

Educational Psychology Service

Guide to Critical Incidents



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CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE BY THE EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE

Background

The nature of the work which is routinely taken on by Local Education Team members in developing relationships with staff within schools, and advising on the needs of children in every school in the county, puts the Local Education Team staff in an ideal position to support schools in a crisis. However, the educational psychologists, often with their experience of not only being teachers, but also their psychological knowledge, makes them the first port of call in intervention during a crisis within a school.

For some time now the Educational Psychology Service has been working and developing a range of support resources which can be useful to schools, not only at times when they are experiencing a critical incident, but also to:

- Enable them to formulate their own plans in order to respond to an incident themselves;
- Train up key members of staff who can most effectively manage a critical incident.

Underlying Principles

The Educational Psychology Service (EP Service) undertakes to offer an equal service to all schools across Wiltshire who experience a critical incident. EPs will work with schools in partnership to help empower staff, parents and pupils on how to deal most effectively with the effects of a critical incident. The response of the EPs will be part of Wiltshire's overall strategy for supporting schools coping with critical incidents.

It is important that all EPs share responsibility for supporting schools in times of crisis. The work may well be rotated so that it does not become an additional burden to one EP, or fall on a few willing individuals. All EPs will be expected to participate in responding to critical incidents throughout the county. If there is a major incident then not only EPs but Local Education Team members who are also trained will also be called upon. EPs may either:

- Be directly involved in the critical incident, or
- Be asked to cover other commitments which cannot be rearranged of colleagues who are working directly with the affected school.

It is assumed that interventions will be short term dealing with the needs of staff and pupils in the initial phase following a critical incident. Longer term support needs will be referred to appropriate agencies as necessary, for example, CAMHS.

EPs will generally work in teams of two in a school in order to offer each other support, and to be able to debrief at the end of the day. The Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) will always ask the EP who is the named liaison EP for the school if they wish to become involved in that particular critical incident. It is understood that all EPs have the right to withdraw from critical incident support if they feel that they have not got sufficient reserves to be able to cope with this demanding response.

EPs will work closely with other agencies and services, ie District Education Officers (DEOs), LET members, the clergy, school counselling service etc. EPs will take responsibility themselves to alert the PEP if they feel they are not prepared to be involved with a particular incident. Individual EPs who undertake this work need to take responsibility for ensuring they take up the opportunities that are provided for their own debriefing at an emotional and professional level. The EP Service will monitor and support the advice provided and the EP Service will undertake to review the policy on a regular basis.

Aims

The aim of the EP is to:

- Deal with the initial shock of crisis situations and respond by supporting a school or institution in those circumstances;
- Support the senior management staff of a school or institution with the re-establishment of regular routines;
- Mobilise individual and collective resources for dealing with a critical incident which are available within the county;
- Use psychological support to reduce post traumatic stress and prevent the onset of post traumatic stress disorder which can have a debilitating effect on individual lives;
- Identify vulnerable individuals who may need more intensive psychological, or even psychiatric help.

CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE

The PEP will be informed via the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) that a critical incident has occurred and will inform the liaison EP for that school and that they may be required to support a particular school in crisis. In the event of a large incident the PEP will work with the Emergency Planning Officer, Social Care staff and Local Education Team members in order to affect an appropriate response.

In the event of a critical incident being reported the EDT informs the PEP, takes detailed information, and passes the message directly to the co-ordinating EP. It is up to the school liaison EP to make direct contact with the school and to offer help and support when needed. A critical incident could include:

- Staff/student lost or injured on a school visit
- Staff or student suicide
- Serious physical attack on student/staff
- Terminal illness of student/staff
- Sudden death of a student/member of staff

In serious incidents in schools it is important that the schools and support teams work in partnership. It is also important to draw the distinction between the kinds of incidents listed above and major civil emergencies which require a multi-agency response, like a plane crash or nuclear accident. The County Emergency Planning Officer has prepared plans for such eventualities, often involving the use of school premises. In such a major emergency separate arrangements are made by the County Emergency Planning Officer.

Schools have an emergency information booklet which aims to assist them in developing a contingency plan in the event of a critical incident. A plan is a guide and an aide memoire to those involved in managing and controlling stressful situations. It is expected, however, that schools will ask for help during a critical incident and they are not expected to cope alone.

Media Unit

In the event of an incident where there is welcome or unwelcome interest from the media they often have misinformation from eye witnesses, parents, etc. To enable EPs to deal with the needs of those involved in any critical incident Wiltshire County Council's media unit will co-ordinate all approaches from radio, television and newspapers and will liaise with the EP in order to ensure that the media have the correct information. The main tasks of the media unit in a critical incident are:

- To keep the media informed with details of known and confirmed facts via press releases, media briefings etc;
- Arrange media briefings away from the school site to try to keep them away from the actual incident;
- Arrange limited access to the school site should that be deemed appropriate;
- Arrange interviews with appropriate spokesperson for the department/school;
- Handle all enquires on behalf of the school and the department.

