

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

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
in
Psychology
at Massey University, Wellington
Aotearoa/New Zealand

Maureen F. Mooney

2016

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

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the willingness and courage of the children and adults who participated in this study. In a time of disaster, chaos, and pressure they took time to discuss how they were managing and trusted me with their stories. My thanks to each of you.

I would like to thank my supervision team: Doctor Ruth Tarrant, Professor Douglas Paton, Associate Professor Sarb Johal and Professor David Johnston for their mentoring, experience, and patience. Profound thanks.

It takes a university to produce a doctorate. I remain grateful and wish to sincerely thank the Joint Centre for Disaster Research for the support, insight, and a precious room of my own. My thanks extend to the many expert colleagues among them, Professor Mandy Morgan (enabling quality advisor), and Doctors Blake and Tuohy, who were generous with their time and knowledge. Integrated university resources from the library, IT and doctoral workshops provided valuable technical input and support that enabled this work. Finally, my gratitude to the university gardener who allowed me to cultivate my allotment in the interest of life balance.

To my dear friends who gave generously of time, knowledge and distraction, you were a lifeline. Finally, but certainly not least, my profound, heartfelt thanks to my dear sons and their families who, with encouragement, caring, and belief, assisted and lightened my months of study. My love to you all.

Table of Content

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
List of Figures	ix
List of Tables	x
Setting the Context	1
Chapter 1: Introduction	2
Aim and Context of the Study	2
The Research Approach	4
Myself in the Research	5
The Thesis Structure.....	6
Chapter 2: Background	9
Disasters	9
Disasters and children.....	10
Psychological Perspectives in Disaster Research.....	13
How children are viewed in disaster research.	13
Challenges of disaster research.....	16
Psychology research focusing on children’s trauma from disasters.	19
Research focusing on children’s positive adaptation.....	23
Conceptual perspectives.	24
Developmental systems theory (DST).....	24
Ecological systems theory.	25
Risk and resilience research.....	26
Coping research.	27
Intra and interpersonal elements affecting positive adaptation.	28
Intrapersonal resources and individual characteristics.	29
Intrapersonal resources.....	29
Age and developmental level.	31
Gender.	33
Individual characteristics: disposition and psychological functioning.	35
Interpersonal elements	37
Community structures and resources.	40
Processes in resilience.	43
Pathways of adaptation following a disaster.....	46
Coping: Ways and strategies of coping.	50
Coping in children.	50

Children's coping in disasters.....	53
Influences on children's coping.....	57
Chapter Conclusion.....	59
Aims of the Present Study.....	61
Research Questions.....	61
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	62
Introduction.....	62
Conceptual framework.....	63
Ontology.....	64
Epistemology.....	64
Theoretical perspective.....	65
Methodological framework.....	67
Evolution of phenomenological research.....	68
Historical perspective.....	68
Recent phenomenological methodology in research.....	68
Phenomenology methodology employed in the present study.....	69
Phenomenological attitude.....	69
Phenomenological reduction adopted in this study.....	70
Reflexivity.....	71
Phenomenological process to analyses in this study.....	72
Table 3.1 Steps in Thematic Analysis.....	74
Pertinence of the specific qualitative approach.....	74
Quality strategies in phenomenological methodology.....	75
Research with children.....	77
Ethical approval and considerations.....	80
Method.....	81
Study design.....	81
Recruitment of schools and participants.....	81
Participants: Time one.....	83
Participants: Time two.....	84
Table 3.2 Participants in the Study.....	85
Interview protocol and procedure.....	86
Time One interviews: Christchurch participants.....	87
Time One interviews: Wellington participants.....	88

Time Two interviews	88
Data.....	89
Analysis of Qualitative data.....	91
Chapter Conclusion.....	93
Research Findings and Discussion.....	94
Overview	94
Chapter 4: Children’s Coping, Way of Coping and Intrapersonal Capacities... 95	
Introduction.....	95
Impact of a Disaster: the Stressor/s	95
Children’s Coping Strategies and Intrapersonal Capacities	97
Managing emotions: “Don’t get worked up about it”	99
“You gotta keep calm”	105
Table 4.1 <i>Developmental and Age Influences with “You gotta keep calm”</i>.	106
“I think happy thoughts”	109
Distancing and distraction: “Taking your mind off it”	111
Humour: make a joke about it all.....	114
Problem-solving: “Working out what to do”	116
I am working out what to do.	118
I am becoming more able.....	121
I’m the one who knows what to do.	122
Working out the new normal.....	123
Positive reframing and appraisal: “Everything’s gonna be alright”	125
Positive reframing: “putting a positive spin on it”	127
Minimising.....	129
I almost think it’s “kinda normal”	130
“Getting on”	133
“Are you ok?”: Helping others	136
Go to someone.....	140
Coping Strategy Interaction.....	142
The <i>Way</i> Children Used Effective Coping	144
Chapter Conclusion.....	146
Chapter 5: Family Influences that Support or Inhibit Children’s Coping	149
Introduction.....	149

