

How Educational Psychologists Support Education Settings to Manage Critical Incidents

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1. Introduction to critical incidents

A critical incident (CI) is any event that is unexpected, acute, stressful and exceeds the normal coping capacities of individuals. Such incidents may be horrifying and evoke reactions of intense fear and helplessness. They usually involve the perceived threat to one's physical integrity or the physical integrity of someone else. Importantly they undermine a person's sense of safety, security and competency in the world.

The effects of a traumatic event upon a community very much depend on the nature of the incident and can be profound and long-term. Support put in place as early as possible can help the school community find a way to cope with the emotional impact of the incident and move towards recovery. In such cases, there may be a risk to the emotional wellbeing of the school community because of emotional disturbance or injury (potential "trauma") linked to the event. Members of the school community may also be at risk of longer term effects.

2. Examples of a Critical Incident

- Sudden/unexpected death or serious injury to (in or out of school) a pupil, a family or staff member
- Violence or severe aggression from a visitor to the school directed at or witnessed by staff or pupils
- Serious crime or abuse to pupils which will become known to other members of the school community
- Any other sudden and unusual event which may upset the emotional wellbeing of pupils and staff and interfere with the smooth running of the school.

3. Impact of a Critical Incident

Individuals involved in the incident, whether directly or indirectly, can be affected in different ways which can include:

- sleep disturbance and/or recurrent dreams
- disturbing images and memories of the event
- impairment of memory
- feelings of guilt
- feelings of detachment
- difficulty in retaining concentration
- diminished interest in significant activities (e.g. exams)
- avoidance of activities which recall the event

4. Support available from the Educational Psychology Service (EPS)

On notification of a death or serious injury to a pupil or member of staff, the Local Authority can offer post-incident support from a range of services, including the Educational Psychology Service (EPS). When the EPS is notified of a child death (or the death of a member of staff), an Area Senior Educational Psychologist (EP) will liaise with the school about the support needed. Schools can also contact the Service directly on 01482 394000 (option 4 then option 2).

The primary role of the EPS is to advise and support school staff who work with pupils. Best practice indicates that pupils need to be with people (adults and peers) they know and trust, and so educational psychologists focus on supporting and helping the school staff to provide the emotional support for their pupils. This is particularly important as school staff are around their pupils in the longer term and are in a good position to monitor changes in pupil well-being over the days and weeks following an incident. How this is managed will be dependent on the consultations between the school and the EPS and the resilience of the community.

5. What your school can expect from the EPS in the event of a Critical Incident

The appropriate support will be negotiated with the Area Senior EP during the first response

- Contact from the identified EP Team as soon after the event as possible, ideally this response will also involve the school's link EP.
- Support with arrangements for managing the situation after it has occurred e.g. checking information dissemination, briefing staff, breaking news to pupils, etc.
- Advice and support to help the school with the short-term support arrangements (memorials) and longer-term support arrangements (anniversary of the incident or other significant dates).
- 'Psychological First Aid'; listening and advising on concerns raised by pupils and staff. This is concerned with normalising the responses that individuals may experience and focus on helping the school community to recover.
- Support and advice for staff on working with individuals or groups of pupils.
- Guidance about the grieving process and the impact of trauma on emotional wellbeing.
- Advice about identifying and supporting vulnerable individuals.
- Information and links to support organisations and websites – e.g. for bereavement counselling.

- Advice on resource materials which may be useful for staff, pupils, parents/carers
- Advice for developing school's arrangements in managing subsequent Critical Incidents.
- Discuss with school whether there is any follow up work or any training needs for the future around issues linked to critical incidents, loss and bereavement.

6. School response to Critical Incidents

- **Have a plan** for the first few days after the event. The EP can help you with planning.
- **Hold a staff meeting** as soon as possible to share the plan and any relevant information. Meet regularly to feedback and monitor the situation.
- **Maintain structure and stability** within the school, keep things as normal as possible. It would be best, however, not to have tests or major projects within the first few days.
- **Provide teachers and parents with information** about what to say and do for children in school and at home.
- **Have teachers provide information directly to their pupils**, not during the public address announcements or assemblies. Assure children that they are safe and that school is well prepared to take care of all children at all times. Give pupils a narrative for what has happened – help them to make sense of what has happened. Pupils will benefit from having an honest explanation, at a level appropriate for their age and understanding. It may be that the parents/carers need some support to do this.
- **Allow time for age appropriate classroom discussion** and activities. Do not expect teachers to provide all of the answers. Teachers should ask questions and guide the discussion, but not dominate it. Other activities can include art and writing projects. Encourage pupils to ask questions and give them honest answers at an appropriate level of detail. Not all information has to be given at once; additional detail can be built in later on. Younger children in particular may need to ask questions repeatedly and to be given honest and consistent responses. Allow opportunities for the pupils to talk about what has happened if they wish to but do not push them to.
- **Identify pupils and staff who may need or want extra support.** It is important to ensure appropriate monitoring procedures are in place so any individuals (pupils and staff) who are particularly vulnerable can be identified and supported. This includes those who:
 - witnessed the event
 - are related to or are friends of those involved
 - were injured
 - blame themselves or are being blamed by others
 - are experiencing instability in their personal life
 - have social, emotional or mental health needs or other special educational needs
 - have previously suffered bereavement or loss
 - have witnessed a similar incident before
 - Individuals without clear connection to the incident or a known vulnerability may have a strong reaction. Provide these pupils with extra support and leniency if necessary.
- **Be careful not to stereotype people** that might be associated with the tragedy. Children can easily generalise negative statements and develop prejudice. Talk about tolerance and justice versus vengeance. Stop any bullying or teasing of pupils immediately.
- **Monitor or restrict use of social media** and texting or viewing scenes of the event as well as the aftermath.

