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Getting through: Children and youth post-disaster effective coping and adaptation in the context of the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010-2012

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Maureen F. Mooney
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Abstract

The study aims to understand how children cope effectively with a disaster, and to identify resources and processes that promote effective coping and adaptation. The context is the 2010–2012 Canterbury earthquake disaster in New Zealand. This qualitative study explores coping strategies in forty-two children from three age groups: five, nine and fifteen year-olds (Time 1). It draws on data from semi-structured interviews with the children, their parents, teachers and principals of five schools in Canterbury. Two schools in Wellington, a region with similar seismic risk, served as a useful comparison group. All children were interviewed twenty months after the first earthquake (T1) during an ongoing aftershock sequence, and six selected children from Christchurch were interviewed again (Time Two), three years after the initial earthquake. Findings have identified multiple inter-connected coping strategies and multi-level resources in the children and in their immediate contexts; these were fundamental to their post-disaster adaptation. Children who coped effectively used a repertoire of diverse coping strategies adapted to challenges, and in a culturally appropriate and flexible manner. Coping strategies included: emotional regulation, problem-solving, positive reframing, helping others, seeking support, and "getting on". Although emotional regulation was important in the immediate aftermath of an earthquake, children adapting positively used heterogeneous combinations of coping strategies and resources. Proximal others provided coping assistance through modelling and coaching. Intra and interpersonal resources, such as self-efficacy and supportive parental and teacher relationships that promoted children's effective coping are identified and discussed. Children who coped effectively with the disaster appeared to have a larger coping repertoire and more practise in use than children in the Wellington comparison group, who were coping essentially with age appropriate challenges. By Time Two, all children in the cohort reported coping effectively, that they were stronger from their experience and had shifted their focus so that their coping skills were now employed for everyday challenges and for moving on with their lives, rather than focused on managing disaster events. Findings suggest that children can be coached to learn effective coping. Key recommendations are made for effective interventions for children and caregivers around children's effective coping and adaptation, and avenues for future research are detailed.

Keywords: **Disaster, children, effective coping, positive adaptation, family, school, community**

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