

Parenting through challenging times

*"Being a parent or caring for children
is challenging, rewarding, exhausting
and fulfilling all at once."*

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Introduction

Kia ora and welcome.

This booklet has been created to support you to talk with your children / tamariki about any challenges you may be having with mental health and/or addiction. We think this information may also be useful for parents or carers experiencing a range of issues that may impact on their children / tamariki. Talking to children openly, honestly and in ways that make sense for children of different ages is often very similar regardless of the challenges being experienced. It is aimed towards creating confidence in the ability to parent, even in tough times.

Being a parent

Being a parent or caring for children is challenging, rewarding, exhausting and fulfilling all at once.

When you are experiencing difficulties and extraordinary challenges it can make all aspects of your life a lot harder, including parenting. You may be concerned about your children / tamariki. You may feel guilt, shame and worry about them and the impact it has on them. It is very natural to feel like this. Fortunately, there are some things you can do to alleviate this stress and pressure. We hope this booklet can help.



Remember you are doing your best at being a parent. Every parent makes mistakes sometimes. Recognise what you are good at and don't dwell on any faults. It's okay to apologise and begin again. This shows children it's okay to make mistakes and learn from them.

Kia maumahara, e whakarirā ana koe kia pai ō mahi poi poi tamariki. Hē ai tātou katoa i ētehi wā. Rapuhia ō painga, ā, kua e arotahitia rawatia ngā hē. He aroha nui te tuku whakapāha me te tīmatanga ake anō.



Talking to your children / tamariki

Being open and honest in ways that relate to the age of your children / tamariki is important.

Without this, children / tamariki may worry that they are to blame or are doing something wrong. Children / tamariki will almost always pick up on things that are going on in the home and can feel as if they are somehow responsible, even if we think we are protecting them from it. Uncertainty is likely to create more worries and anxiety for your children / tamariki and talking and open engagement takes the pressure off.

No age is too young to start the conversation. How you talk to a toddler will be very different to how you talk to your teenager, so consider these things when talking to your children / tamariki.

- › You are likely to be the best judge of your children's temperament and personality, so use words that you know will suit them, and that they will understand and be reassured by. Your children / tamariki will also notice body language and tone of voice, so even though you may be feeling anxious, do your best to appear relaxed and speak calmly. Even very young children / tamariki who may not understand the words will be reassured by your tone and touch.
- › Younger children / tamariki will already have ideas about what being 'sick' or 'sad' is, due to their own experiences, so use this language if that helps your children / tamariki to better understand what is going on. Younger children / tamariki may only be able to focus on what just happened, rather than something that might have occurred several days ago.
- › Think about your symptoms or the things you think they might have noticed as a starting point for the conversation.

What are they seeing and hearing? For example, 'You may have noticed that sometimes Mummy drinks wine and gets a little bit wobbly or is really sad and cries at times'.

- › Older children / tamariki may be more likely to understand more complex words, and you may be able to explain the situation more fully. Check in with them if what you have talked about makes sense.
- › A teenager / rangatahi is likely to be quite knowledgeable about some of the things you and your family and whānau may be experiencing, so explaining in more detail will help them understand what the situation is like for you specifically. A teenager / rangatahi is also more likely to make their own decisions and choices, and be developing support outside of the family and whānau. It is important to be open and give them opportunities to talk to you about how things are for them.
- › Be flexible about how and when you talk to your children / tamariki. Some children / tamariki will be more able and willing to talk or ask questions while playing, others may want to sit down and talk face-to-face. Sitting side by side in a car is often a good place. There might be times that are not so good for having these conversations too, like just before bed or school, or when you are upset.



Ways of starting the conversation

‘You have noticed...’

‘You may be worried about...’

‘I wanted to talk to you about....’

Ngā momo tīmatanga kōrero

‘Tērā pea kua kitea e koe....’

‘Tērā pea e āwangawanga ana koe mō te....’

‘E hiahia kōrero ana au ki a koe mō te....’

