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INFANT MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

A letter from the Infant Mental Health Association Aotearoa New Zealand

To whānau affected by recent weather events

LETTER ONE: PĒPI, TAMARIKI & TRAUMA

Dear whānau with pēpi and tamariki,

We are so sorry that your lives have been turned upside down as a result of the significant recent weather events. While many people are suffering, we wanted to write to you especially. To experience such tragedy, and the ongoing stress of this, while also being so deeply connected with the mind, soul and body of your tamariki is an enormous challenge.

As you already know, your pēpi and tamariki look to you for guidance, reassurance and comfort; you make their world safe. They don't know that you can't control environmental events. From their perspective you are the almighty magician who makes their world right. Your pēpi, even in the face of recent events, do not change this view. You are it. We are very much thinking about you as you help make sense for your pēpi of what has - and is still - happening.

We want to invite you to hold onto your pēpi's view. We encourage you, in the chaos, to linger with your pēpi. Take a few more seconds to watch their face, listen to their chatter. Even if they don't talk yet, take more time to listen to their babble, and then to wonder what they are saying to you.

After listening, talk a little bit more to them. You can talk about what you're doing, where you're going, what's happening next. You might tell your pēpi or tamariki about how you're feeling and wonder about their feelings. If you are not so practiced at this, a good way to start is to ask yourself, "When my pēpi or tamariki looks at me, what do they see, what might they be thinking?"

For example: if you hear an ambulance or a police car, or a loud noise that makes you jump, makes you frightened, your pēpi will most likely also become frightened or unsettled. You are their emotional map. We know even if you wish not to respond like this, these involuntary frights are going to happen for a while.



IMHAANZ is an affiliate of WAIMH:
WORLD ASSOCIATION FOR
INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

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However, what you can do at these times is to begin to talk very gently to your pēpi, use a soothing voice and say something like, “Oh yes, Mummy/Daddy did a big jump and got scared with that noise. You might have felt scared too. It’s ok now”. Keep the message simple and based on the here and now moment.

It may be that it seems you are just talking to yourself and your pēpi isn’t listening. It could just be that they are still coming back from getting a fright. You may have to wait a bit for them to turn to you. Let them know that you are there, gently talking, let your voice be an anchor for them, telling them (and yourself) that it is ok, it was a scary memory.

If they could speak they might say, “Thanks for waiting for me, I did get scared … thanks for telling me it’s ok now”. With practice their return to you will be faster.

That you patiently wait for them to return to the relationship with you is a cue to them that even in this time of trauma and recovery you can be focused on them. Your connection with them is important to your pēpi or tamariki. Given space and support, even at these times, they can continue to grow healthy with you.

Your pēpi or tamariki is healing with you and healing of this kind takes a lot of listening and waiting. We so want you to know that every day as you walk through this mess and this unfolding tragedy, there are people thinking especially about you and your babies.

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Dear parents with babies and toddlers: Letter One - Pēpi, Tamiriki & Trauma

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