

# Trauma, Bereavement and Loss

Guidance for Schools in Dealing  
with Critical Incidents and  
Tragic Events





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### **Leaflets for Heads, Parents and Carers**

- Action Summary Checklist for Headteachers
- Supporting Children through Bereavement and Loss - Guidance for Parents and Carers
- Supporting Children after Traumatic Events - Guidance for Parents and Carers

Sometimes when I am in my classroom and I am standing over my desk, I think the room is going to go over. At night I often dream that the world is going over on its side, all the people will go up in the air, up in the sky and we all will get separated

*Billy, 8 years, survivor of the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster*

# Introduction

The purpose of these guidelines is to support schools in their management of traumatic incidents and the related areas of bereavement and loss.

All teachers will be aware through stories in the local and national press of a range of relatively rare but devastating events that have faced schools, such as murder of pupils, violent intruders on school sites or accidents on school trips. More commonly school communities have to cope with the emotional consequences for children and young people of serious illness, loss or death of family members, of school staff or of pupils themselves.

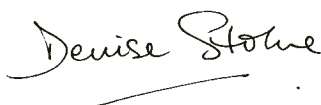
While no-one can predict the exact nature of a crisis that may occur, school experience from many critical incidents nationally, internationally and here in East Sussex has given rise to some important principles for pre-planning and for effective action after the event that can be adapted to any situation. These principles are set out in the guidance with supporting examples and key actions that need to be taken at various stages of a crisis.

The guidelines also cover the emotional and psychological support that can be offered to children and adults struggling to cope with the powerful feelings that come in the wake of trauma and bereavement. They include advice on the likely impact of trauma and bereavement on individuals and the best ways to support them towards recovery and good emotional health

In the appendices to this guidance are lists of organisations that offer support to children and adults and a recommended reference list covering relevant books and other material.

Finally the guidance includes some pamphlets for parents and carers on coping with trauma and bereavement, which schools can distribute as appropriate.

We hope you will find these guidelines useful both in becoming 'wise before the event' and in improving your effectiveness in dealing with any crisis that may occur.



Denise Stokoe  
Director of Education

# Critical Incidents

## 1.1 What Constitutes a Critical Incident?

Traumatic events that schools may face are defined under the three categories below. There is overlap between the three categories but this guidance is principally concerned with critical incidents, bereavement and tragic events as they affect schools.

### a. Bereavement and Tragic Events

- Involve bereavement or significant loss usually occurring to individuals away from the school setting.
- Examples include serious injury, life-threatening illness or death affecting a pupil, a member of the pupil's family or a member of staff at school.
- Can also include very traumatic life events for children, such as divorce of parents or being abandoned or abused physically or sexually or witnessing abuse between adult carers.
- Have an impact not only on the pupil primarily affected but often on the whole school community.

### b. Critical Incidents

- Usually involve pupils and staff being involved in or witnessing traumatic or tragic events on or near school premises or on a school trip.
- Can include for example actual or threatened physical or sexual assault, injury, accidental death or murder on or near school premises, a fire during the school day or a road accident on a school bus - any of the above might also occur while pupils are on a school trip in the country or abroad.
- Are likely to leave pupils and staff shocked, disorientated and distressed to varying degrees.

### c. Major Incidents (not the focus of these guidelines)

- Are widespread and often devastating in their impact eg flooding, plane crash.
- Response is co-ordinated by the multi-agency Strategic Co-ordinating Group, consisting of members of the County Council Services working together with a team consisting of Police, Fire Service and Medical Personnel.
- Are covered by separate Emergency Planning guidance.

## 1.2 Pre-Planning and Preparation

### Action Summary

- Discuss pre-planning at Senior Management Team and Governor meetings
- Form a Critical Incident Response Team
- Allocate roles and responsibilities to the team
- Rehearse how your school would cope with real-life or imaginary scenarios

The variable and unpredictable nature of critical incidents, sometimes combined with a lack of forward planning, can lead to chaos compounding tragedy. While no school can ever be entirely prepared, there is some useful planning and pre-organisation that can be done, notably:

- form a Critical Incident Response Team, perhaps consisting of the Head, a senior member of staff, other key staff members such as an administrative officer and the caretaker, plus a Governor if possible.
- ensure the group meets and allocates roles to members so the group can move into action without delay if needed.

### Sample Scenario

#### Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) - Roles and Responsibilities

##### Hedley High School

The CIRT in our school consists of:

**The Head** - in overall charge of any situation and solely responsible for contact with the County Public Relations Office and dealing with any information given out to the media - also responsible for authorising contact with emergency services.