- › Think about who else could be there to support you and your children / tamariki (for example, a partner, grandparent or older sibling). Who else do your children / tamariki see as important in their lives? Who else can they talk to? Who else can be there for them if you need support?
- › Let your children / tamariki know that if they don't feel they can talk to you, it's okay for them to talk to other trusted adults about how they are feeling. Children are VERY loyal to their family and sense if they are not supposed to talk about things – they should know that they don't need to keep secrets.
- › Allow for questions, and be as honest as you can with your answers, in an age-appropriate way. It's important to validate and affirm feelings.
- › Let your children / tamariki know that you are doing your best to get better or sort things out. Let them know that some days are harder than others. Talk about what you are doing to get help and support. This is likely to instil hope.
- › One conversation is probably not enough. Let them know it's okay to ask questions after they've had time to think about what has been said. Making a time to check in regularly can be helpful. You might consider using a 'question jar' so they can put any questions they have in the jar, and you can look at it together at a time that best suits.
- › Praise them for dealing with the difficult times and focus on their strengths and abilities. What are they doing well?



If your children / tamariki like to read, write and draw you could get them to write down their thoughts, feelings and questions in a special journal or book that you can look at and share together.

Mehemea he pai ki tō tamaiti te pānui, te tuhi, te waituhi rānei, me akiaki ia kia tuhituhi i ana whakaaro, ana aurongo me ana pātai ki rō pukapuka motuhake hei pānui mā kōrua tahi.



Caro

“My mum experiences times of severe depression. When I was little, I didn’t understand what it was. But I knew she was different at times, cold and unreachable. It frightened me SO much. I also knew, but I don’t remember being told this, that we (the kids) were not to talk to anyone about it. I thought it was my fault, that I had caused it by being naughty. I tried really hard to be ‘good’ but it kept happening. I knew I must be very ‘difficult and bad’.

“When I experienced my own mental health problems as an adult with children, I remembered how that had felt for me as

a child. So I did talk to my kids about what was happening. I made sure, no matter how lost in the bad places I was, that they knew they were loved, safe and not to blame.

“Sometimes it was hard to hear how it was feeling for them, I felt SO guilty and worthless. Until I realised that that is what family is all about – going through the good, the bad and the ugly, together. All of us learning as we went.

“My kids are grown up now, they are resilient, open-minded, lovely adults. I am so proud of them and even nicer, they are also proud of me.”

Building strong relationships

In tough times, when you have limited energy and focus, it is useful (when you can) to remember to keep building strong relationships with your children / tamariki.

Continue to set aside time for them while showing your affection and being interested in their day-to-day life. Communication strengthens relationships. This will help your children / tamariki to feel secure, safe, loved, and valued. If there are times when you are unable to do this, at least you will know that you have created a strong bond which will carry you through times when you are less able to be there for them. Try to be as consistent as possible, and get support from people who are important to your children, when you need it.

When you're away from home, it is important to keep in contact with your children / tamariki too. This could be via a postcard, letter, telephone, video call, text or email (depending on what best suits you and your children / tamariki). If possible, encourage them to visit you wherever you are, and when they are there, spend a little time explaining where you are and what you are doing there. For example, 'This is a hospital for people who need some help, I am working on getting better while I'm here'. Ask them how they feel about this and reassure them that this is temporary and all about getting better and coming home.



'Your child's relationships with people around them (most importantly with you and other family members) directly affects their day-to-day wellbeing. When these relationships are strong and supportive, it builds their resilience to the stress caused by life's challenges'.
(COPMI.net.au)



Remember it's okay to look after yourself if you need to. Asking for support is important for you and your children / tamariki. And it teaches them it's okay to ask for help.

Kia maumahara, me āta tiaki e koe tōu anō oranga. Me tono tautoko anō hoki i ētehi wā kia mōhio ai ngā tamariki ko te painga atu tērā.



Having a support network

At difficult and stressful times, it is really important to have some other people around you who can support you and offer help.

Whether the support and help come from your partner, family and whānau members, a friend, a community service or church, it's important to have gathered a supportive network of people. When things are going well for you, it is a good idea to set up some support systems, so you can call on them if the going gets tough.

