**RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS**

**INFORMATION PACK**

**FOR SCHOOLS IN DENBIGHSHIRE**

**Educational Psychology Service**

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**RESPONDING TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT**

**Definition of a Critical Incident**

In terms of a response by the Critical Incident Team a critical incident can be defined as:

***an event that is outside the range of every day events, which involves the experience of a level of significant distress and which has the potential to overwhelm an individual or organisation, such that the normal coping mechanisms of the school and running of the school can be disrupted.***

Emergencies and critical incidents, although infrequent, can cause disruption to the school day and require immediate action. Tragic events such as the sudden death or suicide of a member of a school community can result in intense feelings of anxiety, guilt or anger in pupils and staff. Helping pupils and staff deal with their grief reactions will reduce the likelihood that one critical incident will lead to further unfortunate events.

Some examples of critical incidents affecting schools are as follows:

* The death of a member of the school community through sudden death, accident, terminal illness or suicide.
* An accident involving pupils or staff on or off the school premises.
* An accident/tragedy in the wider community.
* A physical attack on staff member(s) or student(s) or intrusion into the school.
* Serious damage to the school building through fire, flood, vandalism etc.
* The disappearance of a member of the school community.

Within Denbighshire the Critical Incident Team have been involved in working with schools in relation to the following types of incidents:

* The death of a member of the school community through sudden death, accident, terminal illness or suicide.
* An accident involving pupils or staff on or off the school premises
* An accident/tragedy in the wider community

A pre-planned protocol for supporting pupils and staff can be effective in reducing psychological, physical and social difficulties. The main purpose in providing support to staff and pupils is to empower them and their families to help themselves and to enhance their skills for future critical incidents in their lives.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF A PLANNED RESPONSE**

When a critical incident occurs, there is little time for reflective and inclusive decision making. Just as schools have plans for fire drills, schools should also develop generic plans for responding to critical incidents. Emergency procedures need to be practised by staff, just as fire drills are practised to ensure that the school is ready to deal effectively with a critical incident.

**BEFORE A CRISIS SITUATION OCCURS**

Planning should include readiness to deal with emergencies and a plan for responding to the traumatic after effects of a critical incident. Planning should include:

* Identification of members of a Critical Incident Team at school and LA level,
* Protocol for the effective management of emergency situations,
* Development of a school plan to handle the traumatic after effects of a crisis,
* Provision of training for handling both emergencies and responses to critical incidents, and
* Scheduled reviews of critical incident plans as needed.

Critical incidents affecting a school community include not only those crises that occur during the school day and on school property. Incidents that occur on school property after hours or away from school property, such as on a school trip may also require immediate response from the school. All schools should have plans in place for handling emergency situations as they are happening.

Emergency planning and critical incident response protocols should be designed to deal with many different types of crisis situations, for example:

* Suicide or sudden death
* Serious injury, assault or murder
* Acute illness emergency
* Bus or other vehicle accident
* Child abuse
* Bomb threat
* Chemical spill
* Natural disaster

Safety of the pupils and staff should be the number one consideration in developing emergency procedures. Other key issues that need to be considered in the planning include:

* How to assess the severity of the situation
* The method to be used to call for assistance
* Procedures for defusing, controlling the crisis and accessing further help
* The role of experts and when to hand over the incident to outside experts (Police, Mental Health Professionals etc.), and
* Debriefing by the Critical Incident Response Team to decide what further action to take and whether response plans should be implemented.

**IMMEDIATELY AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT**

Once the safety of the staff and pupils is assured, the protocol for responding after a critical incident can take effect, if needed.

Following a critical Incident the Head teacher should contact the Director of Education and Children’s Services and/or Principal Education Officer as soon as possible. Members of Denbighshire Critical Incident Team for schools will then be contacted which includes the Lead EP and/or Senior EP, contact EP for the school and Safeguarding Officer. Other services such as the Counselling Service, Children’s Services and Occupational Health are notified, if, and as appropriate.

Through the guidance and input provided, the Critical Incident Team aim to:

* Help staff deal with the initial shock of a critical incident
* Support Senior Management Team with the re-establishment of normal routines by:
  + - helping school to communicate appropriately with pupils, staff, parents, the public and where necessary the media
    - normalising grief and other responses
    - advising on what to expect at an emotional level and on how pupils and staff may react
  + Help school identify vulnerable individuals – staff and children and young people and provide advice in this regard
  + Provide information about other support services and suggest appropriate resources
  + Support the re-establishment of routines and familiarity
  + Provide, guidance and information to share with parents and young people about possible reactions to reduce any anxiety
  + Provide information/ consultation about identifying distress in pupils.
  + Help teachers recognise the importance of their role in supporting pupils and to recognise that they are not ‘superhuman’.
  + Support schools in ensuring that one critical incident does not lead to further crisis due to reactions in the school community or create harmful conflict among school personnel who are trying to make decisions under stress.
  + Ensure that children and their families are reassured that the incident is being competently managed by the school.

Both school and LA Critical Incident Teams should monitor the situation carefully and continue to provide assistance to pupils and staff. The effects of some tragic events have long lasting results for some members of the school community. Both pupils and staff who are affected may need help finding appropriate support services for the long term.

It is essential to review the handling of a critical incident and follow up with recommendations for the improvements to the plan. With each use of a critical incident protocol, the people involved discover ways to refine and improve the plan.

The nature of a critical incident may create an occasion in which the school community comes face to face with serious social issues, such as spousal abuse, racism or discrimination based on sexual orientation. Although the topics related to the incident may be sensitive in the community, it is important for the school to honestly validate the issue’s connection to the incident as it helps the community to deal with the critical incident.

**RESPONSE TEAMS**

**SETTING UP RESPONSE TEAMS**

Experience in schools has shown there is a need for critical incident response teams at two levels: LA and school. The LA level organisation can assist schools in handling serious critical incidents as needed. The School Team is intended to assist the school administration in managing the response to a critical incident at the school level.

**THE LA RESPONSE TEAM**

The LA response team is led by the LA’s Critical Incident Co-ordinators. Membership of the LA team includes:

* Educational Psychologists (Designated)
* School Based Counsellors
* Educational Social Workers (Designated) – when there are safeguarding issues
* Others as appropriate depending on the specific incident (Response Team to decide)

One of the initial responsibilities of the LA team is to develop a protocol for the LA. Once the plans are in place, the team’s role is to ensure that all members are familiar with the protocol and clear about their duties should there be a need to act.

The LA Team can provide several different types of support to the schools for example:

* Assisting in developing a School Critical Incident Team and reviewing school-based plans.
* Supporting training for the School Critical Incident Team.
* Collaborating with the Head Teacher and School Critical Incident Team to determine whether other district or outside agency help is required.
* Providing links to established community agencies such as Mental Health Services, Victim Services, the Police and others as the Response Team deem appropriate.
* Managing media enquiries and handling communication issues with the community at large.
* Contacting the other schools in the LA that might have students or staff that could be affected by the critical incident.
* Developing a contact list of people and agencies which is current and accessible to all schools in an emergency.
* Working out of the school which has experienced a critical incident, if needed.

Following a critical incident, the LA team can assist the school team in reviewing and implementing the school plan. They can communicate information about how the protocol operated to other schools in the LA thereby providing links between schools and ensuring that all school teams in the LA benefit from what has been learned by the school that has applied its protocol.

**THE SCHOOL CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM**

Each school should have its own team to handle critical incident responses. Members of the team should be chosen based on their leadership roles in the school or their personal qualities which would make them an asset in a crisis situation. These individuals must be willing and able to assist the school administration in carrying out the critical incident plan. Memberships of a school critical incident response team may include the following:

* Head Teacher
* School Based Counsellors
* Department Heads or other key teacher leaders and
* Other staff, teaching assistants, ancillary staff
* Staff trained in Seasons for Growth

Like the LA team, the first task of the School Team should be to develop the school plan or protocol. In most cases this will be based on procedures set at the LA level. The LA team may provide a framework for the schools to use, or schools may use this document to begin their planning. It is important that each person in the School Team is familiar with the entire plan, confident in what their role is, and has developed the skills necessary to carry out the plan.

