



# IMHAANZ

INFANT MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

## YOUNG CHILDREN, TRAUMA AND SLEEP

Letter from the Infant Mental Health Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (IMHAANZ)

### DEAR PARENTS WITH BABIES AND TODDLERS

We want to let you know that we are still thinking of you in Christchurch and around the country, wherever you may be seeking refuge. We also imagine that your young children might still be finding it difficult to settle during this time of upheaval for you and your family, especially when it comes to sleeping.

#### What Sleep? -

Following a natural disaster

We want to talk to you a little bit about sleep following a natural disaster. Often families find that their little ones may be managing really well during the day, but finding it really hard to go to sleep at nighttime. At these times, difficulty getting off to sleep or frequently waking in the night are ways that babies and toddlers let us know that they are still frightened. Letting them know that you are there and that you will keep them safe through the night will help them feel safe, reassured and more trusting that it is safe to sleep.

We understand, for parents and caregivers sleep deprivation is hard enough to deal with under usual circumstances, let alone when you are already on edge with limited basic resources and during ongoing aftershocks. The last thing you need is more broken sleep! This may have been going on for some weeks or perhaps has just started to happen. As you grow in your strength and resilience, your young children also grow in their confidence to share with you their fears and worries.

Natural disasters interfere with young children's natural sleep rhythms.

We encourage you not to try and 'teach' your children how to manage on their own at this time. When children are frightened they are

unable to learn new things because their brain is working so hard trying to make sense of what they are fearful of. The learning happens when they are calm. Responding to them in a comforting way when they need it will help them to learn to manage better on their own and eventually they will not need you so often.

If they could speak your baby or toddler might say to you "I woke up and it's dark and I am scared to be on my own so I'm calling out to you mummy and daddy. Once I know you are with me I will be ok but I just need to know that you are there while I am feeling like this". You might reassure them by telling them "It's ok, I know you are waking up because everything is different and hard to understand right now. But one thing is the same, I am here and I will keep you safe".

Young children re-find their sleep rhythm best when this is a shared venture.

Every time your child calls out to you and you respond in a way that calms them down, they get another internal building block of security. This building block is like an inside photo that your young child develops. Over time this inside picture of you will be so clear and strong that your young child will draw strength from this and not need your physical presence so much.

Whatever your philosophy on sleeping, whether your baby sleeps with you or in a room of their own, think about what it is that will help reassure this particular child. Some children may need frequent cuddles during the night, others may just need your voice to comfort them. They may need you to sleep in their room with them for a while or it might be that you choose to bring them into your bed. You will know what it is that your child needs and we want you to know that it will not be this way forever, but it may take some

time for your young children to feel secure enough to return to their usual sleeping patterns.

Young children grow the capacity to be alone, such as to sleep, when their needs are met by people they love.

Now is not the time to let them cry it out. They need you more than ever right now. We encourage you to let your child's need for more of you right now guide what you do. However, you might be worried if you do this that you will be spoiling them, or that they never grow through this and you will end up raising a needy child. While these fears are understandable, we want you to know that children who have been frightened will return to their previous normal, settled state quicker when you meet their need for comfort. Responding to this need does not increase it.

We also know and appreciate that you too have needs and of course one of these is for your young children to sleep. This may seem the long way to go about it. However, while they are expressing their worry and need for comfort, you can trust that they will grow their security to sleep more quickly with your help, rather than on their own. They will learn best to be alone when in your presence.

Finally, we know that to offer this extra special parenting at this time also increases your own need for support and care. We encourage you to seek this for yourself during the day when you can, so when it comes to the nighttime, you come self-fueled and ready. We are thinking about you and wish you all the best.

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