



trauma & children

what do we know and how can we help them through?

“And hold firmly to the rope of Allah together and do not become divided.”

The Qur'an

Kia hora te marino
Kia whakapapa pounamu te moana
Kia tere te kārohirohi i mua i tō huarahi.

May peace be widespread
May the sea glisten like greenstone
May the shimmer of light guide
you on your way.

Our hearts go out to the many people who lost their lives in the recent terrorist attack in Christchurch, to the injured, to those who lost loved ones, and to all who witnessed the horror.

Many of us are grappling with what has occurred. We are feeling shocked, sad, and disbelieving. Of course our children and our babies are listening and watching too. They will be picking up on the stress their communities are feeling, and they will be closely observing the ways we all react, and what we do to cope.

So what is known about the ways in which children are affected by stress? How can we best meet their needs?

Children and young people have a range of feelings after a traumatic event, just as adults do. They might feel angry, sad, scared, worried or numb. Some children feel guilt or shame, even though they have no responsibility for what has happened. If this happens, adult reassurance that they are not responsible is helpful.¹



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Children and young people have a range of feelings after a traumatic event, just as adults do.

It may seem obvious, but feelings and reactions will differ between different children,² even if their experience has been similar. For example, two classmates in the school lockdown, may have very different emotional responses. Neither will be 'right' or 'wrong', just different. Of course, the way some children will react will be easier for adults to understand and handle than others.

The way in which children and young people are affected by trauma and its aftermath depends on many things. These include:

- The extent to which children were exposed to the events, either by being directly involved, or watching the events online.³
- Their age. While people of any age can be affected, younger children are typically more vulnerable.⁴
- How closely they are connected to what's occurred, for example, were they or family members directly involved?
- The way adults around them are feeling.
- The way in which adults around them are coping.
- What other stressors they have been exposed to in their life, before and after the terror attacks.⁵
- While not true in all cases, boys are more likely to act out, or 'externalise' their distress, while girls are more likely to become more quiet and withdrawn.⁶

Children benefit when parents and other adults can put aside their expectations of how a child 'should' feel, and accept how each individual child does feel.

Also, let's remind ourselves that being told 'Don't worry,' 'Cheer up,' or 'Calm down' has never really helped us, and is unlikely to help our children.

What should we look out for?

While there are many ways children can show stress, these are a few common examples:

- Difficulty concentrating or taking in new information. This may mean they are not doing as well on their school work as they usually do.
- Doing things that felt fairly easy prior to the trauma may take immense effort afterwards. Children may appear to lose skills they've previously mastered e.g. using the toilet.
- Small daily events may lead to a much bigger reaction than would previously have been the case, e.g. responding angrily to friends or family. When we already feel under stress, we can seem to over-react.
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
- Changes to eating e.g. loss of appetite, or eating more.

It is important to note here that there may be no outward signs of stress, so that makes it difficult for all of us. At this time, we should spend time with and support children even if they are showing no signs of stress.

The timing of peoples' reactions to events can vary considerably. For some, their distress may be obvious very quickly; others may be taken by surprise by the strength of their reaction after some time has passed.

Spend time together. Do things they enjoy

Children of all ages need time with their parents and support people when they can have their full attention. Many adults will be seeking support and company at this time and children feel this need too, probably even more than adults.

Hanging out together and doing things children enjoy has many benefits. It helps them be calm. It helps provide them with a sense of 'connection' to their parents. They need to know they're important.

Crucially, it's often in these quieter and more relaxed times with parents that children may feel able to ask questions, share how they're feeling, or ask for what they need.

¹ Schonfeld & Demaria, 2015

² Schilpzand et al., 2018

³ Schonfeld & Demaria, 2015

⁴ Weems & Overstreet, 2008

⁵ La Greca et al., 2010

⁶ Pfefferbaum et al., 2015

⁷ Frost, 1998

⁸ Music, 2011



Children benefit when parents and other adults can put aside their expectations of how a child 'should' feel, and accept how each individual child **does** feel.

Babies feel stress a great deal, as all is new and unknown to them, and this can be overwhelming. Babies and young children 'outsource' their calming down to those caring for them. If those adults are stressed, they need to be aware that their babies may also feel stressed, and will need soothing.