Once the plan is developed, a copy should be given to the LA Team at the beginning of each school year. It is important that this plan includes a list of the names, roles and after hours contact telephone numbers of all the School Team members. Clear communication is essential so that the teams can be mobilised quickly in the event of an incident.

At the school level, two copies of the plan should be distributed to each staff member, one to be kept at home and the other in school. School staff should also have the opportunity to discuss the plan with the School Team at a staff meeting or in-service session. Topics might include procedural matters and the dynamics of grief and trauma reactions. School Based Counsellors will often be a source of expertise in carrying out the training. Materials that might be used for training sessions are included in the appendices of this resource guide.

A printed handout or pamphlet on the school’s critical incident response protocol should be available to each staff member and parents, this should include:

* Introductory material describing the importance of effective critical incident response procedures and planning.
* Clear, easy to follow steps in an action plan for the Head Teacher and team to use as a guide for action following a critical incident.
* Delineation of the roles and responsibilities for individuals in the school community in carrying out the plan.
* Strategies for providing counselling for both pupils and staff.
* Plans for identifying individuals at risk after a critical incident.
* Support materials such as sample formats for class meetings, staff meetings, communications with parents, information about grief and stress reactions, and a list of individuals and agencies with contact phone numbers so the School Team can readily obtain assistance in a hurry.

**CONSIDERATIONS IN DEVELOPING A CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE PLAN**

Developing a Critical Incident Response Plan is the first task the team needs to take on in order to be prepared to respond after a traumatic event. There are many things to consider in the process of developing the plan, from practical questions of telephone lists to the very difficult tasks of diplomacy and ensuring sensitivity to the emotional needs of those affected. While each school community is different and has unique needs, it is worth taking a moment to consider the following areas of concern when developing a plan.

**CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Given the diversity that exists in a school and the community, staff members will need to give consideration to developing plans whose strategies are flexible to meet this diversity. These strategies will need to be appropriate for individuals and groups who may respond differently than staff would expect from their own cultural perspective. There are some important ideas to consider when developing and implementing a critical incidents response plan in a school with cultural diversity:

* Individuals and groups from diverse cultural backgrounds may respond differently to stress situations,
* Services employed to respond to a critical incident may need to go outside school to community support staff who possess additional language skills, and
* Beliefs around concepts of religions, death, and the grieving process differ amongst cultures.

**INDIVIDUALS AT RISK**

Some individuals in the school community are particularly at risk following a critical incident. Children or adults who have a close relationship with a person who dies suddenly will be vulnerable and may need support. Staff or pupils who have recently suffered a personal loss may be strongly affected by a death or other crisis affecting the school. Children who have emotional or behavioural disorders are particularly sensitive to the turmoil of emotions and changes in routine that take place following a critical incident. LA and school protocols for managing a crisis should include plans to deal with the needs of such individuals at risk.

Pupils who are already at risk for suicide, especially those who have made previous suicide attempts, will be at an increased risk in the aftermath of a crisis situation, particularly if the critical incident is a pupil suicide. Appropriate plans and responses will decrease the likelihood of imitation, sometimes referred to as ‘copycat suicides’. Staff and pupils who are close to a person who commits suicide will usually feel anger and guilt that they were unable to prevent the death. They may require reassurance and assistance in understanding their own feelings and help finding counselling.

Young people may feel isolated and alone with their pain after a loss or tragedy. The school must respond with support to assure pupils that they are not alone, that their feelings and responses are normal, and that help is available. Advance planning can assist school staff members in recognising pupils who need help dealing with a crisis.

**VULNERABLE PUPILS**

Some pupils are more vulnerable following exposure to a critical incident because of their circumstances. Pupils with special needs, pupils from minority cultural backgrounds, pupils who have English as a second language, illustrate just a few circumstances that may warrant extra attention. For example, pupils with behaviour disorders and frequently accompanying low self-esteem may react disproportionately to a crisis or trauma, even if the event does not directly affect them. Pupils who have difficulties such as poor communication skills or low cognitive ability may need additional support to understand and deal with the incident. Some pupils are disturbed by changes in their normal routine and the response to a critical incident may even further disturb their coping ability.

Some pupils are more susceptible to depression, self-destructive behaviours and at a greater risk for suicide. This may be due, in part, to the fact that they have difficulty understanding and expressing their feelings or because they suffer from feelings of isolation. Critical Incident Teams should take particular care in planning support for these individual pupils. Parents may need to be involved in planning for some children; for example the plan might include a pupil being removed temporarily from the school environment. Whenever possible however, the Critical Incident Team should implement school-based interventions for most pupils.

**STAFF NEEDS**

School staff may be surprised at their own responses to a tragedy in the school community. Staff who are close to the deceased or directly affected by the traumatic event may require extra support to carry out their roles in the school plan. Some may experience anxiety or sadness which seem out of proportion to their relationship to the person involved in the critical incident. This can be due in part to the existence of unresolved losses. All staff should be kept well informed and given an opportunity to discuss their own feelings. The nature of the critical incident and the level of personal involvement in helping pupils to cope may bring up issues in their own lives which require counselling support.

Because critical incidents can be traumatic, the normal coping mechanisms of even experienced teachers and other staff members can break down. Adults can feel severe distress symptoms which make it difficult for them to work effectively. Staff may need help in dealing with this stress. Even if they believe that they are coping with the crisis, staff may feel symptoms of stress such as fatigue, upset stomach, headaches, chest pains, poor concentration, numbing, a feeling of being overwhelmed, or other reactions.

**SCHOOL CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE PLAN**

This example features ten steps. Because many school critical incidents involve sudden deaths of people in the school community, the language in the steps is oriented toward responding to such events. They can be adapted for use with any type of traumatic event affecting a school.

**STEP ONE – GATHERING THE FACTS**

Whenever a tragedy occurs, children, like many people, may be confused or frightened. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. School personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security. As more information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

It may be helpful to consider the following guidance, when dialogue around a critical incident occurs:

**FACTS**

At first-contact for any Critical Incident, there will be 3 stories, which will naturally compete and conflict with each other. The closer these can be pulled together, the easier it will be to manage the incident i.e.

THE FACTS STORY

THE IMPLIED STORY

THE PUBLIC STORY

THE FAMILY STORY

**THE FACTS STORY**

These are the basic facts as you know them and usually come from the family directly or the police. The temptation is always to speculate and infer from this limited information. The facts are identified by the following questions, which should be kept at the forefront of your mind in discussions. What has happened?

* Where and when?
* Extent of injuries, numbers and names?
* Names and numbers of individuals closely affected by the event?
* Key people involved in school and external agencies?

**THE FAMILY STORY**

Where there is a bereaved family, they should own the information which is in the public domain. There have been cases where schools have shared information or photographs which the family did not want to be shared. It is therefore really important to identify a key contact person (often an adult sibling or in-law) and information shared should always be run past them before being made public.

**THE IMPLIED STORY**

Whenever there is a critical incident such as a child sudden death, the general public would like to know, and the media try to demand a complete answer to the why question, at a time when the facts have yet to emerge.

The following areas have an influence on the Implied Story which can grow and grow:

* The Media
* The Neighbourhood
* The Peer Group
* Social Media

**THE PUBLIC STORY**

It is imperative that the management team identify a Shared Public Story about the events in order to share with children and parents.

N.B. This should consist of the Facts as known, tempered by the Parent’s story/Police. This story should be prepared in consultation with the Local Authority/Police, Local Authority and Press Office (i.e. Gareth Watson and Head of Service).

1. Head Teacher confirms the critical incident with appropriate sources of reliable information:

* Immediate family
* Police
* LA personnel

1. Head Teacher collects information on the critical incident, including:
   * Verification of the details
   * Identification of individuals involved and/or
   * Evaluation of the emotional status of school and, if necessary,

respond to the immediate safety needs of pupils and staff

1. Head Teacher consults with the families affected to determine their wishes concerning public announcements and information for school staff and pupils.

**STEP TWO – CONTACT WITH THE LA**

1. Head Teacher telephones the Police, where appropriate, who then contact the Head of Education. The Head of Education and Chidlren’s Services then informs the LA Critical Incident Response Co-ordinator who initiates the LA Critical Incident Response.

