

CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY

Definition of a Critical Incident

Handling crises and dealing with difficult 'incidents' on a daily basis is viewed by some as a normal aspect of school life. However, there are occasions when schools will experience incidents of a significantly more extreme nature. What seems to distinguish these incidents is their nature and scale, and it is this type of occurrence, which has come to be termed a 'critical incident'.

What is a Critical Incident?

Although the concept of a critical incident is difficult to precisely define, authors who research and write in this field have, in the past, attempted to define critical incidents as:

'Unexpected occurrences, which may suddenly have a major impact on school'.

However, in recent years some authors have noted that this type of description does not capture the relative nature of some critical incidents, which to some may seem relatively small-scale but, to others who experience them, can seem overwhelming. In this respect Gibson (1999) would suggest that an incident could be described in critical terms when it:

'Overwhelms or overcomes the normal coping strategies and strengths of those involved'.

It is also important to note that this approach, which views critical incidents as situations or crises that are beyond the everyday experiences of school life, contains an implied understanding that these incidents would be markedly distressing to a significant number of adults and children.

Preventative and Precautionary Measures

Whilst no amount of planning can totally prevent accidents and problems occurring, it is hoped that some can be prevented and the effects of others minimised by taking sensible precautionary measures. At our school, it is expected that:

- All staff and pupils are familiar with the school's routines for fire and the evacuation of the school building on hearing the fire alarm;
- All staff are familiar with the routines and procedures for dealing with emergencies (as detailed in this Policy);
- All staff and pupils should be familiar with the school's security procedures, in particular that all visitors not wearing a visitor's badge shall be questioned and escorted to reception;
- All staff organising school trips and visits follow the guidelines and complete a risk assessment to be signed off by the Headteacher;
- All staff sign in and out of the premises;
- All staff are aware of pupils with medical needs or health problems;
- All staff are aware that they should assess associated risks to children before carrying out a curriculum or other activity;

- All staff are aware that they are responsible for assessing risks to themselves before undertaking an activity.

Definition of a Major Incident:

- An accident leading to a serious injury or fatality;
- Severe injury or severe stress;
- Circumstances in which a person or persons might be at serious risk of illness;
- Circumstances in which any part, or whole of the school is unable to function as normal due to external influences;
- Any situation in which the national press or media might be involved.

As such, major incidents include:

- Death of a pupil or member of staff;
- Death or serious injury on a school trip;
- Epidemic in school or community;
- Violent incident in school;
- A pupil missing from home;
- Destruction or major vandalism in school;
- A hostage taking;
- A transport accident involving school members;
- A disaster in the community;
- A civil disturbance or act of terrorism;
- Arson attack on the school;
- Major fire at the school;
- Significant vandalism;
- Pupil suicides and sudden deaths;
- Violent attacks on pupils and staff members;
- The sudden death, in tragic circumstances of members of staff;
- Incident involving an intruder, believed to be armed, on school premises;
- Road traffic accidents, involving fatalities within a school community;
- Abductions / disappearances;
- Allegations or actual incidents of abuse against pupils by staff and staff against pupils;
- Incidents involving the murder of schoolchildren that attracted the attention of national and International media over prolonged periods;
- Floods;
- School used in an emergency.

In the event of such an incident the priorities of those adults in charge of the school or trip at the time must be able to:

- Save life;
- Minimise personal injury;
- Safeguard the interests of pupils and staff;
- Minimise loss and to return to normal working quickly.

Critical Incident Management Team will comprise the following (CIMT)

Headteacher
Deputy Head
Safeguarding Lead
SMSCD and Wellbeing Lead
Chair of Governors
Safeguarding Governor
Health & Safety Governor

The school's reaction to a critical incident can be divided into the following categories:

- a) Immediate action;
- b) Short term action;
- c) Medium term action;
- d) Longer term action.

IMMEDIATE ACTION – i.e. within hours of the incident occurring

1. Obtain and collate information relating to the incident – uncertainty breeds rumour and accurate information is essential;
2. Gather and brief the CIMT (Critical Incident Management Team) – brief the whole staff team, allocate roles and responsibilities;
3. Trigger support from the LA and other contacts on the emergency list – establish clearly who is going to contact whom;
4. Set up an incident management room and dedicated phone line – to deal with calls from anxious parents etc. CIMT should agree a factual statement and avoid speculation;
5. Contact families affected – must be done quickly and with sensitivity. Consistency of information is vital. It may be appropriate for families to come to school and immediate emotional support could be a possibility;
6. Make arrangements to inform other parents – may need to take advice from LA, especially if there is the possibility of legal liability. CIMT may wish to send a letter to parents, or prepare a leaflet;
7. Inform teaching and other school staff – staff need to be cautioned about talking to the media or responding to questions from reporters. It is vital that all staff in contact with pupils are kept well informed and feel secure in handling comments or questions from pupils;

8. Inform pupils – can be done in small or large groups depending on which is most appropriate. Care needs to be exercised to protect both children and adults closely involved in the incident. It is important that children receive a consistent account of the incident allowing for differences in their ability to understand;
9. Encourage people involved to talk – the incident may need to be discussed before children go home for the day, for both pupils and adults;
10. Deal with the media – most important to seek advice from LA before agreeing to speak to or be interviewed by the media. If this is not an option, then an agreed text for release should be prepared by the CIMT and a designated spokesperson briefed and prepared to respond on the school's behalf;
11. Devise a plan for handling the reactions and feelings of people affected – the most common reactions will include denial, distress, guilt, anger and helplessness. CIMT need to consider outside professionals to support and debrief staff and pupils affected by the incident. Those providing support also need support. At this point the CIMT will need to plan their short-term reaction to the incident.

