

## **Tips for parents and teachers – supporting children with ASD**

When a large earthquake happens, everyone's sense of safety is threatened. The first concern is to assure them that they're safe and that you will help keep them safe until their parents or other family members come to get them at the end of the day. You can help by re-establishing daily routines as soon as possible.

Children might become confused and fearful as they might not have the ability to understand or process their feelings. Helping children feel safe takes time, patience, and it takes the ability of the adults in their lives to be reassuring again and again.

All children are different and might not show stress in the same way, but it is common for children to revert to behaviours they have previously grown out of e.g., sucking their thumb, wetting themselves. It is important to know the individual child and take note of any changes in their behaviour.

## **Things to keep in mind when helping children and young people under stress**

- Assure the child/young person that you have a plan in place should anything happen again.
- Speak calmly and reassuringly – because they're coming to you from a stressful situation, they might need extra attention and reassurance.
- Spend time with the child/young person, especially when they arrive.
- Address them by their names often to let them know you know who they are and that you are there to help them.
- Learn what makes each child comfortable – get as much information from their parents as possible.
- Don't force any participation if they are hesitant or obviously feeling anxious or sad.
- Allow them to bring or hold onto any objects they find familiar or comforting.
- Provide a variety of age appropriate calming activities – music, reading, art, blowing bubbles.
- Have plenty of paper and crayons for children to draw their thoughts and feelings – record these in portfolios.

## **Autism and coping with stressful events such as earthquakes**

Children and young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are often very dependent on regularity, predictability and routine to manage their behaviour and emotions. Natural disasters result in disrupted routines, may require the whole family to relocate and almost certainly will bring the child into contact with strangers. Even minor changes to environments and people will increase anxiety and stress for children with ASD.

People on the autism spectrum might:

- appear deaf or as though they don't understand you
- be unable to speak or use unusual patterns of speech
- become withdrawn or have 'melt downs'
- use repetitive behaviours (often these rituals help to screen out the stressors for the person with ASD)
- appear insensitive to pain
- be hypersensitive to noises, smells, sounds or touch
- appear anxious or nervous
- dart away from you unexpectedly or 'do a runner'
- use repetitive behaviours (eg, flapping their hands in front of their face or rocking to and fro).

### **Observe and listen**

- Do not attempt to physically block repetitive behaviours as they are often calming to a person with autism.
- Remember that each child/young person is unique - no two children/young people with ASD will respond to events in exactly the same ways.
- Children/young people with autism may ask the same question over and over again as they try to process what has happened. Patiently answer those questions and keep the responses consistent.
- Children/young people who find it hard to speak might resort to more ritualistic behaviours and/or become withdrawn.
- Acknowledge that they don't like change and that many changes will come up during a disaster. Try to give advance warning of changes, e.g. we won't sleep here tonight. The road is broken. We might have to take a different route.
- As much as possible, make sure they have favourite objects, clothes and foods.

### **Connect and communicate**

- Know the young person's preferred method of communication and if they use resources e.g. communication boards, try to make sure that they are on hand.
- Speak slowly and use simple language. Use language the child understands. Speak at the child's language level, giving short explanations. Back up verbal explanations or requests with more concrete materials, e.g. photos, communication books
- Check the child's/young persons understanding, using concrete materials if need be e.g. 'can you show me ...'
- Be aware of the child's/young persons tendency to take verbal information literally
- Repeat simple questions.
- Allow time for responses.
- Give lots of praise and make sure it is specific.

### **Use pictures and talk together**

Each discussion offers an opportunity to help children understand and cope. Get to know the young person's preferred sensory mode, e.g. touch, smell or sound. Build on the young person's strengths by providing information in formats that they prefer. Show photos of the recovery operation e.g., tell them how the fire-fighter or police officer pictured is helping. This can be done many times over the coming days.

### **Use Social Stories**

Social Stories are a way to teach social knowledge and skills to children with ASD. A story is written and illustrated with pictures or photographs from a child's perspective. Write a story about what is happening to the child/young person and their family and how you are planning to manage the disruptions and after shocks.

### **Try to establish a schedule**

Try to establish a regular schedule as soon as possible e.g., set regular times for meals or particular activities. A natural disaster can greatly disrupt regular schedules, increasing the extent to which your life feels chaotic and out of control. Coming up with a daily, structured schedule can help children with ASD re-establish a sense of predictability and control and control fears and anxiety.

### **Dealing with the lack of awareness of danger**

The child with ASD might not be aware of danger in the same way as other children/young person. Gently persuade the child/young person to move away from danger or remove them if they might be harmed.

### **Stress might cause some children to hurt themselves**

Under stress some children/young people might hurt themselves. Use the least invasive technique possible to ensure they're kept safe.

### **Be calm**

Parents, educators and care providers need to appear calm during a disaster or emergency, even if they are not. Children/young people with ASD may well sense your emotional state – and mimic it. Practice being calm eg, lower your voice, talk at your normal rate and slow your actions and gestures.

### **Use visual signs**

For some children/young people with ASD, the use of boundaries and signs might help them to understand limits and expectations. Use dividers, tape boundaries, and signs as needed eg, for children who climb on high surfaces or enter areas that they should not, STOP signs will let them know that what they are doing is dangerous. Using colour tape to designate boundaries on carpets, floors, or walls in an earthquake drill could help to visually remind the child where they need to be.

**An extra resource**

This resource has been helpful for some families

[http://www.tautoko.org.nz/uploads/When\\_stuff\\_happens\\_Version\\_2.pdf](http://www.tautoko.org.nz/uploads/When_stuff_happens_Version_2.pdf)