1. Ensure that the predetermined media contact person for the LA is informed. This person handles all media requests for information and arranges for the preparation of press releases if necessary. The decision of the family about privacy of information must be respected and possible legal implications related to privacy issues must be considered.
2. The Critical Incident Response Team Co-ordinator arranges for all involved schools and personnel to be informed by telephone. The timing of these calls should be sensitive to the needs of the school community most affected by the incident.

**STEP THREE – ACTIVATE THE SCHOOL TEAM**

1. The Head Teacher contacts the members of the School Critical Incident Team and calls them together for a meeting. The Critical Incident School Team will implement an appropriate plan of action that takes into consideration both the wishes of the family or families and the needs of the school.

A sample meeting agenda for use at a school critical incident team meeting is provided within this pack. In brief, at this initial meeting the team should:

* Distribute the Critical Response Team Checklist
* Determine what needs to be done
* Clarify each person’s tasks
* Ensure that confidentiality is maintained until information is shared with the whole school staff and clarify family privacy issues

1. The School Critical Incident Team notifies the rest of the staff including secretaries, caretakers and other support staff of a special staff meeting. If the critical incident occurred during an evening or weekend, a scripted telephone tree can use to call staff to a meeting before the next school day. The School Critical Incident Team should not discuss the incident on the telephone unless it is already widely known in the community. Care should be taken about using the phone tree:

* Ensure that each person understands the message about the

meeting by asking them to repeat the message back to the

caller,

* Avoid leaving a message on an answering machine/voicemail or

with a child, and

* Reassign telephoning responsibility for people who may be

most affected by the incident

1. Tasks for the School Critical Incident team before the start of the school day, if possible:

* Determine further details of the event
* Ensure that the predetermined media contact person is provided with detailed information necessary to effectively carry out the role
* Determine the family’s wishes regarding personal property if the incident has been a sudden death or suicide and ensure that personal property is secure. For example if the pupil has a locker replace their lock if the incident has been a student death or injury
* Decide what course of action will be used to deal with potential ‘shrines’ created by classmates of the deceased after a pupil’s death. It is important to establish a protocol on this matter. Allowing a ‘shrine’ in one instance, but not in the next, may raise questions of fairness and favouritism that can escalate emotions and introduce conflict unnecessarily
* Assess whether supply teachers will be needed and advise the appropriate person to contact them
* Identify members of the school community that may be most affected by the incident and plan support for these people
* Assess need for additional counselling support in the school and ask the LA Team to assist in making the necessary arrangements
* Plan a meeting to inform staff
* Prepare a written statement for the staff meeting
* Decide whether a letter will go home with pupils informing parents of the critical incident

1. Tasks for the School Critical Incident Team during the school day:

* + Supply a brief, written statement for the office staff to use in

referring incoming queries or media calls. A script helps to ensure

that callers are redirected to the official media contact person

* Contact other nearby schools such as feeder schools which may be affected and ensure that the LA team has accurate information so that they can inform all schools in the LA
* Activate plans for a quiet area that pupils can go to should they choose, assign staff as appropriate
* Contact required outside resource people as appropriate for example, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHs), Police Liaison Officers and School Nurses.
* Bring in additional support if needed with the help of the LA Critical Incident Response Team.
* Prepare the letter to parents if one is needed. Example letters are included within this pack.

**STEP FOUR – COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF**

1. Inform all staff of the critical incident at an emergency staff meeting prior to the start of school, if possible. In addition to teachers, be sure to inform secretaries, caretakers, teaching assistants, canteen staff and playground supervisors of the meeting. After the meeting, inform all staff who were unable to attend the meeting.
2. Carefully orchestrate the staff meeting in order to assure staff that the Critical Incident Team’s plans are in place. All members of the Critical Incident Response team should attend. Include the following in the meeting:
   * Advise staff to deal with pupils to a level of their comfort
   * Reassure staff that they will be supported in their efforts to give

comfort to pupils and that additional help is available to anyone

who needs it, staff or pupils

* Remind staff of items in their pack which may be useful over the

next few days and provide them with written directions for the day

as soon as possible during or after their meeting

* Introduce any people from the LA team or the community support

staff who are in attendance at the meeting and may be present in

the school providing support to staff or pupils

1. Develop a plan for the day with the staff:
   * Maintain a regular school schedule, if possible
   * Cancel special activities, if necessary
   * Carefully state the information which should be given to pupils

during class discussions and provide all staff with additional

copies of agendas for class discussions to use with students

* Inform the staff of the counselling services that are available to staff and pupils. In the case of a sudden death or suicide, consider assigning a counsellor to visit the scheduled classes of the deceased
* Identify students who are closest friends or relatives of the deceased or injured and make plans to inform them with additional sensitivity and support
* Identify pupils at risk, those who are vulnerable to stress or changes in routines and make specific plans for each pupil. This task can be assigned to a key member of staff
* Ensure that staff members who are absent get information. Make

plans to assist supply teachers with classroom discussions.

1. Additional staff meetings may be needed:
   * Keep staff informed throughout the day by calling short update meetings during the breaks
   * Gather information about pupils and staff needs throughout the

day

**STEP FIVE – SETTING UP QUIET ROOMS**

Plans for the designation of quiet rooms in case of a critical incident should be in place as part of the school’s critical incident plan. When a traumatic event occurs, there is not sufficient time to carefully discus how this will be organised. Specific rooms or areas of the school can be designated to dealing with a potentially large number of people who are grieving or experiencing high levels of stress following a critical incident.

Some ideas suggested by schools who have planned and used this type of service following a critical incident include:

* Individual pupils can take a break during the day to visit the quiet

room to get support in dealing with their emotional reactions to the

death or traumatic incident

* It is important that support be available to pupils, at the moment they need it, in a private and supportive setting
* Small group counselling sessions may be helpful if staff assigned to

the quiet rooms have experience and training in counselling

* Staff in the quiet rooms should have written information to give to

students, such as normal stages of grief and guidelines on how to

arrange for additional support

* Large groups of pupils should not be allowed to congregate in the quiet rooms

**STEP SIX – TALKING TO PUPILS**

1. Be sure there is a teacher in each classroom as the pupils come in for the day or for their first class
2. Give information on the critical incident in a low-key and factual manner, including:
   * What happened
   * When and where the events occurred
   * Who was there at the time of the incident
   * What happened after the event
   * Who might be seriously affected by the incident because of their relationship with people directed affected by the traumatic event, and
   * What is going to happen next. In the case of sudden death, try to have information available on the funeral arrangements.
3. Give pupils the opportunity to react, discuss and ask questions.

* Allow time for the pupils to express their feelings. Keep in mind that reactions times may vary
* Give pupils permission to express what they uniquely feel. Listen and be empathetic
* Consider using activities to help pupils process their grief, such as art, poetry or creative journal writing

1. Once the talk seems to be over, begin the regular class routines with flexibility to respond to more questions throughout the day.

Teachers will need to be prepared to hear some unusual questions and to handle these questions in a matter-of-fact manner. They will need to model, by their behaviour, that the critical incident is serious while at the same time show warmth and understanding for all pupils. Teachers should watch carefully for individual pupils who are having a hard time coping to ensure they get access to help. It is better to over-refer than under-refer. Teachers should not try to second guess the level of grief of a pupil or staff member as people respond to trauma and grieve differently.

Following a critical incident, a child may report other traumatic events in their lives. All staff should be clear on the protocol for reporting child abuse and neglect and be prepared to take action to get help for the pupil in areas which seem unrelated to the current trauma situation.

**STEP SEVEN – INFORMING PARENTS**

Send a letter home with pupils to inform parents of the incident, if appropriate. In general, parents who are well informed are better equipped to support their children at home.

Information shared in a letter should be carefully worded to ensure that personal and family privacy is respected. Example letters are included in this pack.

**STEP EIGHT – FUNERAL INFORMATION**

In the case of a death, inform staff and pupils of plans for funeral arrangements. Many types of critical incidents involve sudden deaths: accidents, suicides, natural or physical disasters, or sudden acute health events. The school will need to provide information to the whole school community about formal occasions such as funerals or memorial services.

