



Family Conversations about Traumatic Events

1. Your Child's Reactions Make Sense

After a tragic event like this, your child may show signs of:

- Nightmares or sleep refusal
- Clinginess
- Irritability or aggression
- Headaches, stomach aches

After something this frightening, changes in sleep, mood, behaviour or concentration are expected. Your child's nervous system is trying to make sense of danger. The best thing you can do as a parent is to normalize these changes and help their little nervous systems settle.

It's important to remember that: **Connection and regulation needs to come before processing or talking about it.**

- **Name it to tame it** – notice any difference in behaviours and name the emotion that may be below the surface (e.g., I'm noticing that you're having a lot more stomachaches lately, I wonder if you're feeling scared or worried. If you are feeling like that, I want you to know that happens to a lot of people after some scary happens.)
- **Notice your child's bids for connection** – they may be more clingy or irritable or they may misbehave more than usual. This is an opportunity for parents to spend more time with their child – either playing, chatting or just being in the same space bearing witness – this allows the parents to use their own calming nervous systems to influence and settle the little one's nervous system.
- **If children are open to engaging more** – you can try regulating activities like mindful breathing, grounding activities (it can be a game of I-Spy, or the 54321 technique to engage all senses: see, hear, touch, smell, taste).

2. Invite Processing without Pressure

Some children will want to talk repeatedly. Others will avoid it. You don't need to get them to 'open up.' Just make it clear you're available.



Parents should:

- Follow the child's lead.
- Answer questions briefly, directly and as honestly as appropriate for their age.
- Avoid probing for emotional insight prematurely.

3. Re-Establish Safety and Predictability

A. Provide age-appropriate but honest information.

Parents should supervise overexposure to the story but not secrecy.

Something parents can say help children make sense of things, could be:

“Something very scary happened at school. The adults worked quickly to keep everyone safe.”

B. Reinforce Safety Through Action - “Routine tells the nervous system that life is stable again.”

- Maintain consistent routines (mealtimes, bedtime).
- Offer more opportunities for connection and togetherness.

4. Regulate Before You Reason

Children borrow regulation from adults.

Parents/caregivers should focus on:

- Co-regulation (slow breathing together, sitting close)
- Tone of voice and body language
- Limiting visible parental panic or catastrophizing.

Practical tools:

- Mindful breathing
- “Name 5 things you see” grounding
- Weighted blankets or deep pressure
- Physical movement (walking, jumping) / connection to nature



5. Monitor Media Exposure

Repeated viewing of footage or the story can retraumatize. It is recommended:

- No unsupervised news/social media exposure.
- Avoid watching the news while children are present.

6. When to Refer for Trauma Treatment

Families should seek further support if symptoms:

- Persist beyond 4–6 weeks without improvement
- Intensify over time
- Include intrusive flashbacks
- Cause severe school refusal
- Include persistent hyperarousal or dissociation
- Involve self-harm ideation

If your child's nervous system doesn't start settling with support and time, trauma-focused therapy can help reset it.

7. Attend to the Caregiver's Own Trauma Response

Parents may also feel rattled or unsettled after a tragedy like this. Know that this is normal. Your child doesn't need you to be perfectly calm — they need you to be regulated enough. This is also a good opportunity to model to your children how to regulate your own nervous system.