**The Deputy Head** - in charge of any situation in the unavoidable absence of the Head, when she will take over the Head's responsibilities as outlined above - responsibility with the caretaker for ensuring the safety of the building and the pupils within the building, including responsibility for safe evacuation of the building or part of the building as needed - responsible for co-ordinating information given verbally and in writing to staff, pupils and parents - also responsible for contacting the LEA for critical incident support/ debrief.

**Head of PE** - on the group because of her first aid experience and qualification in counselling - primary responsibility for ensuring all necessary first aid is carried out and for pupil care and welfare generally - also responsible for contacting the school nurse as needed.

**Senior School Secretary** - responsible for ensuring the availability of all contact names and addresses and ensuring that all necessary external communications are effected promptly, eg letters home to parents - responsible for answering the designated emergency phone (mobile) which will be kept in the school office - will also keep a log of all events and key communications with times as a record of what has happened and the school's response.

**The Caretaker** - responsible with the Deputy Head for ensuring the safety of the premises and pupils and staff on the premises including evacuation as necessary.

**School Governor** - in her capacity as Chair of the Health and Safety Committee, she will endeavour to be on the premises in an emergency to offer advice and to act as back-up support to any other members of the CIRT as needed.

- run through with the group some possible scenarios to see if the group is clear on roles and responsibilities - it can help to use locally and nationally reported incidents involving schools as the basis for this exercise, or manufactured examples like those given below:

### Critical Incident Scenarios

- a fire resulting from a laboratory explosion traps a class of pupils and their teacher upstairs in a classroom - the Fire Brigade rescue all the children but two are injured jumping from the first floor window and several are in hospital with injuries related to smoke inhalation.
  - a teacher suffers a heart attack while teaching a class and attempts at resuscitation fail to revive him.
  - a coach carrying a party of pupils on a school trip goes out of control and falls from a bridge a hundred miles from the school - three pupils, their teacher and the coach driver have life threatening injuries and a further twenty have injuries ranging from serious to minor.
  - a group of youths enter the playground in search of a 15 year old pupil - they stab the pupil, who dies in the playground - they also stab the pupil's brother and a teacher who try to intervene - both of these are in hospital - the incident is witnessed by scores of pupils and two lunch time supervisors.
- plan to free a phone line in an emergency that is for school outgoing and emergency in-coming calls only (schools generally experience that all phone lines quickly become jammed in an emergency by people and press phoning for news) - this could be a mobile phone, a phone plugged into a fax socket or a separate line in the school kitchen or caretaker's office.

'Communications were a top priority. The school's only outside line was jammed with incoming calls, but we were able to use another number in the community education office. It is very important in a crisis to have a line exclusively for outgoing calls'

School quoted in TES 24.1.92

- ensure the CIRT and all office staff have access to names and addresses of pupils, pupils' next-of-kin and staff as needed.
- ensure the Head and the office staff have the list of emergency out-of-hours numbers of key LEA personnel.
- write down all the above arrangements and ensure all key staff are aware of the guidelines and know where to find them in an emergency.



## 1.3 Immediate Action for the Head or Teacher-in-Charge

### Action Summary

- Assess continuing risk and ensure safety of pupils and staff
- Contact appropriate Agencies
- Brief the School Critical Incident Response Team
- Collect and record information about the incident

### Assess Continuing Risk and Ensure Safety of Pupils and Staff

- If there is still danger in a situation, ensure all pupils and staff are safe.
- Evacuate any part of the building that may be deemed unsafe and arrange for staff and pupils to gather in a safe place.

### Contact Appropriate Agencies

- Emergency Services as appropriate
- Social Services if there could be a Child Protection issue
- The Education Department (see Appendix 1 for list of Departmental Contacts).
- Inform the Chair of Governors.

### Brief the School Critical Incident Response Team

- Remind them of their key responsibilities and discuss how best these should be translated into action in this incident.
- Arrange a time for the team to meet to co-ordinate the response and review events to date.

### Collect and Record Information about the Incident

From all sources, establish the following:

- The exact nature of the incident.
- When and where it occurred.
- Who was involved and who witnessed events.
- Nature and extent of any injuries.
- Location of all involved now (eg which hospital are they in).
- If the incident occurred off-site, what help and support can school offer.
- A log of all information as it occurs, with times.