* When appropriate pupils and staff should have the opportunity to attend the funeral
* Decisions about allowing funeral attendance should be governed by the wishes of the family. Pupil and staff attendance can provide support for the family if that is the family’s choice. Pupils should be informed of the family’s wishes regarding attendance at the funeral service
* The funeral service can help peers understand and accept the death of a friend or colleague and can help to provide closure
* Ensure that pupils who plan to attend the funeral are prepared by helping them anticipate what happens at funerals. Explain the purpose of various rituals, appropriate etiquette at the ceremony, and other topics as necessary such as cremation, open caskets, burial and specific cultural practices

**STEP NINE – REMEMBERANCE ACTIVITY**

Family wishes should guide planning of a remembrance activity after a

critical incident which involved a pupil or a member of staff’s sudden death

* Schools are cautioned against holding a large assembly to honour the deceased because of the potential for group hysteria and for glorifying death in the case of a suicide. Large assemblies are not recommended for acute grief situations
* Pupils or staff may wish to express their grief and sympathy by contributing something in the name(s) of the deceased: a scholarship fund, school landscaping, a school plaque, and books for the library. Caution should be taken when establishing a permanent or highly visible memorial to remember a pupil who completed suicide
* Staff may need to provide leadership to pupils wishing to establish an appropriate remembrance as judgement of peers may be impaired following a traumatic event

**STEP TEN – TEAM REVIEW**

After each use of the Critical Incident Plan the School Critical Incident

Team should meet to review the events while they are still recent,

preferably within two weeks. This will serve several purposes: improve the

plans, raise staff skills about the use of the plan and tie up loose ends and

concerns following the critical incident. The meeting should include:

* A review of how well the plan guided the actions of staff. Identify

improvements that can be made in the school plan for future situations

* Re-evaluation of how well the actions taken as part of the plan were carried out. Appropriate changes can be made for next time, including additional training if needed
* Ensuring that counselling for School Critical Incident Team members is available for staff who feel that they still need to deal with their own feelings about their role in the critical incident
* A plan to write letters of appreciation to all who helped

**COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES**

**ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE SCHOOL**

The manner in which a critical incident is announced to the school can have a major impact on the emotional responses of the whole school community. Before making the announcement of a traumatic event, such as an accident or a sudden death, which is not widely known in the school or community, the Head teacher should consider some important issues:

* Ensuring that the family’s right to privacy is respected.
* Making the announcement simultaneously so that all pupils in the building will hear about it at the same time.
* Reducing potential for creating a highly charged emotional climate by informing students in their regular classroom setting.
* Carefully wording the content of the announcement and providing written copies to teachers to use in their classrooms.
* Monitoring the reactions of the pupils to hearing of the tragedy.

It is important to inform pupils as soon as possible. Delaying a formal announcement may make the situation worse, as rumour can add another dimension to the existing problem. Pupils may feel that a delay communicates lack of concern or sensitivity by the school staff. It is important to communicate that the staff care about the people affected by the critical incident and to model appropriate concern.

**MAKING THE ANNOUNCEMENT**

* Use straight forward sympathetic announcement of a loss with a simple statement of condolence. In the case of suicide, respect the wishes of the family. Use some discretion regarding any details of the critical incident. Be as truthful as possible when responding to the pupils’ questions, but keep in mind that early information available about a traumatic event may not be accurate.
* Use a classroom setting to announce a critical incident. Do not use an assembly to inform pupils or staff or a critical incident as it is harder to control pupils in a large group, it is not possible to gauge individual pupil’s reactions and it is difficult to meet the needs of pupils in such a large group. Holding an assembly may seem to glorify events which should not be glorified, such as a suicide.
* After the announcement in the classroom, allow sufficient time for students to begin to discuss their feelings in their classrooms. Assure pupils that they will be kept informed as information is available.

**SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Announcements of tragedy are like any other form of personal communication; they should be simple, straightforward and unique. These examples can only give you a general idea. They are not intended to be ‘fill in the blank’ forms. Staff who know the pupil or pupils involved can give the personal touch that is needed at such a time.

After the actual announcement, pupils should be reassured that they will have the chance to talk about the critical incident.

**AFTER A KNOWN FATALITY**

*We are taking this time to talk about XXXX, a Year Three pupil who died last night in a car accident. XXXX was travelling home with her family from Manchester. We do not know any details about the accident at this time except that the rest of the family is safe and no-one is seriously injured.*

*XXXX’s funeral is being held at ……. on Thursday afternoon. A funeral is a special time to remember a person who has died. The school will let your families know about the specific time and address of the church in a letter which will be sent home tomorrow.*

*Let’s take a moment of silence to think of XXXX, to remember all the good things about her and to say goodbye. In our silence we will send her our loving thoughts.*

**AFTER A SUSPECTED SUICIDE**

*A tragedy has happened, XXXX, a Year Eight pupil has died suddenly. Details of XXXX’s premature death will not be released to protect the privacy of family members. You will be given information about funeral arrangements as soon as possible.*

*This kind of tragic news is hard to accept. You may experience many feelings within the next few days. Everyone deals with loss differently. It is important to respect the way others grieve. Counsellors are available in room 117, feel free to go and talk to the counsellors. They want to listen to your feelings and concerns.*

**AFTER A FIRE IN A FEEDER SCHOOL**

*Last night a very frightening thing happened in our community. XXXX school was destroyed by fire. Many of you attended XXXX school when you were younger and some of you may have brothers and sisters who attend there now.*

*Luckily, no one was hurt in the fire. But schools mean more to people than just a building. We all have feelings about a school that go beyond the actual walls and roof – many hours of your childhood were spent there. You will have lots of memories connected with the building and you should not be surprised if you feel sad or angry about this happening. Your brothers and sisters who attend XXXX school may be quite upset about the changes that this will mean for them, and they may experience fears because the school was a haven of safety for them.*

*The Police and Fire Departments have informed us that they do not yet know how the fire started, but we will let you know any facts that are communicated to us as soon as possible.*

**SUGGESTED CLASS DISCUSSION FORMAT**

School is a place where learning takes place, where it is safe to ask questions and obtain factual information. Adults frequently attempt to insulate children from the realities of death or other tragic events. But children have the capacity to cope with stronger feelings of loss than many of us realise. If children sense that parents and teachers are hiding something their suspicions can lead to fears and fantasies that are more problematic for them than the truth. A teacher’s expression of sorrow in class conveys to the pupils that strong emotions are natural and that grief does not have to be hidden away. In addition when pupils are allowed to grieve in a supervised setting they can have the comfort and reassurance they need which will serve them well when they must deal with subsequent trauma related situations. When people are able to share their feelings and experiences when confronted with tragedy, they feel less helpless and alone.

**ADVICE FOR TEACHERS**

The following general principles can be helpful when working with pupils of all ages.

* It is important to acknowledge the reality of the critical incident and your willingness to talk about it.
* Be simple and straightforward. Discuss death or other tragedy in terms that the pupils can easily understand.
* Give the facts regarding the critical incident in a concrete, clear and accurate manner. There is no one rule to describe when such information can be shared, each situation will need to be analysed by the school critical incident team.
* Express your own feelings in an open, calm way which encourages pupils to express their grief or fear. Some pupils may choose not to talk, the discussion of the event strikes them as a source or more pain or fear and some have a hard time verbalising their feelings. Such pupils should not be pressured to talk.
* Be sensitive to possible cultural differences in methods of grieving.
* Project confidence and calmness. Be encouraging and reassuring.
* Listen, acknowledge the loss or fear and have a non-judgemental attitude.
* Be patient, many times because of their need for reassurance, young children will repeat the same questions. Older children may repeatedly tell about the relationship and reconstruct the loss. Repetitions of this sort are part of the normal grieving process.
* Be prepared for any pupil(s) who may feel the need to discuss unpleasant features of the relationship. Anger directed toward the deceased person is one of the many normal responses to loss. Pupils who may have had recent conflict with the deceased may be particularly affected.
* Assess the meaning of loss for each child. Pay close attention to those children who have experienced other recent deaths or losses, or to those who have emotional problems.
* Expect regressive behaviours such as a fear of being left alone. Expect physical complaints such as stomach aches and headaches.
* Be aware that both children and adults find it natural to show their empathy during grieving through physical contact such as hugging or touching on the arm.
* Avoid imposing your own theology or/and personal beliefs.
* Assess which students are in need of additional support and refer them to the designated quiet area. It is important to bear in mind that these children may require specialist intervention in the future – referrals may need to be made to the most appropriate outside agency.