If children sense that the adults in their lives are struggling to cope they may not share their feelings, in order to avoid burdening their parents further.¹⁰ It is natural that adults, too, are struggling with these events. Where possible having strong support – from family, friends, community members, and/or appropriate professionals – will be helpful, not only for the parents own health, but also to enhance their ability to care for their children. If children feel that adults are supported by others, they are more likely to seek support for themselves.

Understanding Stress & the Brain. Why we (especially children) 'can't think' when we are stressed

The stress response is essential to survival; it's the way in which we deal with threat and is often known as our 'fight or flight' response.¹¹ Under stress our bodies undergo a number of changes; heart rate and blood pressure increase, and various stress hormones are released, including cortisol.¹² In order to have the energy to do all this, a number of other bodily systems that aren't needed for immediate survival shut down. This includes our higher (more rational) cognitive functions.

While the whole brain works together, many parts of the brain do have specific functions. When we are calm, the areas of the brain involved with our emotions work in a balanced way with those involved with our thinking. Under stress this balance changes, with the emotional parts ruling us more than the rational.

Children seek support in a variety of ways; sometimes this will be direct, such as saying "I'm really angry" or crying. With other children it will be subtler; perhaps they want to be physically close to their parents more often than they were before, or want help with things they used to do by themselves.

Play is their tool

Children use play to work through what's happened. Play is one way they make frightening events more manageable and understandable. It gives them an opportunity to express and process their experiences, feelings, worries and hopes. Let them play. Give them lots of time for unstructured play. Play with them, letting them lead the play.

Do they want to talk about it?

It's great when adults recognise when children do need comfort, or to talk about what's happened and how they're feeling, but it's equally important to be able to see when a child has had enough, and to support them to move on when they're ready. For example, children may talk or ask questions about what's happened and then suddenly change the subject to "What's for lunch?" or a game they want to play. While this can take us by surprise, it probably means they have enough information or reassurance for now, and are ready to move on to something else. For now. There is a lot for our young ones to process; they are likely to come back to it, over and over again. Let them decide when.

How are you feeling?

The way adults are feeling themselves has an impact on the way children in their care adjust.⁹ Babies, children and young people pick up on the feelings of those around them, people such as parents, siblings, friends and teachers. Babies, in particular, are so much more aware of, and affected by, the way those caring for them are feeling, than many people realise.

⁹ Peek et al., 2018; Schilpzand et al., 2018

¹⁰ Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016

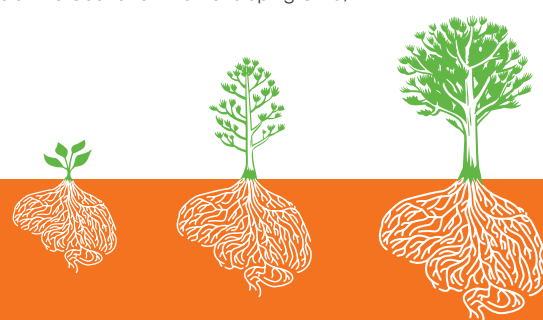
¹¹ Sinnamon, 2019

¹² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014

¹³ Sinnamon, 2019

¹⁴ Bruce et al., 2013

¹⁵ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014



The timing of peoples' reactions to events can vary considerably.

We have all struggled to think rationally when we have been under stress, when we've been hurrying, or when we've been scared or anxious. We can all be 'unreasonable' under stress, and children feel this especially.

Adults and children both have stress responses. However, adults' higher brain functions are usually more established, which should enable them to better handle their emotional experience through reasoning.¹³ In children and young people these functions are still developing. In fact, it's not until our mid-twenties or thereabouts that we reliably access this part of the brain. As a result, babies, children, and teens facing threat or stress have fewer resources to draw on. Therefore, they need more support.

In other words, the emotional parts of the brain are more likely to dominate, without the usual input from the more thinking parts. This is one of the reasons why children's emotional reactions to traumatic events are likely to be stronger than adults, and why they can have greater difficulty handling their feelings.

Both real and perceived threats can lead to the stress response.¹⁴ Even though the threat has passed, children may feel unsafe in other situations, triggering their stress response with all its effects on their brain and rest of their body. Again, we have all experienced feeling 'jittery' and 'on edge' long after an actual threat has gone.

If they feel understood, they will be less stressed

Sensitive caregiving actually helps children better regulate their stress hormone production.¹⁵ This means they are less likely to be adversely affected by ongoing exposure to higher stress hormone levels. It's worth noting though, this doesn't mean children won't still have some reaction to what's occurred. It's just that we can help them deal with it better. This can help them practice dealing with stress throughout their life.