*Remember, however, that there is often a potential criminal element to a critical incident and police may want to interview witnesses. The need to obtain accurate information must not lead to unnecessary questioning in case this affects future witness statements.*

## 1.4 Short Term Action for the School Critical Incident Response Team (same day/ first 24 hours)

### Action Summary

- Arrange an 'open' telephone line
- Inform parents/carers
- Arrange to reunite children with their parents as soon as possible and practical
- Provide same day brief acknowledgment, information, practical support and 'what next' information to staff and pupils concerned (Defusing)
- Arrange psychological/emotional support for those affected
- Seek support in handling media interest
- Review and evaluate team response

### Arrange an 'Open' Telephone Line

- This enables communication channels to be kept open if enquiries block other lines.
- It can be a mobile or the telephone in the school kitchen, caretaker's office etc.
- It needs to be manned at all times to receive and send emergency communications.

### Inform Parents/Carers

- Parents will need information about the incident and how it has affected their son/ daughter (eg did their child witness events) - this information may require a telephone call or could be given by a letter taken home by the child.
- Parents should be told what information their child has been given by school about the incident.
- If there is serious upset for a child or children, school may need to advise parents to make special arrangements to have their children collected then or at the end of the day.
- Where possible and practical reunite children who have been through a traumatic incident with their parents as soon as possible.
- Where staff are upset, school should check with them whether there is someone available to support them at the end of the day and if they are safe to drive or take public transport home themselves or if they need collecting (school may arrange a lift or a taxi depending on circumstances).

### 'Defusing' With Pupils and Staff

- Accurate information is a great help to anyone involved in a traumatic situation.
- In the immediate aftermath of an incident staff and pupils need sensitive practical support, but they also need to know that emotional support will be made available soon.
- It is useful to gather affected staff and pupils together before they leave for home after an incident to give them the facts, let them know arrangements for the end of that day and for the next day and to let them know that further support will be arranged - this is called 'defusing'.

## **Defusing Meeting**

### **Sample Scenario - Hedley High School**

Robert Smith, the popular and apparently fit Head of the PE department, collapsed during a lesson in the gym. For some while he was conscious but suffering badly with severe chest pain. Later he lost consciousness and stopped breathing. Another member of the PE staff and a Teaching Assistant (first aider) attempted unsuccessfully to resuscitate him. The ambulance crew managed to restore breathing and a heart beat after considerable effort and he was taken to hospital. The latest news is that he is on a life support machine in a critical condition.

### **Defusing Meeting with Staff**

The Head met the staff who had been present during the incident (PE teacher, Teaching Assistant, Head of Year 8 and Deputy Head) together. The Head gave the staff the latest information on Robert Smith's situation in hospital and let them know his family was at his bedside. She thanked the staff for their prompt and strenuous efforts to revive Robert and acknowledged the shock and distress they had undergone. She told the staff that she would keep in touch with the hospital during the evening and would endeavour to keep them up-to-date with any major changes in the situation. She also told them that she would be contacting the Education Department and Staff Welfare Service with a view to providing post-trauma support for any staff who wished to take advantage of this. She then checked with all staff that they felt able to make the journey home and that family members or friends would be around when they got home. The PE teacher was very shaken and did not feel able to drive. The Head arranged for another member or staff to drive her home and rang her husband at work to ask if he could return home early.

The Head also briefed the rest of the staff on the situation at the end of the day and promised to let them know as soon as possible of any changes to Robert's condition.

### **Defusing Meeting with Pupils**

The Deputy Head visited the class concerned. She up-dated the pupils on Mr. Smith's situation in hospital and acknowledged the shock and upset the accident had caused everyone. She said she would give the pupils any further information on the situation in assembly the next day. She thanked them for being so supportive and sensible in supporting staff during the incident. She let them know an Education Welfare Officer and an Educational Psychologist would be available the next day for any individual or group who felt they would like to discuss what had happened and how it had affected them. She handed out a letter to their parents briefly explaining what had happened and letting them know their children had been through a traumatic incident. She checked that all felt able to make the journey home and that all would have a parent or family member available to them that evening. Where practical, groups of pupils arranged to travel home together.

## **Arrange Psychological/ Emotional Support for those affected**

Schools are advised to make early contact with services and agencies that can offer such support.

The Principal Educational Psychologist in East Sussex has coordinating responsibility on behalf of the LEA for psychological support following crises in schools. Her contact number and that of other colleagues at County Hall and in other relevant agencies are in the Contacts Section at the back of these guidelines.

Section 1.6 of these guidelines deals more comprehensively with harnessing schools' own resources and obtaining help from outside school to meet the emotional/ psychological needs of those affected. This section also deals with the typical signs and symptoms of post traumatic stress reaction and post traumatic stress disorder.