**THE CLASS DISCUSSION**

There is no right way to talk about death or other tragedy. The following statements are only examples to guide your class discussion of the critical incident. This sample script can be changed to better fit the situation or the pupils’ needs. Classroom discussions will vary in length depending upon whether the critical incident occurred at school where pupils may have witnessed some aspect of the event, the age of the pupils and their emotional involvement with the injured or deceased. Some discussions may be as brief as a few minutes, while others will continue for an entire class lesson.

**BEGINNING SCRIPT**

1. ‘*Something very sad has happened. XXXX, a Year Three pupil has died in a car accident. This kind of sad news is hard to accept. You will probably have many feelings for a while. You could be sad, angry, confused, depressed, afraid, or have no feelings at all for some time. When I have felt like this, it has helped me to talk to someone. Sharing my feelings made it easier, although not less painful to deal with the tragedy. If you’d like to talk about the situation, I’d be glad to take time to do that. I’ll try to answer any questions as well as I can’*.
2. Encourage children to share their memories related to the critical incident: ‘*What are some of the things you want to remember about XXXX’.*

**RESPONDING**

1. Acknowledge that a wide variety of feelings are normal. There is no one right way to react to a tragedy. Feelings will vary from pupil to pupil and will change over time. Some possible responses include:

* ‘*Some of you feel angry that XXXX died. What can you do with your angry feelings?’*
* *‘It’s ok that some of you are very scared or angry as a result of hearing about XXXX and some only a little sad or scared’.*
* *‘Because XXXX has died, you may be reminded of others that you cared for who have died’.*
* *‘It’s ok to forget XXXX sometimes when you work and play’.*
* *‘It’s ok to cry – it’s alright’.*

1. Acknowledge that you do not possess all the answers. Often there is more comfort from an honest, ‘I don’t know why’, than from an attempt at explanations that don’t sound credible.
2. Acknowledge the various cultural or religious beliefs that may be expressed.

**CONCLUDING**

1. Focus on the strengths and support the pupils have to get the help they need:

* The support that comes from sharing feelings of grief or fear with others,
* The student’s support network, such as family, significant adults, teachers, counsellors. Have each pupil think of someone he/she can go to for support, and
* The student’s individual strengths which provide self-support.

1. Talk about the natural healing process. ‘*Over time the pain of missing XXXX won’t hurt so much. That’s the way it should be. It doesn’t mean that you loved XXXX any less’.*
2. ‘Class is almost over, and it seems that there is more to talk about.

Perhaps we can set aside some time tomorrow’.

1. Give information about the quiet room. ‘*There is a room available*

*where you can go and talk about your feelings. This room is the*

*library and you can use it whenever you like. The people in this room*

*want to help you. They will listen to your feelings and concerns. They*

*want to try to help you’.*

1. It is helpful to channel the feelings of the class into appropriate expressions of concern. It may provide comfort to pupils to feel they have participated in some overt act to express their feelings and reach out to grieving families affected by the critical incident. Teachers will need to use their own judgement to guide the appropriateness of the pupils’ activities, and they may need to be cleared with the Head Teacher.

**STATEMENTS TO AVOID**

1. Avoid euphemisms for death such as ‘Passed away’ or ‘Gone to sleep’ which may confuse or frighten the child.
2. Avoid the general statement, ‘If you need anything, tell me …’ It is better to say ‘Would it help if I …?’ Pupils may find it difficult to verbalise their own needs and will require assistance to find a way to describe the support they want.
3. Avoid saying ‘I know just how you feel.’ It is more empathetic to say ‘You must be having a lot of feelings right now...’
4. Avoid blaming or judging.

**THE CLASS DISCUSSION IN THE EVENT OF A SUICIDE**

Most pupils over eight years of age are old enough to understand the suicidal act. Children and teens often have romantic fantasies about death which must not be encouraged. Helping adults should be truthful, but not dwell on the details of how the pupil took his or her own life.

This type of sudden loss may bring with it a heavy overlay of guilt, shame, self-doubt and self-blame as well as feelings of anger, betrayal and rejection. Teachers should be prepared to encounter and validate these expressions. Bereavement and mourning can be more intense and extreme in the case of a suicide. School counsellors, who have been trained in suicide prevention, should have a key role in providing support to staff and pupils.

If the family has agreed that the death was a suicide, it is appropriate to use that term. If not, the class discussions will need to be conducted as for a sudden death.

**POSSIBLE SCRIPT FOLLOWING A SUICIDE**

‘*A very sad thing happened today. XXXX, a Year Nine pupil has committed suicide. Details of the death will not be released to protect the privacy of the family. This kind of news is hard to accept. You will probably experience many feelings now. You may feel sad, angry, confused, numb, depressed or even guilty. This was XXX’s choice and it is important to remember that he is responsible for making the decision to kill himself’*

1. ‘*You are not responsible’*
2. ***‘****This kind of death does not need to happen. Studies show that at the moment of suicide, individuals think death is the only way out. Although it may not seem possible, feelings and circumstances can change. Many people when they feel unhappy or unloved think about hurting themselves. But there are many better options. There are people who can help’.**Pupils can be reminded about the quiet rooms currently operating in the school, as well as the ongoing support that is available through the School Based Counsellor or Community Mental Health Services.*
3. ***‘****Some people who commit suicide believe that people will care more about them after they are dead, than when they were alive. This is not the case’.*
4. At the end of the discussion, help pupils understand the importance of talking to someone when they feel despondent. Elicit suggestions from the class as to whom they would talk to, and ask each individual pupil to privately think of those people to who they would turn.
5. Pupils should be reminded to anticipate rumours and misinformation and that they should not automatically believe anything they hear.
6. For younger children and pre-adolescents, it is important to confirm the fact that any death, including suicide, is final and irreversible.

**COMMUNICATION WITH INDIVIDUAL PUPILS**

Certain pupils may require individual attention. Pupils who are considered high risk need to be identified and offered help at the time of the incident. It may also be necessary to provide these individuals with support on an ongoing basis, particularly at high-risk times. High risk times include anniversaries of a previous death, birthdays, holidays etc. of the deceased pupil and the high risk pupil’s own birthday.

The following descriptors are helpful in identifying a high risk individual:

* Participated in any way with a suicide or accident
* Knew of suicide attempt or potential attempt and did not try to stop it
* Feels guilty about things they said or did to the deceased prior to the death
* Had recently punished or threatened to punish the deceased for some misdeed; did not take a suicide threat seriously, or had been too busy to talk to a victim who asked for help
* Were relatives, best friends, or those mentioned in a suicide note
* Identifies with the victim’s situation, has a history of suicidal threats or attempts, or is desperate and now considers suicide a viable alternative

**COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

Parents will want information when a critical incident in the school community may be affecting their children. Depending on the nature of the traumatic event, the entire community may be affected. Special communications to parents can be extremely helpful in gaining their support for the school and in reaching satisfactory closure to the incident for pupils. In some cases, communication by telephone may be advisable. In other cases, where the number of contacts precludes telephone contact, a letter is more useful.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS WITH PARENTS BY TELEPHONE**

* The person doing the telephoning should be comfortable with the role and ideally have experience or training in counselling
* Prepare a script similar to the one used to announce the event to pupils, which covers the facts of the critical incident
* Be sensitive to possible emotional reactions by a parent and use active listening skills to calm an upset parent
* Personally contact the parents of any pupil who has had a difficult time coping with the traumatic event and give information about additional support that parents may wish to access for their children
* Reassure parents that the school is responding to the critical incident and describe the response activities

**SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS**

Depending on the impact of the critical incident, a letter may be sent home with every pupil in the class or classes involved and, in some cases with the entire school. Information to be included in the letter should be checked with the relevant experts. This letter could include the following information:

* The nature of the critical incident and appropriate details
* What the pupils have been told
* Possible grief/stress reactions that parents may expect in their children
* Suggestions of how they might respond to their children’s reactions
* In the case of a death, the funeral arrangements, and
* Resources available to parents

This resource guide provides examples of letters which can be used to plan communication with parents/guardians.

**COMMUNICATIONS WITH PARENTS AT THE SCHOOL SITE**

Make plans to accommodate parents who come to the school following a critical incident.