It is EPS policy for EPs not to speak to Press during critical incidents unless agreed by the media unit and the PEP.

Support for Educational Psychologists in Schools

EPs who have not previously been involved in critical incidents will need to work with an experienced EP. It is good practice to co-work in interventions such as those receiving services for critical incidents where they are likely to work with strong emotions. In the interest of staff welfare it is important that those involved in this type of intervention are comfortable working as a team to offer and receive debriefing/supervision and support. It is necessary for all those involved to make time to receive both operational and psychological/emotional debriefing following their involvement. **Remember** stress is accumulative and debilitating and these interventions are normally extremely stressful. At the end of each session working with a school the EP takes responsibility for ensuring that 20 to 30 minutes are set aside to allow for debriefing and dealing with their own emotional response to the situation. This half hour session forms part of the planned support to the school.

MANAGEMENT OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE

Time Allocation

EPs who are drafted in to support schools during a critical incident will automatically cancel any current commitments they have. If these can be covered by other members of the Local Education Team, or other members of the EPS, then this should be explored. However, schools understand that if an EP is drafted in to support during a critical incident they may lose some of their time allocation.

Recording

It is assumed that the critical incident will be recorded on a needs assessment sheet and that there is a record of the intervention as it unfolds to provide a prompt for various actions which are outlined in the policy. The liaison EP should email the PEP with a summary of what has happened and what their involvement has been.

Quality Assurance

It is the department's aim to assure that anyone who may have suffered emotional trauma through being involved directly or indirectly in tragic or stressful circumstances, which includes department personnel, friends, relatives of the dead and injured. All such persons should be entitled to:

- Courtesy; honesty; respect for feelings; respect for religious, cultural and other personal differences and wishes, including the right to decline offers of help from others;
- Privacy and confidentiality;
- Access to information and advice as soon as it becomes available;
- Sympathetic consideration of practical needs;
- Access to immediate emotional support; comfort, reassurance, escorting etc from caring and sensitive personnel;
- Access to emotional first aid delivered in a way that is appropriate for their age and understanding, and access to long term support from other agencies for those identified as being particularly vulnerable, or for those who request such help.

TASKS OF THE EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST WHEN RESPONDING TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT IN A SCHOOL

The Wiltshire EPS has two levels of support following a critical incident.

1 Initial Support

This is usually completed by the school's EP in consultation with school staff.

Immediate Interventions

- 1 Gather accurate information
- 2 Assess the situation – delivery of first aid etc if necessary
- 3 Ensure emergency services are involved
- 4 Ensure safety of all children, staff and students is taken into consideration
- 5 If critical incident is off site, contact police to gain information
- 6 Keep agreed lines of communication open
- 7 Mobilise critical incident response team
- 8 Notify department and governors etc
- 9 Determine what information is to be shared and who with:
 - a Staff
 - b Students
 - c Parents/community
 - d Media
- 10 Arrange reunion of students and parents
- 11 Arrange a vulnerable needs assessment
- 12 Identify 'at risk' students/staff
- 13 Agree nature of interventions
- 14 Help school to liaise with the media
- 15 Help school to write a letter to parents explaining the situation (see template)

Mid Term Interventions ie 24 – 72 Hours Later

- 1 Arrange daily staff meetings to inform and discuss intervention plans
- 2 Plan reintegration of staff and students
- 3 Suggest referral procedures for staff and students for individual support to other agencies
- 4 Suggest support for parents via other agencies

Longer Term Interventions – 72 Hours Plus

- 1 Suggest/organise condolences/memorials/visits to families, hospitals etc
- 2 Suggest condolence books/cards
- 3 Suggest/continue to monitor staff and students for signs of stress
- 4 Identify particular students who may be showing extreme signs of stress
- 5 Review critical incident policies and procedures
- 6 Suggest a plan for, and be sensitive to, the disturbing influences of anniversaries, inquests etc

2 In Depth Support

This is to be completed by, and in agreement with, EPs in the Critical Incident Support Group via the PEP. The nature of this work would vary according to the needs of the school, but is likely to involve in-depth, one to one sessions with either pupils or staff, based on their developmental stage.

In Classroom Support

The family is the first line of resource for helping children. However, schools also have an important therapeutic role to play.