Relevant information for parents and carers is contained in the leaflet at the back of these guidelines entitled 'Supporting Children after Traumatic Events'.

## **Seek Support in Handling Media Interest**

- Where appropriate, schools will be put in touch with the Public Relations Office when they inform County Hall of a critical incident.
- The Public Relations Office will give information and advice on how to deal with the media relevant to the particular circumstances a school faces.
- It is usually best for one designated person only, normally the Head, to respond to Press queries.
- Information given to the Press should usually be agreed between the Head, Chair of Governors and, depending on circumstances, parents most affected and the police, following advice from the Public Relations Office - it should be brief and factually based, avoiding any speculation on causes or outcomes.
- The Press may telephone or they may turn up at the school gates or call at Reception - be prepared - they can move very quickly and their presence if in large numbers can be an additional source of disruption and anxiety.
- The Press are not allowed on the school site without permission - however it may be necessary to put staff on the entrance gates to withhold permission for the press to enter the grounds and to make sure that pupils and parents can enter unimpeded.
- The Press may try to talk to pupils and parents outside of school or in their homes - schools should warn pupils and parents of this possibility and may need to take action to help prevent potentially distressing approaches to pupils, parents and staff.

## 1.5 The Next Few Days and Beyond

### Action Summary

- Inform all parents and the wider community
- Make arrangements for representation at funerals as necessary
- Keep in close touch with families most affected
- Make a plan to mark the event in school, eg special assembly, special place in school where children can express their feelings, memorials for the future
- Plan to help injured, bereaved or shocked children return to school
- Arrange emotional/psychological support for staff and pupils affected
- Monitor the impact on children and staff most affected

### Inform all Parents and the Wider Community

A critical incident in a school will leave few members of the community unaffected and all will want to know what has happened and how it has been dealt with. In the first instance the school may only have been able to inform those parents whose children were directly involved in the incident. However the next day or early afterwards, a letter to all parents, or in some instances, a meeting may be helpful.

Schools can also help in ensuring support to all pupils who may be affected in other ways. Neighbouring schools who have brothers and sisters and cousins of the children affected may need to know what has happened and what action has been taken in case they too need to offer support.

### Representation at Funerals

Some bereaved families may want a very private funeral. Others may very much value the attendance of staff and some pupils at the funeral.

Many adults fear that a funeral will upset surviving children further. There may be other worries about lack of familiarity with religious beliefs or funeral rites and customs where they are different from those of staff and pupils. In the latter case, where good relationships have been made or can be made between school and the religious leaders in the community served, such issues can be discussed and worries overcome.

There are no hard and fast rules about whether or not children should attend funerals of staff or pupils to whom they were close. Every child is different and age and circumstances need to be taken into account, as do the wishes of the child concerned. However current professional consensus is that funerals provide a helpful outlet for shared grief, and attendance is therefore likely in most instances to be beneficial to affected adults and children alike.

### Keep in Close Touch with the Families Most Affected

In the intense immediate aftermath of a tragic or traumatic event, families may receive much support but as the days and weeks pass, the reluctance of many of us to face the long term effects of bereavement mean they may experience a lessening of social contact.

However there is much that schools can do to keep in touch and provide support, as by:

- Arranging for pupils and staff to send regular get well or sympathy messages to injured or surviving children while they are absent.
- Visiting pupils in hospital or at home.
- Supporting plans the parents may have for a memorial.
- Ensuring that brothers and sisters in the affected family are supported during their return to school and afterwards.
- Providing opportunities for pupils to write about, draw or otherwise express their appreciation for a pupil who has died and passing these onto parents.
- Consulting parents about special assemblies, anniversaries and any memorials the school plan.

## **Mark the Event in School**

Assemblies and tutor times can be used to up-date pupils on the situation, answer their questions, get their ideas for ways to commemorate the event and provide emotional support.

Many schools hold one or more special assemblies where the event and its impact can be discussed. Often religious leaders and sometimes affected parents attend and speak to pupils. Children who are or were particularly close to a pupil who has been hurt, is ill or who has died may also like to speak.

Schools can be enormously helpful to their pupils by facilitating and encouraging the expression of sadness and regret and allowing a space for mourning.

Most children value the opportunity to show their feelings in some way if a pupil has died. Often schools dedicate a part of the school or classroom for this purpose. There can be photos of the child in this space. There can also be examples of his or her artwork or interests. Children and staff can then write letters or poems, draw or paint, to express their memories and feelings. This can be a good opportunity to remember what they valued about the pupil and the good times shared. Some children may not be ready to express their grief soon after a bereavement, but creating opportunities sensitively for expressing emotions is the key.