Parents or other concerned community members may gravitate to the school in response to a critical incident. They may wish to take their children home or may be looking for information or help with their own emotional responses to the incident.

Plans should include advance arrangements for how to deal effectively with these adults. Experienced schools report that it is a good idea to pre-arrange a space to accommodate these individuals.

Support materials for parents on how to help pupils deal with trauma can be made available and information about community resources can be provided.

**GUIDELINES FOR DEALING WITH THE MEDIA**

During crisis situations, schools may find that the news media are planning to report on the events as they occur. It is important to have an established protocol in order to protect school personnel and the pupils from misrepresentation or exploitation, and to ensure that the information provided to the media is appropriate, accurate and prompt.

**IDENTIFYING A SPOKESPERSON**

The LA Critical Incident Response Team and the Head Teacher should decide together who should deal with the media. Depending on the nature of the critical incident, the appropriate person may vary. Where appropriate this person can meet with the family or families and other individuals such as the police to determine sensitive issues. Additional advice and opinions should be sought from those directly affected.

The wishes of the family are crucial in making decisions about the information provided to the media. The manner and content of the information released to the media can have serious legal implications for the school community.

The contact person should be available for radio, television or newspaper interviews. It may be advisable to prepare a formal press release for some types of critical incidents.

**SAMPLE PROTOCOL**

The following is one example of a protocol. In this instance the Police Liaison Officer is the designated media contact person.

1. All requests for information about the events surrounding a critical incident must be referred to the Police Liaison Officer. The Police Liaison Officer is directly responsible for communicating with all media.
2. The Head Teacher or designated member of the School Team should ensure that the Police Liaison Officer has access to all information about the events as they become known in order to carry out this role effectively.
3. A brief prepared statement directing media enquiries to the Police Liaison Officer should be written and available for secretaries or other persons who may be answering telephone enquiries or any other requests for information by the media.
4. School personnel should check with the Head Teacher before speaking to reporters. It is not a good idea to speak to the media ‘off the record’.
5. The media may not interview pupils on school premises unless the interviews are approved by the Police Liaison Officer.

**CHECKLISTS AND AGENDAS**

**SCHOOL TEAM – CRITICAL INCIDENT CHECKLIST**

The following items are sample actions for a checklist which can be adapted by the School Critical Incident Team to suit the protocol developed in a particular school.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Assist Head Teacher in preparing written instructions for staff to be distributed at the staff meeting or into the hands of staff |
|  | Compile a list of staff who may require extra support because of their closeness to the deceased |
|  | Assign a School Critical Incident Team member to classes where the teacher has requested this type of assistance |
|  | Gather and maintain a list of at risk pupils, including those pupils who may need to go home or may require additional support. Ensure that parents are informed. |
|  | Contact other schools where siblings, team mates or close friends of people directly affected by the critical incident may be attending. In case of a staff death, all schools in the LA should be contacted. |
|  | Assist in organising the school or staff’s role in visitation, funeral or memorial arrangements in the case of a pupil or staff death. |
|  | Meet after school to review the day, and plan for the next day’s activities. |
|  | Be available to discuss concerns regarding pupils or procedures to be followed with any staff member. |
|  | Ensure that school records relating to the pupil are handled in a sensitive and appropriate manner. |

**TEACHER – CRITICAL INCIDENT CHECKLIST**

The following items are sample actions for a teacher checklist which can be adapted by the School Critical Incident Team to fit the protocol developed in a particular school.

Teachers play a vital role in helping pupils or staff deal with their feelings regarding critical incidents such as the death of a pupil or staff member. If a teacher is uncomfortable in carrying out the actions of the checklist, assistance should be requested from the School Critical Incident Team.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Attend staff meetings and obtain all possible information. |
|  | Follow instructions in the handout received from the Head Teacher and School Critical Incident Team. |
|  | Request a School Critical Incident Team member to lead the class discussion if you feel uncomfortable. |
|  | Allow pupils to express their feelings openly and facilitate the Classroom discussion by modelling listening and sharing feelings and reactions with pupils. |
|  | Direct any pupils who appear to need further assistance to the appropriate support personnel; allow pupils to go to the quiet rooms. Arrange for someone to accompany young children or pupils who are in distress. Keep a list of these pupils and give it to the School Critical Incident Team. |
|  | Provide the names of any pupils or staff considered to be at risk or in need of counselling support to the School Critical Incident Team. |
|  | Attend after school staff meeting. |

**SCHOOL STAFF – CRITICAL INCIDENT CHECKLIST**

All school staff are affected by a critical incident such as a disaster or the death of a pupil or staff member; everyone should be clear about his/her role in dealing with a tragic event. The following is a sample checklist for school personnel who are not teachers which can be adapted by the School Critical Incident Team to fit the protocol developed in a particular school,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | If possible, attend the staff meeting to be informed about the traumatic events and the plans for the school day. If you are unable to attend, contact a member of the School Critical Incident Team and get information. |
|  | Ensure that you are informed of appropriate strategies to handle pupils’ questions or comments. Redirecting pupils to teachers or counselling staff may be an appropriate response. |
|  | Ensure that you are clear on procedures for handling requests or calls from parents, news media and others. Be aware that extra personnel may be in the building, but report anyone who appears to be on school grounds inappropriately to the Head Teacher immediately. |
|  | Provide names of any pupils or staff whom you are concerned about to the School Team. |
|  | Attend the Critical Incident after school meeting. |

**SAMPLE SCHOOL CRITICAL INCIDENT TEAM MEETING AGENDA**

The following sample School Critical Incident Team meeting agenda can be adapted to fit the protocol developed in a particular school.

1. Share information with the Critical Incident Team regarding the facts of the traumatic event. No information should be shared with anyone else until a decision is made about what information is to be shared and the process for notifying staff and pupils.
2. Determine the impact of this particular incident on individual members of the School Critical Incident Team in order to ensure that all members can function objectively. Assess the likely impact of the critical incidents on classes and individuals. Consider the impact for anyone in the school community who may have recently experienced a significant death or loss. Are there staff members who may require assistance in leading the classroom discussion?
3. Determine whether there are any cultural or religious implications surrounding the incident. How should they be addressed?
4. Identify school resources. Are there other staff members who might be helpful additions to the team in this situation?
5. Determine whether additional counsellors are required to provide support to the Critical Incident Team and work with pupils. Assess the extent of the need for additional resources. The team could be augmented by a variety of LA personnel, Behaviour Support Assistants and Mental Health Personnel.
6. Confirm the overall strategy and the specific roles of the Critical Incident Response Team members for this particular crisis.
7. Develop an agenda for the general staff meeting and prepare a written statement for the meeting about the critical incident.
8. Decide whether it would be appropriate to send home a brief announcement about the critical incident. Sample letters are included in this pack.

**SAMPLE STAFF MEETING AGENDA**

The following sample staff meeting agenda can be adapted by the School Critical Incident Team to fit the protocol developed in a particular school.

1. Attendance – anyone who is not present should be informed of the critical incident as soon as possible following the meeting.
2. Provide as much accurate information as possible, including:

* + Names of the pupils or staff members directly involved,
  + Time and place of the event,
  + Any additional information surrounding the event, and
  + Names and classes of the siblings of those directly affected who are also in the school.

1. Introduce the School Critical Incident Team, members of the LA Team, and any additional support staff or community resource people who are present and explain their roles.
2. Briefly review the school’s response plan. Provide extra copies.

* Prepare teachers to deal effectively with informing their pupils of the critical incident
  + Give directions and model how pupils should be told
  + Encourage teachers to allow time for classroom discussion
  + Provide all staff with a copy of the protocol for class discussion. Guidelines on leading a classroom discussion are included within this pack.
* Clarify procedures for handling pupils who want to leave the classroom
* Pupils who are highly emotional should be accompanied to the designated quiet room
* Pupils who wish to leave the school should only be released to their parent or guardian
* Inform teachers of counselling support plans
* Ask staff help to identify pupils who may be at risk or need extra support
* Review media policy
* Inform all staff of any changes to the regular school schedule or cancellation of normal school events

1. Set the date and time of a follow-up meeting.

* Assure staff that they will be kept informed of any relevant information in this update meeting
* The follow up meeting will provide an opportunity for staff members to discuss classroom experiences and report back to the group.