7. Support for school staff to support pupils

School staff play an important role in supporting pupils to cope with, and recover from, an incident. However they should not be expected to perform an ongoing counselling role. If additional individualised support is needed for a pupil, then staff should discuss this with the parent/carer and seek advice from trained specialists. Helpful guidance and assistance for school staff and parents/carers is available from:

Child Bereavement UK	https://childbereavementuk.org/	Helpline: 0800 02 888 40
Winstons Wish	www.winstonswish.org/	Helpline: 08088 020 021
Cruse Bereavement Care	https://www.cruse.org.uk/	Helpline: 0808 808 1677
Samaritans. (They provide a step-by step programme to support schools recover from suspected or attempted suicide)	https://www.samaritans.org/your-community/samaritans-education/step-step/	Helpline: 0808 168 2528
Local faith groups		

8. Support for school staff

Coping with critical incidents can be extremely stressful and emotionally draining and school staff need support if they are to be effective in caring for their pupils. It is important to acknowledge that staff who have been significantly affected by the incident will need to be supported and feel able to opt out of, or step back from, providing direct emotional support for their pupils if and when needed.

A booklet giving information relating to Critical Incident Stress can also be accessed from the EPS.

Staff in need of emotional support can access a 24-hour helpline run by the Education Support Partnership: Webpage: <https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/> Helpline 08000 562 561.

9. Supporting others through loss and bereavement

- Grief is the response to the loss of someone we love; it is painful but normal (*the range of needs, feelings and responses associated with grieving are outlined below*).
- You cannot 'fix' the situation for pupils but they may need to be supported through grieving.
- Pupils should be involved in making choices about the support they receive. Often school is the only part of the pupil's life that remains 'normal' and young people should be asked about what they need and clear plans for any alternative arrangements should be agreed.
- Keep communicating with the child and family and ensure the relevant staff are involved.
- Look and listen - watch out for changes in behaviour and attitude.
- Grief will be re-visited over time so it is important to be aware of significant dates, events and the impact of the grief at different developmental stages.
- Look after yourself - to be of help to others you must take care of yourself.
- **School cannot do it all...but can be part of a vital network of support**

10. Stages of Grief

Stages of Grief	Needs	Feelings	Responses/ Behaviour	Types of Support
Shock, disbelief, numbness	Warmth, clothing, comfort	Sad, lonely, numb, scared	Quiet, withdrawn or tearful	1:1 listener Comforter eg teddy, quiet space
Upset, crying, sadness	Security, comfort, love and attention	Upset, sad, desperate, not understood, scared	Tearful, moody, seeks attention and/or comfort, unable to concentrate	1:1 support, trusted group support, a place of sanctuary
Loss of appetite, sleep, interests	Food/drinks, health	Ill, tired, disinterested, listless	No lunch, sleepy, snappy, ill tempered	Check out, encourage drinks, eat small amounts
Anger, regret, guilt	Security, self esteem	Angry, snappy, spiteful, hurt	Angry outbursts, destructive	Space to talk, time to write/ draw, pillow to hit, 1:1 support
Acceptance	Self-worth, to be wanted, time with others	Calmer, happier, able to cope	Able to work, join in, concentrate	Friends, staff to share happy memories
Letting go and moving on	Security, attention	Involved, back on form, happy	Able to support others	When needed, especially anniversaries

11. Sample letter to send to parents/carers

Additional template letters can also be found in the Schools Information Pack from the Child Bereavement UK (pages 65 - 67):

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=4b13d694-2038-4918-90b3-13c06100aafb>

Dear Parents/Carers

You may have heard/It is with sadness and regret that I have to inform you

.....

(insert known facts of the incident – ensure you have permission about what specific details can be shared at this point from safeguarding if applicable and family)

As a school community, we are all deeply affected by this tragedy/I am sure that you will wish to join me and my staff in offering our condolences and sympathy to those affected/to.....

(Refer to individuals/families affected only where it is appropriate and you have permission from the family to release this information)

I have now spoken to all pupils and staff in school about what has happened and I wanted to let you know that the following arrangements have now been made:

(If applicable include details about: school closure, changes to timings of school day, transport, lunchtime arrangements, changes to staffing, arrangements for specific classes/year groups, provision of further information as relevant. If appropriate, advice about media contacts)

We would like to reassure you that there will be members of staff available in school for your child to speak to either individually or in in small groups should this be required. We are also working with the Local Authority and Educational Psychology Service to ensure we have the most appropriate support in place for our students.

Please be encouraged to talk openly about what has happened with your child at home and offer additional reassurances. The following websites/helplines may be helpful to you and your child and provide you with additional advice/guidance:.....

(Include references to relevant resources suggested in section 7)

If you would like to discuss this further then please do not hesitate to contact the school.

Yours sincerely,