Conclusions

The important role that parents and other adults play in supporting children in difficult times, does not mean there is one 'perfect' or 'right' way of doing things. Being there and doing our best to support our children is more important, than 'getting it right.'

Children's ability to cope with both what is happening now, and the extent to which they might be affected in the future depend on them having safe, supportive and dependable adults who can provide the support they need.

This can be extremely hard when their parents, teachers or other important adults are themselves struggling to deal with what has occurred.

Every single one of us have a role to play in contributing to an environment in which those affected have the opportunity to heal.



Kia kaha, Kia māia, Kia manawanui
Be strong, be brave, be steadfast

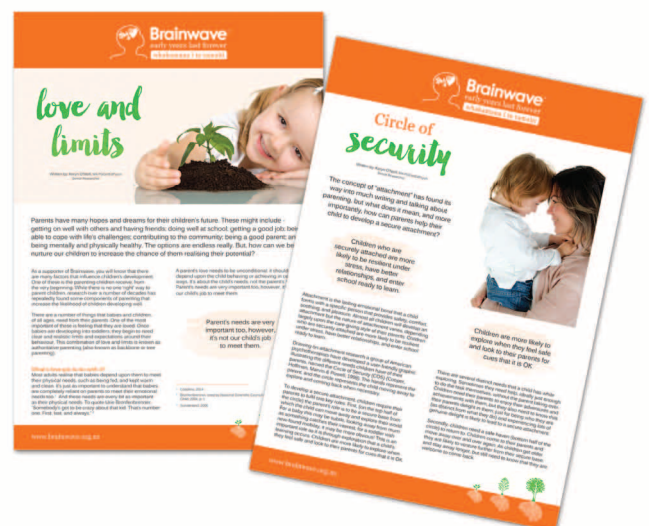
The full reference list for this article can be found at <http://www.brainwave.org.nz/category/all-articles/>

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Circle of Security <http://www.brainwave.org.nz/circle-of-security/>

Love and Limits <http://www.brainwave.org.nz/love-and-limits/>

Resilient Rangatahi <https://www.brainwave.org.nz/resilient-rangatahi/>





Another way of looking at teens:

positive youth development

By Keryn O'Neill, MA, PGCertEdPsych, Knowledge Manager

Teenagers. Let's think about that for a minute. What images, thoughts, or feelings does the word teenagers conjure up?

"Storm & Stress"

For a long time, the teen years have been seen as a time of "storm & stress". We assume that rangatahi cause problems; problems for themselves, and for those around them. Hormones are frequently blamed. Whānau and others need to cross their fingers and hope to make it out the other side. Preferably in one piece.

This view is widespread, reinforced by media, parents, and sometimes even 'experts' on adolescents. Parents of young children sometimes dread their tamariki becoming rangatahi.

This view has influenced the study of adolescents since early last century.¹ These ideas began to change as researchers started to realise that most rangatahi actually do pretty well during their teen years. NZ research found that about 80% of secondary school students were healthy and not engaging in high risk behaviours.²

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When we expect the worst, we are more likely to get it.

Positive Youth Development

There is another way to look at this stage in a person's life. Positive Youth Development (PYD), shifts our view of rangatahi from 'problems to be solved'³ to 'resources to be developed'. Rather than focussing on preventing problems, adults need to actively assist rangatahi to develop the skills they'll need to thrive as adults. Just preventing young people from 'getting into trouble' is not enough.

Negative stereotypes: at what cost?

Critical talk about rangatahi can create self-fulfilling prophecies, as they "live up or down to the expectations they believe we hold for them."⁴

When we expect the worst, we are more likely to get it. Studies have shown that the more parents expect their teen to be rebellious and take risks, the more likely this is to actually happen.⁵ Similarly, parents who believed that their teen was likely to drink, had teens who drank more.⁶ In other words, research suggests that not only are these negative stereotypes wrong much of the time, they can also contribute to poorer outcomes. The very thing we want to avoid.