It needs to be remembered that to those not so directly affected by trauma or bereavement, life moves on faster than it does for the survivors and the bereaved. Those more closely affected will be helped by schools remembering that their mourning process may take up to two years or more, and that the effects of the loss will probably be lifelong to some extent. Acknowledgement, either privately to pupils and parents concerned or in tutor groups or assemblies, that special times are likely to bring sad reflections can be enormously supportive. Particular attention needs to be paid to affected children at Christmas, anniversaries of the incident or bereavement and birthdays of the person who has died.

Schools should have a key member of the pastoral staff responsible for monitoring the welfare of pupils most affected. If learning and behaviour are adversely affected or if the pupil's distress seems unabated by time, there is a need to seek longer-term support or counselling.

## 1.6 Arrange Emotional/Psychological Support for Staff and Pupils

'Symptoms varied but the commonest were sleeping difficulties, nervousness, lack of friends, unwillingness to go to school or out to play, instability and enuresis (bed-wetting). Some of the children had shown some of these symptoms before the disaster but they were said to be very much worse after it. Broadly speaking, the children who were most affected were those with other anxiety-creating situations in their backgrounds.'

Lacey 1972 on the child survivors of the 1966 Aberfan disaster  
(W Yule & A Gold)

Emotional and psychological support after a critical incident can be crucial in terms of immediate and longer-term pupil and staff welfare and should not be overlooked. Staff need to be aware of:

- how best to offer support to affected pupils and adults both from within schools' own resources and from outside services;
- what are the typical emotional and psychological reactions that follow a traumatic incident and how to monitor pupils and staff for the signs and symptoms of post traumatic stress.
- see page 27.

### Support from Schools' own Resources

Depending on the nature and severity of the incident and the skills and experience of the staff, schools may be able to support their pupils entirely from within their own resources. This is especially the case where there is a counsellor on the staff or where pastoral staff have acquired some training and expertise in this area.

In terms of becoming 'wise before the event', schools should consider some staff training in managing trauma, bereavement and loss so there is expertise available in the event of such an emergency.

Even where schools have good support arrangements in place, it is usually a good idea to contact external support services even if only for advice.

In essence, schools support pupils most effectively by:

- Providing opportunities to talk about the incident, share information and express feelings in safe and supportive settings.
- Providing a familiar structured routine (an element of 'business as usual' can be very reassuring).
- Securing internal and external support as needed.
- Monitoring the long-term progress of pupils affected.

### Support from Outside School

If a crisis is very serious or wide-ranging with a significant emotional impact on staff and pupils, it is recommended that schools always contact the LEA and other appropriate external support agencies for advice and help as appropriate.

The Education Department can support schools in dealing with both the immediate and potential long-term effects of trauma.

The Principal Educational Psychologist is responsible for the co-ordination of psychological support from the Education Department following critical incidents. Her number and those of her deputies are in the 'Contacts' section in this guidance. Members of the County Psychological Service, Education Welfare Service, Teaching Support Services and the Staff Welfare Service who have undergone special training or have particular experience in the area needed can offer support as appropriate. The main types of support offered are:

- To staff in thinking how best to support pupils - this is often done by psychologists and other colleagues attending specially convened staff meetings to discuss events, feelings and how to respond most sensitively and effectively to the particular circumstances- the impact on staff as well as pupils is discussed.
- To groups of pupils affected - This can be by holding informal sessions with pupils to discuss their feelings but in some circumstances may include a 'Critical Incident Debriefing' session for pupils and perhaps for staff
- To children and families by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and some voluntary organisations, such as Cruse, providing longer term counselling support to children and families (see Contacts section).
- To adults in school affected personally by post traumatic stress reaction or post traumatic stress symptoms are available from the Staff Welfare Service (see Contacts section).

### **Post-Traumatic Stress**

There are three main groups of symptoms of post-traumatic stress:

1. The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced in thoughts, dreams or flashbacks where the individual thinks it is all happening again.
2. There is persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, or there is a numbing of general responsiveness.
3. There are signs of increased physiological arousal such as disturbed sleep and poor concentration.

### **POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS REACTION**

- Most people, adults and children, suffer some post-traumatic stress reaction after a disturbing incident - these commonly include symptoms such as sleep disturbance, nightmares, feelings of anxiety, intrusive memories of the incident, irritability and upset stomach.
- Other symptoms may include an unwillingness/inability to talk about events to friends and family, guilt at surviving or not helping others enough, heightened alertness to danger and general fearfulness, panic attacks, grief and distress, depression.