The Family as a Unit of Influence	150
Parents	154
Table 5.1 Parental Influences on Coping and Adaptation	155
Coping assistance.....	156
Examples of coping assistance.....	157
Ineffective parental coping assistance.....	159
Parental coping assistance adjusted to children's needs.....	161
Support.....	165
Protection, buffering, and reassurance.....	169
Watchful awareness acceptance and positive appraisal of children's reactions and responses.....	172
Getting on: providing stability, routines, and distraction.....	176
Siblings, Extended Family, and Family Pets	180
Siblings	180
Extended family.....	183
Family pets.....	185
Chapter Conclusion.....	186
Chapter 6: Close Community Influences on Children's Coping	188
Community: People and Place.....	188
Community context: restraints and resources.....	189
Community as seen through the children's eyes.....	192
A shared adversity and mutual support	192
A community of social capital and local places	194
Living in a multi-cultural community.....	198
Peers.....	199
Both adult and peer support.....	200
Peer support and assistance.....	200
The school institution.....	203
Schools in the disaster context.....	204
Re-establishing routines and stability.....	204
School as a place of safety, efficiency and reassurance.....	206
Schools modelling coping and source of supportive interventions.....	210
Schools as a community resource.....	213

Teachers and principals.	215
Teachers.	215
Teachers: source of safety and proximal support.....	216
Teachers re-established routines and provided support and reassurance.....	218
Teachers and assisted coping.	220
Teachers and disaster specific behaviours.	224
Teachers as facilitators of school-based intervention programmes.	227
Principals.	230
Leadership and support.	230
Principals work as a community resource.....	235
Principals as observers.	236
Chapter Conclusion.....	237
Chapter 7: How Coping Evolves Over Time	239
Temporal Element in Children’s Coping and Adaptation.....	239
Things Have Got Better, but a Heightened Awareness Remains.....	240
We Have Got Stronger from our Experience	242
We may be better at coping now.	244
Shift in Focus: We Now use our Coping Strategies for Everyday Challenges	250
We Are “Moving on” With our Lives	257
External Resources that Promote Coping and Adaptation	259
Parents.....	260
Peers.....	263
Schools and teachers.....	266
Community resources.	269
Adequate Ongoing Adaptation	271
Chapter Conclusion.....	275
Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion.....	277
Children’s Effective Coping.....	278
Intrapersonal Resources and Individual Characteristics	283
Interpersonal and community resources	286
Coping Over Time: A comparison between T1 and T2 coping	290
Limitations.....	293
Strengths of the Present Study.....	294

Recommendations	296
1..... Programmes to coach effective coping.	297
2. Tailoring interventions for children who struggle.	298
3. Interventions for children’s caregivers.	298
Future Research Directions	298
References	301
Appendices	335
Appendix A: Glossary of terms	335
Appendix B: Information sheets.....	340
Appendix C: Consent forms	364
Appendix D: Questions for semi-structured interviews Time 1 and 2.....	371
Appendix E: Update information for schools Time Two	377
Appendix F: United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child	378

List of Figures

Figure 1. Location of earthquake and aftershock epicentres during Canterbury Earthquake sequence	3
Figure 2. Developmental Systems Theory (DST) (Gottlieb, 2007)	25
Figure 3. A bio-ecological model of the child's ecologies	26
Figure 4. Examples of adaptive and maladaptive pathways in the context of an acute-onset disaster	48
Figure 5. Ted's drawing: "I thought the house would fall down"	96
Figure 6. Key coping strategies identified	99
Figure 7. Model of <i>ways</i> of effective coping employed.....	144
Figure 8. Children nested in their ecologies	188
Figure 9. Children's effective coping leading towards positive adaptation.....	292

List of Tables

Table 3.1 Steps in Thematic Analysis	74
Table 3.2 Participants in Study	85
Table 4.1 Developmental and Age Influences in “Keeping Calm”	106
Table 5.1 Parental Influences on Coping and Adaptation	155