**THE SIGNS OF TRAUMA IN PARENTS AND CARERS:**

* Recurrent and intrusive distressing thoughts, images and perceptions: This can be thoughts of failure as a parent and negative comparisons with an internalised (unrealistic) ‘ideal’ parent or with other parents /carers.
* Recurrent distressing dreams
* Psychological / physical distress at exposure to cues that symbolise the traumas you have experienced (perhaps in other relationships): This could include generalising from thoughts that “I’m a bad parent” to “I’m worthless”.
* Avoidance of thoughts and feelings associated with the trauma (switching off feelings): This can include seeking help to ‘fix’ the child as a way of reducing feelings of failure as a parent.
* Avoidance of activities, people, places you formerly enjoyed: Often parents feel that friends and family do not understand the difficulties leading to a sense of isolation.
* Diminished interest or participation in significant activities: Living with stress is exhausting and it might feel impossible to relax and enjoy any non-child related activities. Parents might also feel selfish if they take time out for themselves.
* Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others: This is likely to stem from feelings that others don’t understand the difficulties. It can also be an outcome of feeling a failure.
* Reduced capacity to have feelings (both positive and negative): e.g. disassociation. This can start as a survival strategy and then become an internalised state of being.
* Sense of foreshortened future (difficulty thinking ahead): Hope for the future is difficult to consider when one is in ‘’firefighting mode’.
* Persistent symptoms of increased arousal; e.g.:
  + - sleep difficulties
    - irritability
    - angry outbursts (perhaps towards people other than your child): Many parents describe feeling angrier than they ever thought possible.
    - difficulty concentrating
    - hypervigilance: This is a natural consequence of living with children whose behavioural challenges disrupt ‘normal’ family life.
    - exaggerated startle response
* The realisation that things have changed between you and others
* The feeling that you’re no longer the same person you were before
* The inability to enjoy yourself with others in the same way as before
* The feeling that you’re unlike other people
* Feeling lonely and isolated
* Feelings of low self-esteem and low self-worth
* Feeling out of control emotionally: This can be increased anger or feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
* Developing physical health problems
* Excessive immersion in work
* Developing ‘selective perception’: either being over-sensitive or under-sensitive to your child’s behaviours: Being over-sensitive is an outcome of hyper-vigilance; being under-sensitive can be a defence mechanism and can be seen in normalising and minimising unacceptable child behaviours.
* Becoming more highly attuned to dangers: excessively cautious
* Becoming a ‘risk taker’ inappropriately: less attuned to danger
* Loss of feelings of security: It is hard to feel secure when you are living with children who challenge one’s core beliefs of what it means to be a parent. It is also not possible to feel secure if family life is chaotic and unpredictable.
* Loss of feelings of meaning in your existence
* Loss of feelings of control
* Fatigue and depression
* Stress on significant relationships
* Feelings of helplessness and anger combined.

You do not have to have all these feelings to be suffering from trauma. If a number of them pertain to you, you may be suffering from secondary trauma. Acknowledging this is the first step towards considering how you and your family can begin the repair process.