If you don't have a support system around you and you feel isolated, this can make challenging times even more difficult. Talk to your health care professional or GP about this and ask if there are any services in your area that may be able to help.

Corey

“When I was using drugs, my relationship with my kids was pretty non-existent. I spent a lot of years using drugs and at the same time had a corporate career. I thought I looked good from the outside and felt okay on the inside. Despite my partner expressing concerns I didn’t actually think there was anything wrong. I thought using heavily was normal, until it all began falling apart. I was so caught up in what I was doing, I wasn’t able to be present in my kids’ lives. There was no way I could communicate with them or their mum about what was going on.

“Looking back, I would have liked to have been more present. I would have liked to have taken them to the park to play with them. I would have liked to have helped them with their homework and read them a story. Just be part of their lives really.

“Looking back after six years of recovery, I can see how oblivious I was to what was happening in my family. These days I’m learning just to be their dad and give them time. You don’t have to shower them with gifts and presents to make up for lost time. Just give them your time and talk to them and listen to them. My kids talk to me now and tell me what they do at school and I listen. That feels really good.”



Routines

Simple family and whānau routines can help children / tamariki feel safe and secure.

Eating together, reading a book before bedtime, having a scheduled bedtime, going to church, attending sports events, doing homework together, doing chores or walking the dog are all examples of family activities that can become routines. If you're able to do at least one of these things regularly, it will be

helpful. When you are less able to do routine things with your children / tamariki, this may be something that people in your support network may be able to take over, so the routine for your children / tamariki remains the same. If you think it would work for you and your family and whānau you could look at developing plans with your children / tamariki for what happens for them if you are struggling.





Anna

“When my son was just 6 weeks old, I had a massive panic attack while I was trying to breast feed him. I was worried about dropping him, so I found my partner – luckily, he was at home and I managed to give him the baby. Then I crawled into my room and hid so my children wouldn’t see what I was going through. I didn’t want them to worry. My three-year-old was beside herself trying to get to me and screaming ‘what’s wrong with mummy’, and I was yelling, ‘don’t let them see me like this’. It was awful, and my panic attack didn’t stop until my partner came into the room with the children to help me calm down. Having the family around me immediately helped and I managed to calm down.

“My biggest learning was that hiding my panic attack from my children made it worse for everyone. They couldn’t see what was happening, and imagined something worse, and I was distressed at their distress. My partner did the right thing, and now I don’t try to hide my panic attacks. I just say ‘Mummy is having trouble breathing’ or as my daughter is now 8, I or my partner can say ‘Mummy is having a panic – she’ll be okay soon’. We also talk about times when ‘mummy has a panic’. They know what it is and they know it won’t kill me and it feels like now they just accept it as part of who I am.”

Family and whānau fun time

Making time to have fun with your children / tamariki and the rest of your family and whānau is also important.

Spending time together doing activities inside (board games, reading books, playing with toys and reading) and out (kicking a ball around, going to the beach, going for a walk, walking the dog) is another good way of building a secure bond with your children / tamariki. When you are less able to participate, it might be possible to sit and watch others in the family and whānau doing these things, even if you're not up to joining in.

Encouraging your children / tamariki to become involved in activities outside of the home is also great if you can afford it. This might include joining a sports club, youth or community group, going to a friend's house or playing a musical instrument. Having these interests helps them to make friends, feel a sense of belonging and develop their social skills.



Recovery means different things to different people, and you define your own recovery. It may be helpful to think about family and whānau recovery, as well as your individual recovery. Think about what your recovery looks like for you and your family and whānau.

He rerekē te āhua o te whaioranga ki tēnā, ki tēnā, ā, māu anō tōu whaioranga hei whakamahere mai. Me whakaaroaro pea mō te whaioranga ā-whānau i tua atu i tōu anō whaioranga takitahi. Me whakaaroaro hoki te āhua o te whaioranga mō koutou ko tōu whānau.

Having difficult conversations

There may be some areas of your life that are arguably not appropriate for discussing with your children / tamariki.