- Younger children particularly may show regressive behaviour, clinging to parents, wetting the bed, becoming aggressive and destructive, becoming involved in repetitive play or drawing pictures repeatedly on themes relating to the incident.
- The symptoms themselves can be very frightening and distressing - however they are usually short-lived, lasting from a few days to a few weeks - in the majority of people affected, they gradually reduce in intensity and eventually disappear.
- Reassurance to those suffering a post-traumatic stress reaction that the strange feelings are normal and usually pass can be very helpful.

## **POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER**

- A few people, both adults and children, go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, which can last a few months or in some cases become severe and long-term.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder is usually diagnosed if the symptoms of post-traumatic stress reaction remain intense and last for more than a month after the incident - referral for counselling or related support is crucial if post traumatic stress disorder seems to be developing.
- The right kind of support after an incident can reduce the distress associated with the commonly occurring post-traumatic stress reaction and the much rarer post traumatic stress disorder.
- School staff, whether directly or indirectly involved in the incident or with victims of the incident, may need help and support too.
- Adults and children who seem to cope well in the initial aftermath of a crisis may go on to develop an emotional reaction some time after the event.
- The School Management Team need to monitor the emotional well-being of affected staff over time.
- Post-traumatic stress counselling is effective in helping those with post-traumatic stress disorder.

## **Critical Incident Debriefing**

Critical Incident Debriefing can be defined as:

'A meeting with one or more persons, the purpose of which is to review the impressions and reactions that survivors, helpers and others express during or after a traumatic incident such as an accident or disaster.'

(Dyregov A)

The purpose of a critical incident debrief is to provide emotional support to those affected, thereby reducing the likelihood of longer term post traumatic symptoms or post traumatic stress disorder.

Those leading a debriefing session must have undergone special training in this technique.

Debriefing sessions would normally take place with a group of those most affected and usually there would be separate groups for pupils and staff. Normally the session would be held within four days of the event. Consent from the parents and the pupil concerned would be needed for attendance at a session. The session provides an opportunity to go over the facts of the incident as each pupil remembers them, to cover the thoughts and emotions that accompanied the events, to discuss any post-traumatic reactions, and to advise on the best ways to cope with the stress and distress that frequently follow such events. At least one follow-up session will be arranged to check how the group is faring.

Not all incidents will require a critical incident debrief. While the technique has been criticised in some quarters recently as not having adequate research evidence to prove its effectiveness, it remains widely used with most people who have been through debriefing reporting that they feel it has been helpful to them.

## Critical Incident Debriefing - Sample Scenario

### Emotional/ Psychological Support

#### Withdean Primary School

Approaching the school at the beginning of the day, Louise, a Year 5 pupil was knocked down by a van on a zebra crossing. She was killed immediately. Six pupils from her class were walking with her and witnessed the incident.

The school contacted the Education Department and asked for post-trauma support. The following was arranged:

1. The Principal Educational Psychologist contacted the school the same day to find out details of the incident and what support was needed - she was asked for advice on breaking the news to pupils in the school and what to say to parents, which she gave.
2. The school's Education Welfare Officer and Educational Psychologist arranged to be in school the following day to offer general support to Louise's classmates and any other pupils affected.
3. An Educational Psychologist with experience in working with critical incidents joined the school EWO and school EP for an emergency staff meeting after school to discuss how best staff should support the pupils, not forgetting an acknowledgement of the staff's feelings of distress.
4. The school borrowed age-appropriate books and materials on bereavement from the County Psychological Service which they made available to the class and other pupils in the school.
5. Plans were made to support the six friends who had witnessed the accident on their return to school.
6. Letters went home to the parents of these children asking if they would like the children to take part in a critical incident debriefing session which would be taken by a psychologist and an education welfare officer with special skills/experience in this area - the class teacher was invited to attend this session as well.
7. Parents were also sent leaflets from the County Guidelines on Trauma, Bereavement and Loss, describing common reactions their child might experience and giving advice on the best way parents can offer support.
8. All parents and children gave consent and two sessions were held within days of the incident to explore what had happened and the children's associated thoughts and feelings and then also to think of positive ways they could join in remembering their friendship with Louise and commemorating her life.
9. The learning support assistant in the class, who was also facing a possible bereavement in her family, recognised a need in herself for counselling in the aftermath of the tragedy - she contacted the Staff Welfare Service who arranged five sessions with a counsellor, which were effective in enabling her to cope.

