



## **Guidelines for dealing with Critical Incidents**

### **1. Critical Incident Management Response and After Care Guidelines**

Critical Incident Management Guidelines are essential in school life today. This document has been compiled to offer a summary guide to our approach, should the need arise. Our main reference materials are *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools* and *Responding to Critical Incidents: Resource Materials for Schools* (Published by Dept of Education & Skills (DES) and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), 2007).

These guidelines have been revised following our experience of critical incidents over the past two years.

A critical incident is defined *as an incident or sequence of events which overwhelm the normal coping mechanisms of the school* (NEPS).

Examples of such critical incidents within the school community are:

- Death of a member (s) of the school community, i.e.pupil or staff member
- Death of a member of the wider school community
- Disappearance of a member of the school community
- A Child Protection issue

### **2. The Critical Incident Management Team (CIMTeam) will consist of the following**

- Chairperson of the Board of Management
- The Principal

- Deputy Principal
- Chaplain, if required
- Relevant others i.e. teachers, SNAs, admin staff, caretaker.

The role of Principal / Deputy Principal is normally one of leadership, family liaison and/or communication. The role of the Chaplain and relevant others would be in relation to counselling.

### **3. Leadership/Family Liaison/ Communication**

**3.1** When a critical incident occurs it would be expected that the Principal/Deputy Principal would take actions which **may** include the following (depending on circumstances).

- Confirm what has occurred and get accurate information in relation to the incident. Only if the tragedy is confirmed by the family as a death by suicide can it be relayed as such.
- Express sympathy to the family and assure the family of the school's support throughout the process.
- Ensure that the family knows who is the contact person with the school (normally a member of the CIMTeam).
- Organise a meeting of the CIMTeam.
- Make contact with Gardai if necessary.
- Make contact with the NEPS Psychologist for advice.
- Assess the necessity of the NEPS Psychologist to attend the school.
- Set up a crisis team room in the school to which queries, phone calls and information would be forwarded. Devise a process for dealing with telephone enquiries from concerned parents.
- Plan a staff meeting if required.
- Prepare an announcement for staff and pupils.
- Prepare a statement and distribute *Procedures for breaking the News* to class teachers.

- Contact parents if some pupils request to go home.
- Have written and / or oral response to enquiries prepared.
- Notify the Board of Management.
- Prepare a statement for the media if required.
- Discourage any pupil or staff from dealing with the media.

### **3.2 Intervention responsibilities for the Principal and/or Chaplain**

- Outline services available to the affected pupils during the first couple of hours on hearing of the incident.
- Assist class teacher of the class affected in breaking the news.
- Have guidelines for staff in dealing with pupils in distress i.e. information on grief responses, in identifying those in need of counselling and support and possible parental support.
- Take time with the most affected pupils in crisis response room.
- Organise a class prayer service once all pupils have been notified.
- Encourage those who feel able to return to class.
- Meet and support any distressed parents or staff.

### **3.4 A sample media statement which can be modified to suit and reflect the incident.**

*“It is with profound sadness that that the Board of Management, Principal, staff and students of St.Christopher’s Primary School have learned of the ..... Our sincere sympathy is extended to the family of...*

*On hearing the tragic news the school Critical Incident Management Team was put into immediate operation. The Critical Incident Management Team convened a meeting to ensure that pupils affected by the ..... are cared for adequately. Procedures are in place to ensure that all in the school community affected by this ..... are given all the help they need to cope at this time.*

*The school is offering counselling and support for pupils and parents affected by this ..... Prayer services have been held with each class in co-operation with the Chaplain. At this time our prayers and support are with everyone affected by this .....*”

#### **4. The CIMTeam: step by step approach, in the event of a death of a member of the school community.**

- The Principal, having confirmed the death, makes contact with the family.
- The CIMTeam meet to plan strategy, keeping in mind the guidelines already outlined.
- Key tasks are distributed.
- Have all guidelines for teachers ready.
- Have written and oral statements ready for all communications within the school and possible media enquiries
- Make contact with staff to request attendance in the staff room at an arranged time.
- Meet staff, note any absences or late arrivals to ensure that all staff members hear the news.
- CIMTeam outline to staff the plan for the day and the support available.
- Class teachers break news to classes, with assistance from Chaplain if appropriate.
- Plan another staff meeting if necessary to update staff and / or make decisions.
- Clarify funeral arrangements with staff when known.
- CIMTeam meets to plan for school involvement in the ceremony.

#### **5. Guidelines on breaking news**

From a teacher's perspective it is very difficult to pass on bad news as a result of a critical incident. The following guidelines are suggested in such an event.

- The class of the pupil/teacher who has died should be the first to be told.
- Other classes to be told by their class teacher.