**CRITICAL INCIDENT CONTACT LIST**

**SCHOOL CRITICAL TEAM**

**NAME ROLE/POSITION PHONE**

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**LA TEAM**

**NAME ROLE/POSITION PHONE**

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**OTHER KEY COMMUNITY CONTACTS**

**NAME ROLE/POSITION PHONE**

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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX ONE**

**QUIET ROOMS**

Setting up temporary quiet rooms following a critical incident is an effective way to support pupils, particularly those considered high risk. All available school counsellors, with possible support from available LA School Based Counsellors and selected members of the School Team can staff the quiet room. The duration of this provision will depend upon the nature and impact of the incident. The following suggestions for planning and operating such a service have been used successfully by schools.

**GUIDELINES FOR SETTING UP A QUIET ROOM**

1. Provide a quiet room all day the first day that news of a critical incident such as a sudden death is disseminated.
2. Ensure that more than one counsellor/facilitator is in the room at all times. Counselling in the room may be with individuals or small groups.
3. Staff who provide counselling in the room should organise themselves to maintain continuity in spite of the ‘drop in’ process, so that adults may consult with each other about identifying high risk pupils as well as for general help and support.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR STAFF IN THE QUIET ROOM**

* Accept all responses from pupils and allow them to express their reactions in a way that is individually appropriate
* Let the pupils express their feelings about other personal losses such as deaths in their families or other traumatic events. A critical incident may bring up painful memories or unresolved emotions from the past
* Listen to the pupils express their feelings without making judgements. Be empathetic and encourage them to discuss how they are feeling
* Be genuine. Do not try to convince pupils that you understand their feelings. Say: ‘I want to understand you feelings. Please tell me some more so that I can try to understand where you are coming from’.
* Discuss the facts and the critical incident and discourage rumours. Ensure that confidential information is not revealed in discussions in the quiet room
* If the incident was a suicide or if the pupils mention suicide in response to another type of traumatic event, reinforce that suicide is always an unwise decision, without moralising. Focus suggestions on other options for dealing with serious problems
* Provide opportunities for pupils to discuss feelings of guilt related to the tragedy. They may need reassurance that they are not responsible
* Help pupils who may become fearful for their own safety and that of family members or peers. Remember that critical incidents can spark disclosure of child abuse or other ways that pupils are at risk
* Carefully monitor the pupil’s response to you. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of the response, seek immediate assistance from other staff
* Be vigilant to any expression of suicidal thoughts. Remember that a well thought out plan to commit suicide is a significant danger sign which should signal immediate action for staff and/or family. Seek immediate assistance and do not leave the pupil alone until you have it

**APPENDIX TWO**

**GUIDELINES FOR A GRIEF SUPPORT GROUP**

In some instances, schools may decide to set up a grief support group which will meet on a longer term basis following the death of a student or other person in the school community. Other schools may choose to call on community agencies to provide this service. The following suggestions are designed for schools who wish to establish their own grief support groups. When counselling staff decide to set up a group of pupils to meet together they might want to consider focusing on some of the following topics:

* Assuring the pupils that it is normal to have feelings of anger, guilt or fear,
* Planning acceptable activities to respond following a death such as appropriate ways of communicating with the family of the deceased,
* Encouraging pupils to recall personal memories and in particular positive experiences involving the person who died,
* Sharing feelings about how this death connects to other losses in their lives,
* Discussing the stages of grieving, and
* Encouraging pupils to involve their peers who may need support and/or counselling

Grief group meetings should be brought to a close when appropriate. Some students may need continued individual counselling on a one-to-one basis. The group may need to reconvene for a brief meeting if future events require it. In some instances the anniversary of a critical incident calls for such a meeting.

Additional support may need to be arranged for some members of the group to get ongoing support. Throughout the life of the grief support group, facilitators need to identify pupils with chronic problems around the issue of suicide or other self-destructive behaviours and obtain additional services to meet their more serious needs.

**APPENDIX THREE**

**UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH GRIEF**

Grief is a process. It is the work we must do to come to terms with loss. Grief is not a single emotion, but rather it is a constellation of feelings which can be expressed through a variety of behaviours and thoughts. Because there are many ways to express grief, there are many ways to resolve grief. It should be remembered then that children who are grieving may show a variety of physiological symptoms and psychological and behavioural responses. Since there are varying theories on the child’s concept of death, it is helpful to ask the pupil for his/her interpretation of what happened in order to deal with the issues at the most appropriate level of understanding.

**THE GRIEF PROCESS**

Grief is a natural and normal process. It is a physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological response. Grieving is a common life process.

Grief is the healthiest way to accept a loss and put it into perspective. It helps us to face the reality of loss, to recover, and to grow through the experience. The expression of grief may differ with each individual, yet follow a broad common framework. It is important to understand the process of grief.

No matter what type of loss is experienced, the same process is generally gone through each time, although the length and intensity of the experience will differ. The stages of grief are not necessarily in a particular order. An individual may flow back and forth between stages. There is no set time for an individual to spend in each stage. To reach a level of acceptance may take months or years.

This appendix provides three resources that are useful in gaining a perspective on the grief process and the possible grief reactions of children and adults. These include the Stages of Grief developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, descriptors of Children’s Concepts of Death and suggested ways to provide comfort to a grieving child or an adult.

**THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS**

Response to grief and stress in all ages can include some of the following reactions:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Emotional | Physical | Behavioural |
| Shock | Dizziness | Avoiding talking for fear of upsetting family and friends |
| Disbelief | Shaking | Tearfulness |
| Denial | Nausea | Black Humour |
| Anger | Changes in Breathing | Irritability |
| Guilt | Changes in/or loss of Appetite | Pre occupation with the event |
| Longing | Tiredness | Increased Risk Taking Behaviour |
| Shame | Insomnia | Flash-back |
| Anxiety | Memory Loss | Hyper-vigilance about own safety and safety of friends and family |
| Fear such as fear of the dark or leaving a parent | Lack of Attention and Concentration and interest in usual activities | Aggression |
| Returning to a younger emotional state | Fight, Flight, Freeze Responses | Pretend play – acting out what has happened |
| Regrets about what has been said or left unsaid | Bad dreams | Mood swings |
| Guilt at not having done something /having survived |  | Deterioration in school performance |

Developmentally, children and young people may not have the words to express their emotions and many rely on their behaviour to communicate how they feel. Staff working with the children should be alert to the feelings and needs that may be behind behaviours.

**NORMALISATION**

Normalising the reactions that many individuals experience after a traumatic bereavement can reduce feelings of alienation and assist with processing the traumatic event and losses. These feelings and reactions are distressing but are normal reactions to the abnormal situation or traumatic bereavement. Although common, different people experience them in different ways, based on their circumstances and experiences. For example, the extent of reactions can be affected by the age of the deceased, the level of media involvement.

**STAGES OF GRIEF**

This is a description of the adult grief process which was originally developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book, *On Death and Dying.* It is widely used in the field of hospices for dying patients. Ross’ stages were originally developed from her work with dying cancer patients, but the strategies have been generalised and applied to many other areas of adult grieving.

**STAGE TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR**

**Shock and Denial** Appears inactive, expressionless, numb

Exhibits denial, disbelief

Feels disorganised

Loses appetite

**Fear**  Feels terror

Panics in absence of parents

Feels helpless

Fears something will happen to loved ones or self

Develops physical symptoms, sleep disturbances

**Anger**  Resents others and self

Exhibits uncooperative and rude behaviour

May become angry at those trying to help

**Guilt**  Blames self for loss

Has lowered self-esteem

May seek to punish self

**Depression**  Feels empty

Appears unhappy and cries excessively

Yearns or searches for lost object or person

Withdraws, is silent

**Acceptance**  Has experienced separation or loss and is able to

cope

Feels hopeful

Reorganises life and focuses on the present

Although considered classic for adults, children’s grieving is not commonly described with the same adult stages. Terese Rando uses different descriptors for the stages of grieving for children in her book *Grief, Dying and Death:*

* Avoidance
* Confrontation
* Reestablishment

**CHILDREN’S CONCEPT OF DEATH**

This is a commonly accepted description of children’s concepts of death at different ages. Children develop at different rates and may not fit these categories exactly. Different cultures vary in their concepts of death as well as their methods of grieving.