## 1.7 Evaluation and Review of Procedures

- The Critical Incident Response Team need to meet and review their response to the incident as often as necessary
- The Team should plan for the longer term as well as the immediate aftermath
- Where death has occurred, support to the families, attendance and input to funerals, special assemblies and memorials all need to be considered
- Plans need to be in place to monitor the longer term welfare of pupils and staff
- Lessons learnt from the incident should be used to improve the School's critical incident planning.

# Bereavement and Loss

'Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the o'er fraught heart and bids it break.'

Shakespeare - Macbeth IV iii 209

## 2.1 Sources of Bereavement and Loss

Estimates suggest that around 2% of children will experience the death of a parent by the age of 16. This means potentially 4 children on a roll of 200 and 16 on a roll of 800 will have lost a mother or father. Many more children will experience other deaths of close family members, including grandparents and siblings. Others will experience the death of a friend or fellow pupil.

Additionally bereavement is seldom a single traumatic event. Other negative consequences may compound the sense of loss and disorientation. A surviving parent may seem 'lost' in his or her own grief. The bereavement may bring other changes, such as a stay with relatives or foster parents that involves a loss of contact with siblings and school. There may be financial loss or a move to a different house or area, breaking associations with the past.

Other losses children experience can feel similar to a bereavement. 'Looked after' pupils may feel they have lost their birth family. Refugee and Asylum Seeker children may have left family members behind in dangerous circumstances and be unsure if they will ever see them again. Divorce and separation of parents can also involve a great sense of loss. Estimates suggest that divorce will result in a marked change in school performance for two-thirds of children affected.

## 2.2 How Children are affected by Bereavement and Loss

In the past, it was generally believed that children were less affected by bereavement than adults, particularly if facts that could be distressing were withheld from them.

We now know that children experience the effects of bereavement just as intensely as adults and that the experience can have long term negative consequences for them. However there is a difference between the way adults and children mourn.

Adults tend to experience grief powerfully and consistently for some considerable time until gradually their mood stability recovers. Children, on the other hand, are more easily distracted from grief for periods of time. They may experience intense emotions for short periods followed by a return to a more normal mood state. This can be mistaken for lack of depth of mourning. However research suggests that about 40% of children who lose a parent are at risk of long term associated psychological problems. As many as 20% of bereaved children develop learning difficulties or other special educational needs. Many more children will experience problems with schoolwork associated with a loss of concentration and problems with key relationships resulting from the turbulent emotions involved in the mourning process.

The mourning period can also be lengthy in children, lasting two years or more, with the second year sometimes experienced as more difficult by the child than the first. Sometimes adults may notice a sudden change in behaviour but, because time has passed since the bereavement, they may not make the connection.

Children facing bereavement and loss are likely to experience some or all of the following in varying degrees of intensity. It is important to acknowledge that any of these behaviours can be described as 'normal' and should be dealt with according to existing school practice.

- Grief including an overwhelming yearning for the lost person.
- Anxiety and even panic that there will be further loss or that they themselves might die.
- Guilt that they might somehow have prevented the death or loss.
- Loss of self-confidence and self-worth.
- Loss of ability to make and maintain social relationships.
- Numbness, shock and disbelief.
- Intense loneliness.
- Nightmares and disrupted sleeping patterns.
- Headaches and stomach aches.
- Tiredness and listlessness.
- Poor concentration and hyperactivity.
- Bed-wetting.

The following changes in behaviour may be observed:

- Reluctance to go to school.
- Unwillingness to go out to play.
- Becoming upset by seemingly minor events.
- Problems with schoolwork.
- Changes in patterns of social relationships eg becoming withdrawn or starting to bully others.
- Aggression, anger and non-compliance.

## **Children's Comprehension of Death**

Accurate factual information helps children to mourn. Fear and confusion about the circumstances surrounding a death can compound anxiety and distress. Children are helped by simple age-appropriate explanations about death which avoid euphemisms such as 'gone away', gone to sleep' or 'passed on'.

A child's perception of death changes with age and experience. There are no hard and fast rules about ages at which aspects of death are understood because much depends on the individual child's cognitive and developmental level and the experience and discussion of death within the family.

However, children up to the age of 7 or 8 may see death as a reversible process and a degree of 'magical thinking' may make them believe the dead person can be brought back to life by an action of theirs or someone else's. They may blame themselves for the death on account of some minor misdeed, real or imagined.