Classroom support sessions are a critical step in crisis intervention. Sessions of up to as many as 30 students can be effective. Classroom or group crisis support is especially important and practical following crises that affect a large number of students. Classroom support following a crisis is also a way to help identify children who may need an individual crisis counselling intervention.

We recommend the classroom teacher take as active a role in the classroom support session as possible. Teachers may be able to lead the classroom session and the EP will only serve as a consultant or co-facilitator. Where the teacher is having severe difficulty coping with the crisis, the EP will take a more active role.

Classroom crisis intervention would require anywhere from one to several sessions, with session length being tailored to the developmental level of the class.

The process of classroom support would typically have the following components:

- 1 Providing crisis facts and dispelling rumours.** The most important classroom support task is to provide children with the facts surrounding the crisis and dispel rumours. Dispelling rumours is especially important given that crisis rumours are typically more frightening than reality. Making sure children understand the reality of the crisis (that is the facts) is an important pre-requisite for coming to terms with what has happened.
- 2 Sharing stories.** Children are encouraged to tell their story of the event. Through the telling of these stories students will begin to feel more connected to each other and less alone because of their common shared experiences. Research indicates that those children who verbalised most effectively and in the greatest quantity manage recovery best. Besides asking children to express their experiences verbally it is also helpful to allow them to recount their experiences and express their feelings in other ways. Art activities can be particularly helpful. These activities are especially important for younger children who may not be able to verbalise what has happened to them.
- 3 Sharing symptoms.** Children are encouraged to share their feelings since the incident and their reactions to the incident. It is the teachers' and EPs' role to explain that their reactions are a normal response to an abnormal circumstance. Teacher and EP should also let pupils know that with time, for most people, the crisis reactions or symptoms will go away. However, they should also be informed what to do if symptoms do not go away, or if they subjectively feel that the symptoms are more than they can cope with.
- 4 Empowerment.** The aim is to assist the children in regaining a sense of control. Students can be asked to think of strategies that might help prevent a recurrence of the crisis event. Class teacher and EP can also help students to identify strategies that they can use to help manage crisis symptoms. For example, the importance of getting sleep, healthy eating and exercise can be stressed as ways in which students can help themselves feel better.
- 5 Closure.** The aim of this section is to focus on the future. A natural activity for crises involving death is the development of memorials. Following crises that result in physical injury the writing of get-well cards and letters can also help to bring about a sense of closure. It is important for the teacher and facilitator to reiterate to students that they are experiencing reactions to abnormal circumstances. They should be assured that while memories may always remain, with time, the pain associated with them will lessen and the symptoms will typically disappear. Remind students that if needed, additional counselling services are available. The teacher and EP should praise the students for their courage and sensitivity.

Classroom Management Following a Crisis

How schools can help:

- Normal routine should be established as soon as possible. However, pupils should be given an opportunity to discuss the incident and express their feelings and emotions. Pupils should not be discouraged from expressing themselves appropriately or asking questions. The adult :pupil ratio in certain classes may need to be increased in order to provide the support required.
- Classroom support sessions ought to be arranged to establish the facts of the incident, quell rumours and share individual experiences and reactions. This can be followed up with creative work, art or writing, for example, to allow their stories and feelings to be expressed. Creative work ought to be followed up by discussion. This activity allows pupils to vent their experiences and to discover that others share their fears.
- It is appropriate for the curriculum to be adjusted and adapted. Teachers should avoid presentation of new materials. Much of what is typically called 'busy work' might be appropriate for the classroom dealing with crisis.
- Pupils could discuss how to avoid future crises (eg Lessons learnt etc).
- Pupils ought to be encouraged to take control of the situation and be involved in the decision making process regarding such things as memorials, condolences, gifts etc.
- Encourage resumption of extra curricula activities.
- For younger children, availability of toys that encourage play re-enactment of their experiences and observations during the crisis can be helpful to them in integrating these experiences.
- Stimulate group discussion about the crisis experience by showing your own feelings, fears or experiences during the crisis event. It is important to legitimise pupils' feelings and to help them feel less isolated.
- Discuss the symptoms and common reactions of post-traumatic stress and coping strategies.

For those who can't or won't talk, don't force them. Suggest others they can talk to

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST'S RESPONSE TO POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Individuals directly or indirectly involved in a traumatic incident may experience strong emotional and/or physical reactions. Post traumatic stress reactions are normal and natural reactions of normal people to abnormal events and experiences. Sometimes stress reactions appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they appear a few hours, or days, later. In some cases weeks, or even months, may pass by before the stress reactions appear. The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or even a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. If symptoms persist professional assistance from a counsellor or psychiatrist may be necessary. Children and adults can be affected by post traumatic stress. This typically involves:

- Re-experiencing (flashbacks) triggered by reminders of the event or unexpectedly.
- Avoidance of anything or anyone which reminds the person of the incident or situation.
- Arousal, sleeplessness, difficulties with concentration, irritability; hyper vigilance; impulsivity; increased sensitivity to sounds and bright lights.