SHORT TERM ACTION – the next stage

1. Reunion of children with their families – especially where the incident occurs outside the school. Mostly children will need to be brought home, but sometimes parents and families need to visit the scene of the incident to understand how they deal with repercussions in terms of children's fears etc.
2. Managing staff – support needs organising for all staff, preferably from within the school, but using outside agencies if appropriate. Staff monitoring should be a priority, even members of the CIMT. If a crisis persists over many hours staff become tired, weary and upset and this affects their powers to make sensible decisions;
3. Encourage pupils to talk – activate strategies for enabling young people to talk about the incident, and their feelings, using outside agencies if appropriate. Staff will need briefing about ways to help the children affected by the incident, and how to identify patterns of behaviour etc. This may have implications for the wider curriculum i.e. training in bereavement counselling for staff, provision of a range of books, PSHE discussion etc.
4. Debriefing meeting – it may be appropriate to hold a debriefing meeting for staff, children and parents to:
 - a. Clarify what has happened;
 - b. Allow for sharing reactions;
 - c. Reassure people that reactions are normal;
 - d. Mobilise resources e.g. parental support groups.
5. An experienced person, possibly someone from outside the school community, should lead this meeting;
6. Formal and informal recognition of rituals – it is important to remember to express sympathy to families of the hurt or bereaved. Visits to children/staff in hospital. Pupils may wish to send cards and letters. The school may also need to consider attendance at funerals, and/or the desirability of holding special assemblies or memorial services. Anniversaries are also key times when support and sensitivity are required;

7. Re-establishing routines – every attempt should be made to provide continuity for the children. The return to school of staff or pupils directly affected by the crisis will need to be managed carefully and with sensitivity but the re-establishment of routine is an important stage in emotional recovery.

MEDIUM TERM ACTION

1. Return to school for staff or pupils after long absence – reintegration will need to be planned carefully, and may involve home visits prior to return, part time attendance initially, reducing workloads, putting in place mentoring process etc.
2. Consulting professionals – consideration should be given to consulting the Educational Psychology Service for support and guidance, especially to help those showing unusual or prolonged reaction to the incident;
3. Keeping parents informed – it may be appropriate to produce a leaflet for parents giving guidance on the possible delayed reactions of pupils to an incident and making suggestions to help them deal with these;
4. Support for staff – ongoing monitoring and support for staff is a major consideration;
5. CIMT especially will not be immune to reaction from their ordeal.

LONG TERM ACTION

1. Monitoring the vulnerable – the effects of a crisis can reverberate for years, and it is especially important that new staff and pupils are briefed in the school's history to help them understand and deal with potential repercussions especially at anniversary times;
2. Legal processes – the length of time taken over some legal processes can prolong the recovery process following a critical incident. CIMT may need to plan for this especially where staff may be involved attending legal processes, and facing extended emotional trauma;
3. Curriculum implications – it may be appropriate to schedule INSET training for staff in loss counselling, bereavement etc.

Action Cards

It may be useful for the CIMT to consider and devise a set of Action cards.

The Action Cards give responsibilities for specified staff in the event of a critical incident:

- a) Away from the school;
- b) In the school environs.

These should be used in the event of a major incident and be carried by staff on school visits. Due to the nature of school life, which includes the absence of staff on courses, at meetings etc. The following are three possible suggestions to follow but will need to be amended to reflect the nature and severity of the incident.

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL STAFF IN EVENT OF A MAJOR INCIDENT IN SCHOOL

ACTION CARD 1

- Obtain facts and information;
- Call the emergency services using 999;
- Retain any relevant equipment;
- Inform rest of school staff and children as appropriate;
- Ensure register of all children is maintained;
- Contact local authority for advice;
- Contact chair of governors;
- Contact health and safety reps;
- Prepare to deal with the media.

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL STAFF IN EVENT OF A MAJOR INCIDENT OFF SITE

ACTION CARD 2

- Administer first aid as appropriate;
- Establish a contact point with the emergency services;
- Allocate responsibility to ensure other pupils are safe including registering;
- Inform school;
- Use systems e.g. phone/text to communicate with parents;
- Travel with casualties to hospital;
- Complete accident forms.

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL STAFF IN EVENT OF A MAJOR INCIDENT ON SITE – E.g. Fire/Flood

ACTION CARD 3

- Keep a record of witnesses;
- Keep others informed of situation;
- Ensure register of all children is maintained;
- Arrange for non-casualties to evacuate school and relocate to other premises;
- Use systems e.g. Phone/text to communicate with parents;
- Manage traffic onto the site to ensure that emergency access vehicles can arrive;
- Care for relatives arriving at school;
- Remain available to emergency.