¹ Hall, 1904, cited by Lerner et al., 2005

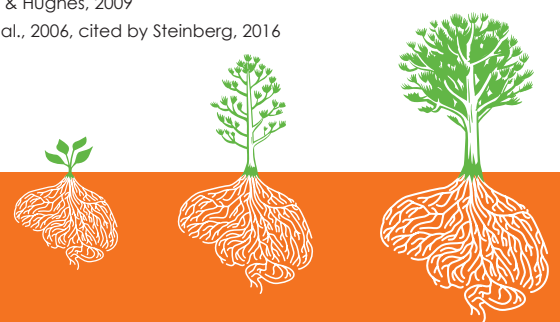
² Noel et al., 2013

³ Pittman et al., 2003

⁴ Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011, p.339

⁵ Buchanan & Hughes, 2009

⁶ Madon et al., 2006, cited by Steinberg, 2016





Rangatahi whose strengths are harder to see, might be those who most need an adult making the effort to find them.

While we can learn at any stage in the life-span, the plasticity of adolescence - that is, their ability to change and think differently - means that it is easier to do so at this stage, than it will be later. This plasticity is a strength shared by all rangatahi.¹⁰

The role of adults

To paraphrase John Donne: "No teen is an island." Rangatahi are not developing in isolation, but as part of their wider whānau and community.

While there are some internally-driven changes during this time, for example, to their bodies, including their brains, the way in which this development unfolds also depends on their environment. There is a two-way relationship between rangatahi and their world.¹¹ What rangatahi do affects those around them; equally, the experiences and relationships that rangatahi have, influence them.

Both the young person and their environment have strengths and resources that can contribute towards positive development.¹²

The way in which adults interact with young people influences their behaviour and development. This includes the things we can readily see, like their behaviour, and those we may not see, like their expectations. Effective social support provided by adults is a major asset for young people.¹³

What does this mean in practice?

- For some of us, this may mean a change in the ways in which we think and talk about and with rangatahi.
- It may also mean challenging the negative stereotypes and expectations about adolescents that are so common.
- If difficulties arise, e.g. substance use issues, mental health concerns, learning or behaviour difficulties, these need to be addressed. However, they should not be allowed to 'define' the person, or young people in general.
- An important role of adults is to recognise the strengths rangatahi already possess and support their ongoing development.

⁷ Steinberg, 2016

⁸ Larson & Tran, 2014

⁹ Pittman et al., 2003

¹⁰ Lerner et al., 2013

¹¹ Larson & Tran, 2014

¹² Lerner et al., 2013; Masten, 2014

¹³ Rhodes & Lowe, 2009, cited by Lerner et al., 2013

Nature & nurture

Human development is life-long, occurring as a result of both nature (the genes we are born with) and nurture (the environments, experiences, and relationships that we have). The way in which rangatahi develop in adolescence is influenced by earlier development during pregnancy and childhood. In turn, the relationships, experiences and skills developed in adolescence will help shape the adults rangatahi become.

When there are difficulties

Some rangatahi do experience difficulties. At times these are serious and require specialist help. Even when this is the case, it is important to understand these difficulties are just one part of what's happening for the young person; it is not the whole picture of who they are, nor what they can become.

It's important to understand that the difficulties that some rangatahi experience are not an inevitable part of being a teenager; instead, they may have been heavily influenced by their experiences growing up.⁷

Strengths

PYD focuses primarily on the strengths rangatahi have.⁸ Another way of thinking about it is seeing the glass as half-full.⁹ For example, a teen may have leadership skills being used in a negative way to influence their peers, which could be harnessed to lead a positive group or activity.

Despite the issues some rangatahi face, they will also have strengths. When adults such as whānau and teachers can recognise these assets and help to strengthen them, they are supporting rangatahi to reach their potential. Sometimes strengths are easy to notice; for example, skill on the netball court or rugby field. At other times, strengths can be harder to see; loyalty to a friend, quietly helping out whānau. Rangatahi whose strengths are harder to see, might be those who most need an adult making the effort to find them.

Conclusion

The PYD approach focuses on supporting young people to develop their full potential by recognising their strengths, supporting them to develop further, as well as addressing problems when needed. Adults in the lives of rangatahi play a crucial role in supporting young people to make the most of this period of development.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on:

Work conducted jointly by The Collaborative Trust for Research and Training in Youth Health and Development <https://www.collaborative.org.nz/> and Brainwave Trust Aotearoa.