Physical Effects

Feeling generally unwell, listless, sick or very overactive.

Some people may go into denial which prevents them from asking or seeking any help. If post traumatic stress is denied and ignored, post traumatic stress disorder may then develop when symptoms continue over time and seriously interfere with the individual's quality of life and relationships.

Possible Indicators of Post Traumatic Stress in Children;

Pre-school Children

- Thumbsucking
- Loss of bowel/bladder control
- Fear of being alone
- Fear of strangers
- Irritability
- Confusion
- Immobility

Children Age 6 – 11 Years

- Headaches or other physical complaints
- Depression
- Fears about safety
- Confusion
- Loss of ability to concentrate
- Poor performance
- Fighting
- Withdrawal from peers

Children Age 12 – 17 years

- Headaches or other physical complaints
- Depression
- Confusion
- Poor performance
- Aggressive behaviours
- Withdrawal and isolation

Coping Strategies

- It is suggested that talking about the experience with family, close friends and teachers may help.
- Re-establishing daily routines, healthy eating and exercise.
- Encourage pupils to get enough rest to increase their reserve strength.
- Educate pupils and their families about normal reactions to disaster.
- Encourage redefined priorities and focus energies and resources on these priorities.
- Talk to children; be supportive.
- Set an example by expressing your own feelings.
- Provide children with frequent attention, verbal reassurance, physical comfort, comforting bed time routines.
- Consider relaxing expectations in school or at home with a clear understanding that it is temporary.
- Discuss safety measures to be taken in future disasters.
- Encourage resumption of social activities like clubs, sports, etc.

There is a wide range of normal reactions following a traumatic event. Usually reactions can be dealt with by support at home and at school, however, occasionally a referral may be necessary for professional help. This is not a sign of failure of parents or school. Early reaction will help the child return to normal and avoid more severe problems later. Individuals who are directly involved, or have experienced previous crises, may have more difficulty in dealing with additional stress. Counselling may be recommended as a preventative measure in these circumstances.

Critical Incident Information

General Information (other key contacts in critical incident booklet)				
Critical Incident Co-ordination	Office hours	01225 713000	Out of hours	0845 6070888
School Contacts				
School:		Other:		Telephone
Headteacher		Chair of Governors		
Deputy		Vicar		
Secretary		Educational Psychologist		
SENCO		Primary Link Advisor		
Other		LSS		
Other		BSS		
What has happened?				
When and where?				
What has the school already done?				

Notes from discussions

What was our response?

What are the next steps?

For the school?

For the EP service?

NEEDS ASSESSMENT – INITIAL ‘AT RISK’ SCREENING

1 Identify pupils who have been directly involved in and/or directly exposed to the incident

List pupils’ names below. All pupils listed here are automatically classified as being at high risk.

Name	Date of Birth	Person with Parental Responsibility	Agreed Intervention	Parental Permission Sought
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

2 Identify pupils who are considered at high risk due to other factors

The factors used in identifying these students will include the following: (a) familiarity with victim(s), (b) previous trauma or loss, (c) pre-existing psychopathology, (d) worry about safety of a family member or a significant other, and (e) lack of resources.

Name	Date of Birth	Person with Parental Responsibility	Agreed Intervention	Parental Permission Sought
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

3 Identify pupils who are at moderate to low risk level

Name	Date of Birth	Person with Parental Responsibility	Agreed Intervention	Parental Permission Sought
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Sample Letter when a Pupil/Teacher has Died

Feel free to use this sample letter as a basis for a letter from your school, you can adapt and change it to your particular circumstances. You may also want to write a completely different letter, but the following might be useful to consider.

Dear Parent/Carer

It is with great sadness that I have to inform you about the (sudden) death of xxx, one of our pupils/teachers in Year x. The children were told this morning by their class teacher/tutor.

Xxx died as a result of xxx/the full details surrounding the death are not known at this stage – but children have been reassured that this is something that does not happen very often. Your child may or may not want to talk about it, but it is likely that he/she will need your special care, attention and reassurance at this difficult time.

We are all deeply affected by the death, but we are trying, for the children's sake, to keep the school as normal as possible over the coming days, whilst allowing the children opportunities to talk about xxx if they want. Trained staff from the Critical Incident Team are helping to support us through this difficult time. If you feel that your child needs extra support, please let us know.

Our thoughts are with xxx's family at this difficult time and the whole school community sends them our sincerest sympathy and support.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Xxx

Headteacher