

Coronavirus related Critical Incidents in Schools

Critical Incident definition:

“A Critical Incident can be defined as a sudden and unexpected incident, or a series of incidents which causes trauma within the school community which overwhelms the usual coping mechanism of that school.”

The coronavirus pandemic is having an effect on our children, our schools, families, communities and our way of life. The situation is likely to persist for a while and so there is an increased risk that schools will need to deal with critical incidents, such as bereavement and loss, over the next few months. In many ways the pandemic is a critical incident in itself which is likely to have an impact on our children and young people in different ways. As well as this, we are experiencing increased feelings of anxiety and worry due to the unpredictability of the situation which is likely to complicate things further.

To add to these difficulties, schools will be dealing with these challenges in exceptional circumstances with most children at home, staff self-isolating or working from home and trying to communicate with people in new ways. Because of this, we as a team have formed this guidance document which includes good practice for responding to any critical incidents that happen over this difficult period. It is not intended to be used as a ‘policy’, but rather as a flexible document outlining what would be useful for you to consider/decide now in case a critical incident occurs in your school community.

Schools can cope with most situations on their own by using their usual coping strategies without the need for input from external ‘experts’. The Educational Psychology team is, however, available to offer support through discussion, sharing ideas about the best ways to support children in these situations, and offer a supportive ear should the school feel stressed and unable to deal with the situation alone.

During bereavement and grief, research has shown that in most situations support from familiar people and the people closest to us is enough to help us (and children) process and cope with grief. For most children, emotional support from staff at school and their families, as and when it is needed, will be enough and there will be no need for external counselling.

If you believe a child or member of staff is not coping, despite giving them time or internal support, then we will be available to discuss possible next steps. (Information on how to contact the team on the bottom of the document).

General things to consider:

Before the event

Communication:

- Who are the first people who need to know? It can be useful to create a critical incident team within your school who are responsible for leading on the response
- Who will contact the family? (It may be useful to create a short script when contacting the family)
- How will you communicate the information to staff? Who will lead on this?
- How will you communicate with the pupils if there is a bereavement? Will you contact the parents only? It can be useful to create a script including key information but using language to try and minimise worry or panic. It will be important that everyone who discusses the bereavement with children uses the same language (more information on this can be found in our 'Bereavement and Loss' document)
- How will you contact the parents? Consider how you usually contact parents and whether this is appropriate (in many situations a phonecall or letter is more appropriate than a text message)
- It's important to consider what your arrangements are for speaking to the media if they contact the school. There are people within the LA who can help with this.

Before and soon after the incident

Identify vulnerable members of the community (pupils, families, staff):

- It's likely that you will have already identified some of the vulnerable children and families within your school community. In the same way it is important to identify which children (or families) would be most vulnerable following a bereavement in the community (e.g. those who have previously experienced a bereavement, those who are from traumatic circumstances, those who have mental health difficulties). It may be useful to identify a 'key worker' to help support these children, someone who knows them well.
- It is also important to identify any staff members who may be more vulnerable in the event of a bereavement. It's possible that the leadership team may not be fully aware of who these vulnerable individuals are and so it's important to have systems in place to support staff through a critical incident. This could be through a 'buddy' system, by identifying specific members of the leaderships team to check in on specific members of staff, or by ensuring staff are aware of the external support agencies available.
- You may also wish to consider any children/young people in your school who have additional learning needs. These young people may need information presented to them in a specific way, such as using specific language. The ALN&I team can support you with this should the need arise.

Following an incident

- Senior Leadership Team to refer to the communication plan they have created and finalise roles and decisions (dependent on the event and which staff are working)
- Discuss with the family (if appropriate) what information they wish to be shared with others
- Try and hold a briefing sessions with staff in order to share up to date information and to confirm what everyone's role is in response to the incident (this may need to be done over video conferencing or over the phone)
- Create a plan for vulnerable pupils and staff. Who will be their key workers and is there a need to contact external agencies?
- Provide information for families about the services available for support should they feel their children aren't coping with the situation
- Identify a way for children and young people to discuss their feelings in small groups if possible (dependent on the children's age and if they are attending school)
- Try and sensitively return to normality when possible (e.g. keep setting work for the children and contacting them in the same way you have been) encourage the families to do this as well.
- Regularly communicate with staff members – identify the vulnerable staff members and make sure they have additional support (e.g. more regular contact)
- Consider practical matters e.g. memorials, sympathy cards, are they appropriate?

When the bereaved child comes back to school

- Discuss with the family and child (if age appropriate) what they would like to see happen/how they would like to be supported when they return to school
- Discuss with the child's peer Group (if they are attending school) how grief can effect people in different ways and encourage them to discuss their feelings. Ask if they have any ideas about how best to support the bereaved child.
- When the child comes back to school, it's important to acknowledge their loss (albeit briefly if this is what the child wants) e.g. 'I'm sorry to hear that ____ has died. I know you're very sad...'
- It's also important to return to normality as soon as is appropriate. Returning to routine will help the child cope.
- Identify a quiet room or area where the child can have some time alone if needed. It may also be a good idea to have a similar area for staff (dependent on the situation)

Further information about supporting children and young people through loss and bereavement is available on our website. Remember that the Educational Psychology team is available to discuss the contents of this document, ideas about how to support children and/or staff, and more generally to be a supportive ear.

For more information or advice, contact your Educational Psychologist directly, or if they are not available you can contact the team by e-mailing this address and asking to speak to a member of the Psychology Team:

GweinyddolADYaCh@gwynedd.llyw.cymru

Further documents related to loss and bereavement available on:

<https://www.adyach.cymru/en/Parents/Access-to-the-Service/Educational-Psychology-Service/Coronavirus-Educational-Psychology-Service.aspx>

Further useful web-pages:

<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/>

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>