- Not every class is going to be traumatised following the bad news but a possible way for a teacher to break the news would be to tell the class that they have sad news and it is difficult for them to do this. The teacher should let the class know the name of the person the news is about. Let the class know the facts as the teacher knows them and encourage questions. The teacher should let the class know of common reactions to such tragic news, the most common reaction being shock. A teacher can expect tears and outbursts but should not allow a pupil to leave the classroom alone. Pupils must be supervised within the school building while in a distressed state. Let them know that they will receive support within the school. Allow the class to mingle and talk. The teacher can explain to the class how they can support one another. The teacher may also try to be attentive to identifying those who are not coping well with the news. It may be essential to remind pupils more than once that there is help available, as limited information is assimilated initially.

Some pupils will need to stay with the CIMTeam for the morning. Those who go to class may not be able to concentrate on the work for that class therefore teachers should be sensitive to this.

## **6. Common reactions on hearing traumatic news.**

Individuals react differently on hearing traumatic news. Listed below are possible emotional and physical responses to hearing traumatic news:

*shock, fear, guilt, grief, tears, panic, denial, anxiety, depression, anger, emotional outburst, being overwhelmed, nausea, fainting, pain, dizziness, weakness, palpitations and breathing difficulties.*

In the emotional/ behavioural area there may be:

*Confusion, uncertainty, blame, poor concentration, disorientation, restlessness, signs of withdrawal, or a feeling of being let down.*

In response to these reactions the crisis response team and / or teacher should show genuine care and concern to the individual affected. Be available through listening and

allow pupils to express their feelings and encourage as much talk as possible. Allow the pupil to talk about the pupil/teacher they have lost and reassure them that they as an individual class group have done everything possible. A list of local counselling services outside of school will be available to parents where necessary, as sometimes a child may need further or longer periods of counselling. 'Rainbows Ireland' supports children bereaved or separated and runs local groups.

On Day 2 pupils who are not coping should be referred to the Principal or Deputy Principal on an individual basis. It is important that the school function as normally as possible on the second day following a critical incident.

On Day 3 the CIMTeam need to meet to work through the critical incident strategy and the after care for the pupils and the school. This may involve the class teacher, resource teacher etc. School records should be updated.

#### **7. Contacting staff if tragedy or incident occurs over a weekend or over holidays.**

If a tragedy occurs over a weekend or during holiday time and the death is one of a teaching colleague, a system of informing staff needs to be in place. Normally the Principal and Deputy Principal will make contact with the staff by phone.

If it is the death of a pupil, the CIMTeam needs to be informed immediately while other staff can be informed later. Nevertheless whoever hears the news first need to inform the Principal or Deputy Principal.

#### **8. The aftercare as a result of a Critical incident.**

It is important after a critical incident, that a de-briefing occurs for pupils and staff. In particular, staff should be kept informed of the on-going counselling and support which people are receiving within the school. Close attention and observation of pupils who are deeply affected by such incidents must be observed. De-briefing can prevent the onset of post traumatic stress disorder, (the symptoms of which may include flashbacks or nightmares, intense stress, emotional numbing, lack of sleep, irritability, anger, poor

concentration). This is why critical incident stress de-briefing is an important part of our approach.

## **9. Memorials and Remembrances.**

Suggested below are items, which may prove useful in a critical incident plan:

- A book of Condolence, A Sacred Space, A lighted Candle
- A scrapbook or pictorial record
- The use of a photograph of the individual(s), with a candle
- A Memorial Award
- A Memorial Service
- The anniversary to be remembered.

## **10. In the event of a death or deaths of parents/pupils/retired teachers under normal circumstances, the normal response may be as follows:**

- \* Consult the family on the school's involvement in the funeral, remembering that the family wishes must be respected.
- Make decisions on those who should attend the funeral, where relevant.
- Communication of such a death to the school as a whole.
- Discuss the possibility of the school being closed on the day of funeral which would involve notification to the Department of Education & Science, parents, the cancellation of organised activities e.g. matches, tour buses and the informing of possible visitors to the school on that day of closure.
- \* Organise flowers and mass cards.
- \* Book of condolence for pupils and staff.
- \* A school memorial service for pupils and staff.

## **11. Staff:**

In the event of any critical incident within the school the actions above attempt to serve pupils and staff alike in their dealing with such a tragedy. Nevertheless each individual member of staff will deal with such an incident in their own way. It may be useful for staff to be aware of their own reactions when it comes to such a psychological trauma.

Staff should be helped to understand their own emotional reactions, to plan for balance in the after event of such an incident and to create a support system within the school. Staff be aware of the availability of personal assistance through the Employee Assistance Scheme (DES). This can be accessed, at no cost on **1800 411 057** or <https://www.inspirewellbeing.org/workplaces>

Copies of relevant resources are included in *Responding to Critical Incidents (Resource Materials for Schools)*. We endeavour to purchase relevant new resources/materials as they become available.

**12. The health, safety and welfare of all the School Community are paramount to the B.O.M.**

**These guidelines were reviewed and revised by the Board of Management in January 2020.**

**They were ratified by the Board of Management on February 4<sup>th</sup> 2020 will be reviewed again in 2022.**