

## ■ Advice for principals and teachers 3: When school reopens

- Expect the unexpected. You might not have your usual cohort. Some families might have moved away; others families temporarily moved in. Some children will be too frightened to come to school or to be away from their parents; in other cases, parents might not want to have their children out of their sight.
- Some children might be late or need to leave early because of transport arrangements. Some children might want to be with their siblings or friends even if they are in different classes. Some children might come with nothing – no supplies or lunch. Being prepared for these possibilities and being flexible in the early days saves extra stress.
- Children will show different responses and different levels of trauma. Some children might be quiet and withdrawn; others might be nervy and wriggly. Some might cry, some might get angry and some might even laugh inappropriately. Some might be frightened by sudden noises. Your response needs to be calm and even handed.
- Familiarity and routines provide a sense of security. With the routines, however, the activities need to be flexible and offer options. Allowing children to share or respond in different ways is important. While having activities, such as sharing in pairs or small groups, writing or drawing will help the emotional processing, this should not be forced.
- Distracting children from things they find distressing is important. Acknowledge their sadness but gently move to another activity, especially calming ones such as relaxation exercises, listening to a story or quiet music.
- It is ok to have fun. Playing a game, indoors or outdoors, re-reading one of their favourite stories or watching a video can help lift the mood. Children need to know that in the midst of sadness there is still happiness and hope.
- Making plans, talking about the future and discussing what has been learned, is also part of healing and moving forward. After the Black Saturday fires, children had input into the design of their new schools and many ideas were acted upon, whether it was an indoor garden or an outdoor running track.
- Similarly, in Christchurch children were encouraged to design their ideal playground and one of the designs was chosen as the basis for the city's now popular Margaret Mahy playground.
- Arts-based activities have been shown to be very therapeutic and there are many musicians or music therapists, drama or dance groups or arts specialists who can come and help with an appropriate programme, if this is beyond your skill level.
- Sports, games, physical challenges and getting outdoors can release energy and tension and provide a break from indoor activities.

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.