**3-5 Years Old**

These children do not accept death as a permanent process. Death is seen as an ending. They fear separation and abandonment more than death. Children may feel angry or sad that someone is not coming home. They often ask questions such as ‘When will Grandma come back?’

**5-9 Years Old**

Children of this age are beginning to understand that death is very concrete and irreversible. They fear darkness and being alone. They know the body decays, but believe the spirit still lives. Talk openly to clear up misconceptions and lessen fears. Reassure children that they will be looked after and accept that their level of conceptual understanding necessitates a concrete view of death.

**10-14 Years Old**

Children are beginning to understand and accept a mature, realistic explanation of death as final and inevitable. They are developing their independence from parents but are not yet fully established individuals. Consequently, a death, especially of a peer can cause considerable distress based on a fear for their own security. They may refuse to believe they are mortal.

**15-18 Years Old**

Teens are aware of complex social issues. They are moving to a more abstract level of thinking and yet their tendency is to react, especially in the death of a person, in a highly dramatic fashion, with a reliance on personalised rituals, symbols etc. Their energy can appear to come in great spurts and their responses can be unpredictable.

**Adult**

The variety of grief response in adults is extensive, largely due to how previous losses have or have not been resolved. It is important to remember that culture plays an important role in how the experience of death is expressed and resolved.

**SUGGESTED WAYS TO PROVIDE COMFORT**

**TO COMFORT A GRIEVING CHILD:**

* Be yourself. Show your natural concern and sorrow in your own way and own words.
* Be there. Spend time with the child walking, reading, talking. Spend some time with the child away from the group.
* Listen. Be sure to have good eye contact. Use simple, direct words. Let the child be mad or express other feelings.
* Explain things. Give information about what is going to happen. Keep promises made. Be as predictable as possible.
* Comfort the child. Do not assume that a seemingly calm child is not grieving. If you can, be a friend to whom feelings can be confided and with whom tears can be shed.

**TO COMFORT A GRIEVING ADULT:**

* Be there. Attend the funeral, visit, call and spend time with those grieving. Particularly after the initial attention subsides, bring food, do errands.
* Listen. Grieving people need to talk about the sudden vacuum in their lives. Allow them to know that you wish to hear about their experiences. Do not force conversation, allow the grieving person to lead. Do not attempt to tell the grieving person how he/she feels. Ask (without probing), but realise you can only know what you are told.

Avoid talking to others about trivia in the presence of the recently grieving person, even if this is done to distract the bereaved.

Do not take away pictures, clothing, pupil’s belongings and/or desk too quickly. Acknowledge the death.

* Send a note. Notes can share personal memories, short and simple.
* Give a gift. Donate a collection of poems, a book to the library in memory of the deceased, a gift to a related charity.
* Extend an invitation. Consider what the person likes to do. Bereaved people often decline invitations or cancel at the last minute. Do not give up. Ask again. Do not forget the person after time has past.
* Encourage the postponement of major decisions. Whatever can wait should wait until after the period of intense grief.

**APPENDIX FOUR**

**SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS AND WAYS TO HELP**

**WARNING SIGNS:**

**CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR**

Normally active people may become withdrawn; cautious individuals may start taking unusual risks. Any significant change may be cause for concern.

**PROBLEMS IN SCHOOL**

A dramatic drop in marks, falling asleep in class, emotional outbursts or other uncharacteristic behaviour may be cause for concern.

**THEMES OF DEATH**

A desire to end one’s life may show up in the person’s artwork, poetry, essays, listening to heavy metal music, or preoccupation with an occult group or activity.

**A PREVIOUS SUICIDE ATTEMPT**

A significant number of young people who commit suicide have attempted suicide before.

**SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

Alcohol and other drug abuse appears to be significantly linked to an increase in risk taking and suicide attempts among young people.

**SIGNS OF DEPRESSION**

These may include changes in eating and sleeping habits, anxiety, restlessness, fatigue, feelings of hopelessness and guilt, and loss of interest in usual activities. Alcohol and drug abuse are common ways for people to medicate themselves from depressive feelings.

**VERBAL STATEMENTS**

Comments such as ‘You’d be better off without me’ or ‘I wish I were dead’ should always be taken seriously.

**GIVING AWAY POSSESSIONS**

Someone who has decided to commit suicide may give away personal possessions: records, favourite articles of clothing etc.

**POOR COPING SKILLS**

The inability to see many options for solving problems and lacking confidence in a brighter future makes young people vulnerable.

**OTHER**

These may include physical comments, frequent accidents, hyperactivity, aggressiveness, sexual promiscuity or prolonged grief after a loss.

**WAYS TO HELP**

**DO:**

**BE A GOOD LISTENER**

Be calm, speak quietly and gently. Listen with your eyes and your ears. Look for nonverbal clues that show how the person is feeling and report what you see. For example, say ‘You seem sad’ then wait for a response.

**BE DIRECT**

Talking openly is the only way you can find out how serious the person is about ending his or her life. Ask ‘Have you ever felt so low that you felt your life was not worth living?’

**SHOW THAT YOU CARE**

Tell the person that you are always available to talk about things that may be troubling him/her. Use a warm expression and physical contact to reassure him/her that you care.

**GET HELP**

Seeking professional help is a must! Although simple depression can disappear as quickly as it came, it can develop to the point where a person may impulsively see suicide as the only way out.

**DO NOT:**

**DO NOT MINIMISE**

Avoid offering empty reassurance or dismiss the person’s problems as trivial. From his perspective they matter a great deal and are making him/her unhappy.

**DO NOT MAKE A MORAL JUDGEMENT**

Do not act shocked or disgusted. Do not use reverse psychology. Do not tell them they have a lot to live for, argue with them, lecture or punish. If what the person tells you makes you feel angry, control those feelings.

**DO NOT LEAVE THE PERSON ALONE**

If you feel there is any immediate danger, do not leave the person alone and eliminate all access to lethal weapons, drugs and cars. The easy availability of drugs increases the chances of a passing impulse ending in death.

**DO NOT IGNORE THE PROBLEM**

Just because a person may frequently be manipulative, dramatic or attention seeking does not mean they are not also suicidal.

**APPENDIX FIVE**

**SAMPLE LETTERS TO PARENTS**

**LETTER 1**

Dear Parents,

The school has experienced *(the sudden death, accidental injury)* of one of our pupils. We are deeply saddened by the death/events.

*(Brief details of the incident and in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost)*

We have support structures in place to help your child cope with this tragedy. *(Elaborate).*

It is possible that your child may have some feelings that he/she may like to discuss with you. You can help your child by taking time to listen and encouraging them to express their feelings. It is important to give them truthful information that is appropriate to their age.

If you would like advice or assistance you may contact the following people at the school. *(Details).*

Yours sincerely,

**LETTER 2:**

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian:

We have suffered a tragedy at our school. On December XXX, one of our pupils, XXXXX, died suddenly and unexpectedly. In addition to our grief over the loss of this member of our school community, we are sensitive to the fact that such an event has an impact on other pupils.

In response, the school has implemented a plan which allows pupils an opportunity to talk about their thoughts and feelings with trained professional staff. We expect that some will seek out this help, while others may not. Those who do will be given an opportunity to express their feelings and grief. This is not intended to take the place of outside professional counselling or religious care.

Anticipating that your child may have a reaction to this event, we have some information available to you at your request which could be helpful as you respond to your child’s concerns. If you should determine that your child needs further professional counselling, please feel free to contact the school for phone numbers of local agencies that are available to assist you.

Please do not hesitate to contact the school regarding your requests or concerns,

Sincerely,

**LETTER 3:**

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian:

It is with sadness that I inform you of the death of a Year Two pupil in our school. XXXX died from injuries suffered in a car accident which occurred last night.

Pupils will have varied reactions to the death of a peer. A wide range of reactions is normal in the grief process and can vary from withdrawal to crying and anger. I encourage you to openly discuss with your child their reactions and feelings regarding the death of XXXX.

Special counselling services have been made available to pupils today and will continue to be available throughout the week and longer, if needed.

If you think your child needs additional counselling support, please do not hesitate to contact the school office,

Sincerely,