For example, various (and sometimes illegal) ways of earning an income, and/or the use of illegal drugs. You would need to consider whether your silence on the subject is more harmful than having an honest conversation with them. Remember they are likely to know something is going on anyway.

There is probably no right or wrong answer to this dilemma. Each parent, carer, family and whānau will have to decide

for themselves the best way of dealing with these situations in an age-appropriate way and in the best interests of their children. It might be useful to think about gaining knowledge as a process that occurs over time. Younger children / tamariki might need to know only a few things. But by the time they reach adolescence they will have slowly come to terms with the reality and understand more of the details of the situation. In this way, knowledge about these things grows with your children / tamariki.



For many family, whānau and children / tamariki there is also concern about how others outside the family and whānau will handle information about these sorts of things. If you decide to share some of this information with your children / tamariki you will also need to discuss this. How will they talk to friends and others

about these things? Are there 'safe' people that they can talk to? It's important that children / tamariki do not think they have to keep secrets to keep their family and whānau safe – and that they are never expected to.



When you are worried about your children / tamariki

If you are worried about your children / tamariki and they are experiencing problems on an ongoing basis, it's important to get some help for them too. Some things to keep an eye on include:

- › ongoing stomach upsets
- › problems eating, sleeping or concentrating
- › developing more slowly than expected
- › hurting themselves or others
- › sudden and ongoing changes in their behaviour
- › trouble at school.

If you are concerned about any of these things it's important to speak to your health care professional or GP in the first instance. Also think about who else might need to know what is going on. For example, does the school or day care centre need to know a little about what is going on at home, so they can better support your children / tamariki? There are also parenting courses that can help you to deal with these situations.

Suzy

“I was 32 when my daughter was born. I had been on daily methadone maintenance for several years and was smoking tobacco and cannabis on a regular basis as well as using alcohol.

“I felt guilty about my use of substances during pregnancy, especially the alcohol, but didn’t know how to live without it. I didn’t know about dependence in those days. Instead, I thought there was something deeply wrong with me, because I wanted to do the right thing by my daughter and yet I couldn’t stop.

“I didn’t want people to know I was feeling out of control, so did my best to keep it a secret because I was afraid of being judged harshly. It was very lonely. I wish I’d had someone to talk to, to

be able to be honest about the fear and anxiety I was feeling. I was convinced I was not going to be able to be a good mother. This was reinforced when I gave birth and they took my baby to a different ward, away from me, ‘to keep an eye on her in case she was born methadone dependent’.

“It was a lonely time for me and it was only with the consistent kindness and support of my methadone service case manager I was able to get real and tell her how I was feeling, and with her help, see that it is possible to be a good parent when dependent on substances. She taught me so much about taking care of myself and how to communicate with my wee girl and I am forever grateful.”





Further support

The Parenting Place

New Zealand's largest parenting organisation.
www.theparentingplace.com

Skylight Trust

A national not-for-profit trust that enables children, young people and their family and whānau to navigate through times of trauma loss and grief and difficult life situations.
www.skylight.org.nz

The Incredible Years® parenting programme

The Incredible Years® is a parenting programme provided to families around New Zealand.
www.incredibleyears.co.nz/parents

The Family Services Directory

A directory of service providers for families and whānau.
www.familyservices.govt.nz/directory

Supporting parents, healthy children

Information and resources for parents, young people and professionals regarding supporting families and whānau where a parent is experiencing mental health and/or addiction issues.
www.supportingparents.co.nz

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Providing support services throughout New Zealand to grandparents raising their grandchildren / mokopuna on a full-time basis.
www.grg.org.nz

Ruby's Dad

A children's story book about Ruby and her family who are dealing with their father's problematic alcohol use. Available from the Health Promotion Agency.
www.alcohol.org.nz

Parent Help	0800 568 856
Family Services Helpline	0800 211 211
Youthline	0800 37 66 33
Kidsline (up to 18 years of age)	0800 543 754
What's Up (for 5-18 year olds)	0800 942 8787



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