Material written by Brainwave Trust for the Parenting Resource, which was developed by the Ministry of Social Development, Family Services Team <http://www.parentingresource.nz/>

If you enjoyed this article, here are some others that may be of interest

Resilient Rangatahi

<https://www.brainwave.org.nz/resilient-rangatahi/>

Understanding adolescents who have experienced early adversity <https://www.brainwave.org.nz/understanding-adolescents-who-have-experienced-early-adversity/>

Explaining social and emotional changes in adolescence <http://www.brainwave.org.nz/explaining-the-social-and-emotional-changes-in-adolescence/>



Glossary of Māori terms:

Rangatahi – youth, younger generation

Tamariki – children

The full reference list for this article can be found at <http://www.brainwave.org.nz/category/all-articles/>

Introducing our new Kaiako

We are pleased to introduce three new Kaiako who have recently joined the Brainwave team, Jason Tiatia, Dr. Rob Thomson and Dr. Seini Taufa.



Jason Tiatia, Dr. Rob Thomson and Dr. Seini Taufa

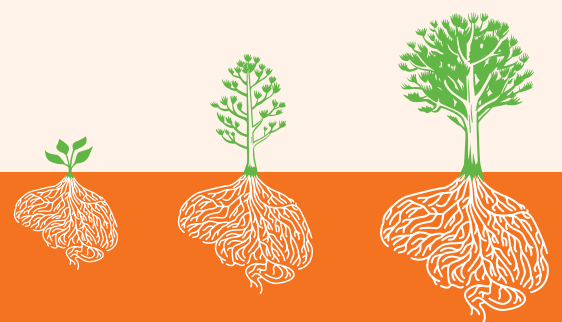
Bios

Dr. Seini Taufa is based in Auckland and is a Pacific researcher and evaluator with over fifteen years of quantitative and qualitative research and teaching experience at the University of Auckland. A bilingual New Zealand born Tongan, she is extremely active within her Tongan community both in NZ and in Tonga. She has evaluated ethnic and Pacific programmes on Suicide Prevention and Family Violence Prevention through the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Development.

Dr. Rob Thomson will be our Dunedin based Kaiako. He is a social psychologist by training and has worked in academic, research, clinical and community organisations. He has a PhD and Honours Degree in Psychology. His current role is to support agencies and services develop effective responses to addressing family violence by providing training and resources as well as developing inter-agency relationships and networks. He is active in the community to raise public awareness and inspire individuals to take action against family violence.

Jason Tiatia is from Christchurch and is a programme coordinator and tutor at the Institute of Canterbury. He teaches sports coaching and indigenous studies, and tutors in Pacific performing arts and Gagana Sāmoa. Jason represented New Zealand in the All Black Rugby 7's and spent time playing in several countries and has been a selector and coach in the Canterbury region. He is a respected leader in Pacific communities in Canterbury.

Our new Kaiako have completed their training and are looking forward to delivering our latest programme, Nurture your Tamariki.





BrainwaveTM
early years last forever
whakamana i te tamaiti

NEW!



Nurture your Tamariki

This two-hour session is created for parents and whānau to understand what children need for the best start in life. Providing practical advice about what really matters in the early years, the session will support parents and whānau to make positive choices for their tamariki.



Brainwave Kaiako will share some key things with you that can help children to reach their potential. Attendees will leave with a clear understanding about what they can do to give their child the best start in life, including:

- Understanding what really matters for children and parents in the early years
- Making informed and positive choices as parents
- Knowing what they can do to make a positive difference in their children's lives
- Seeing the child's perspective of the world and how to understand and respond to their needs
- Have confidence in their role as parents.

To book a seminar or workshop

Contact Robyn Fisher, Booking Administrator
www.brainwave.org.nz/book-a-seminar/
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Brainwave Trust Aotearoa Whakamana i te tamaiti

Every childhood matters. That's why we speak up about the importance of brain development in the early years. Brainwave's vision is that all children in Aotearoa New Zealand are valued and nurtured so they can reach their full potential.

We are a charitable trust that aims to educate everyone involved in the life of a child about the importance of early experiences on brain development and their lifelong impact.

Brainwave has no political or religious affiliations and is known for relying on strong evidence and for the scientific integrity of all its material.

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Brainwave Trust Aotearoa is a registered charity. Support from the community enables us to work towards every child in New Zealand getting a better start in life.

Any donations we receive works towards our vision that all children in Aotearoa are raised and nurtured in order to reach their full potential.

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