life, it might be time to seek help. Start with your GP, school or community counsellor. They can refer you on from there. There are also helplines to contact.
- If a child has had an earlier traumatic event or has a history of anxiety or depression, new events can trigger a relapse. Just keep an eye on how they react to the new event and seek help if necessary.

This information is supplied by Professor Carol Mutch (from the University of Auckland), a researcher in disaster response and recovery from her own work and the research and advice of other experts in the field. It is designed to provide a general overview and might need adaptation for individual circumstances.