



Tips for talking to children about traumatic events

Supporting autistic children after a traumatic event, such as a gun incident, involves focusing on safety, clear communication, maintaining routine, and allowing space for emotional processing.

Children have different awareness of terrorism so we should not assume their knowledge. It is important to ask what they have heard or know about gun violence in our community or from others. Be sure to validate their thoughts and feelings and reassure them that they are safe.

Allow them time to process information and express themselves in their own way. This may include the use of AAC devices and/or visual cues. Consider using a social story to help them understand what they are feeling and that what they are feeling is okay, and that they are safe.

General principles for support:

- Prioritise safety and control
 - Help the children feel safe
 - Emphasise what adults are doing to keep them safe
 - Offer concrete coping strategies- e.g. “if you are feeling worried, you can come to me or use your fidget toys”
- Maintain routine
 - Autistic children often rely on routines for stability
 - Continue with normal routines
 - Use a visual timetable to explain any changes to routine
- Validate feelings
 - Acknowledge the children’s feelings and discomfort
 - Autistic children may express distress through behaviours (e.g. stimming, meltdowns, withdrawal) rather than words
 - Use creative avenues (e.g. painting, drawing, art, puppets) or sensory tools to help them share their thoughts and feelings
- Limit media exposure
 - Turn off the television/radio. Limit your own exposure as well. Adults and children may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage
 - Limit adult conversations about the event in front of the children to avoid overwhelming them with disturbing images or details

Talking about the incident:

- Use simple, concrete language
 - o Avoid idioms, euphemisms, or graphic details
 - o Use direct and clear language appropriate for their developmental level
- Use visual supports or a social story
- Provide facts, not fiction
 - o Children know when something significant has happened
 - o Giving simple, non-graphic facts helps to build trust and avoid confusion
- Ask what they know
 - o Ask the child what they have heard or understand about the event
 - o This provides the chance to correct misinformation and provides the opportunity to address specific concerns

Use simple and direct language:

The following are suggestions for language to use based on age range. These are only suggestions. Consider your personal beliefs, and parenting values.

- ❖ **Preschoolers:** *"Sometimes, a person uses a gun to hurt other people. That is not okay. Your teacher(s), community helpers like the police, and our family keep you safe."*
- ❖ **Early Primary Schoolers:** *"Gun violence is when a person uses a gun to hurt another person. It can happen at school, in public places, or at someone's house. Using a gun to hurt another person is not okay. Your teacher(s), community helpers like the police, and our family work hard to keep you safe from gun violence."*
- ❖ **Primary Schoolers:** *"Gun violence happens when a person uses a gun to hurt and/or kill another person. This can happen at school, in public places in our community, or at someone's house. Using a gun to hurt and/or kill another person is a crime. Community helpers like police work together to try and create a community safe from gun violence."*
- ❖ **High Schoolers & Young Adults:** *"Gun violence is a serious issue that affects our society. It happens when a person uses a gun to hurt and/or kill another person due to mental health issues, access to a gun, and/or beliefs about violence. This can happen at school, in public places in our community, or at someone's house. Using a gun to hurt and/or kill another person is a crime. Community helpers like police work together to try and create a community safe from gun violence."*

Encourage them to ask questions. Listen to and validate their perspectives and feelings on gun violence. Continue to revisit this conversation and support their understanding as they change developmentally.

Where to get help:

- Your child's School

- GP or health professionals
- Crisis lines
 - o Kids Helpline (ages 5 to 25)- 1800 551 800
 - o Lifeline: 13 11 14
 - o Beyond Blue: 1300 22 46 36
 - o Headspace (ages 12–25) – 1800 650 890

Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children's/teens' abilities to function or if you are worried, contact local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma. Contact your family GP, paediatrician for referrals.

- NSW Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511 (24/7, advice, assessment, referral to NSW Health services).

Resources:

- Raising Children Network: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/communicating-relationships/autism-coping-with-traumatic-events/traumatic-events-supporting-autistic-children-afterwards>
- Emerging Minds Community Trauma Toolkit for Parents – <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/parents-and-caregivers/> o Teachers - <http://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/educators/>
- Talking with children about terrorism - <https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/sites/default/files/2025-02/fs635.pdf>
- Talking to children about shooting - https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/tip-sheet/talking_to_children_about_the_shooting.pdf