Children from around 8 to 10 will generally understand death is permanent and irrevocable. However some remnants of 'magical thinking' may remain, with the child perhaps seeing the death as some kind of punishment for the person who has died or those left behind. They may be very curious about death and its associated rituals.

Older children and teenagers will have a more mature and adult understanding of death. However they are unlikely to have much experience of death previously and will still need explanations, which may need to be repeated as they come to terms with difficult information.

## **The Stages of Mourning**

Much is often talked about the stages of mourning, but it is very important to remember that there is no formula for grieving. Although phases in mourning can be identified, there is a dynamic relationship between them which can involve movement forwards and backwards in terms of resolution over time. Equally there are no time scales for grief. It takes its own time and while resolution and acceptance at some level generally comes eventually, the pain and loss surrounding the death of a close relative or friend will always be there to some degree.

The stages of mourning are commonly described as follows:

### **Early Grief - The Protest Phase**

This stage is characterised by shock, disbelief and denial. Not only is the person lost but it can also feel as if life has lost its meaning. Shock can take the form of physical pain or numbness, but more often consists of complete apathy and withdrawal or abnormal calm, in some cases even anger. Numbness can act as a defence that enables coping with immediate jobs and needs.

Denial generally occurs within the first 14 days and can last minutes, hours or weeks. In this stage the bereaved person behaves as if the dead person is still there and no loss is acknowledged.

### **Acute Grief - The Disorganisation Phase**

Many feel at this stage that they are abnormal because they have never before experienced the waves of savage feelings that surge through them and over which they temporarily have no control, eg tears, anger, guilt, sadness and loneliness. Some or all of the following emotions may be experienced:

- There may be overwhelming grief, yearning and pining plus an urge to go over the death, trying to find a reason for it and re-visiting where it happened.
- There may be anger against the person who caused the death in the case of an accident or with God for letting it happen or with the deceased for leaving them.
- The bereaved person begins to feel the despair, the emptiness, the pain of the loss and with this may come depression. Such feelings are often accompanied by a sense of redundancy, of lack of self worth and of lack of point to anything. If a person can cry it usually helps to relieve the stress.
- Guilt is a common emotion which can be felt for the real or imagined negligence or harm inflicted on the person who has just died. People often say, "If only I had called the Doctor - not gone out" etc. There is a tendency to idealize the person who has just died and feel they could have loved them better. The bereaved can also feel guilty about their own feelings and inability to enjoy life.
- There is often anxiety. In extreme cases anxiety can even become panic as the full realization of the loss begins to come through. There is anxiety about the changes and new responsibilities that are taking place and the loneliness ahead. There may even be thoughts of suicide.

### **Subsiding Grief - The Reorganisation Phase**

This generally occurs in the second year after the death. Acceptance and a calmer emotional state gradually take over. The person is ready to move on, although feelings of sadness and loss may remain to some degree for a lifetime.



## 2.3 Informing Staff and Governors of a Tragedy or Death

A tragedy or death can affect each individual of the school community. It is important that all teachers, governors and support staff be informed as soon as practicable and thus avoid rumour. The following may help when informing staff and governors:

- tell the “story” of what happened leading up to the event.
- explain how the tragedy or death occurred.
- be prepared for obvious upset and feelings of anger/guilt, be clear that this incorporates known facts only.
- to enable absent staff to feel part of a caring team, arrangements should be made to inform them over the telephone if a personal visit is impractical.
- people may connect the incident to their own personal experience of tragedy or bereavement, so feelings about past events may need to be discussed.
- arrange staff condolences with collaborative agreement.

In some situations where a number of people need to be up-dated on a situation, a letter might be appropriate. Nominate staff to prepare a letter for parents and others. Consult the most affected parents, if possible, on the contents before sending out as information will be extremely sensitive. Such a letter could contain:

- information about who has died and how the death occurred.
- details of the funeral and condolences, if they are known and if the bereaved parents want this information published.
- a copy of the advice for parents on how to talk to children about death.
- known facts about how children respond to the news that someone has been badly hurt or has died i.e. they may respond in very different ways, and no apparent response does not mean that they don't care.
- details of a teacher or professionals from supporting agencies who can be available to talk things through with a parent or child if the parents feel that the child is finding the situation particularly hard. This teacher or outside professional could advise the family of the support services available to them if required.

## 2.4 Informing Children and Young People of a Tragedy or Death

People often think that children do not grieve, but even very young children will want to know what happened, how it happened, why it happened and perhaps most importantly of all, what happens next.

The following guidelines will help in informing children of a death or serious illness or accident:

- Identify those children who had a long-term and/or close relationship with the hurt, ill or dead person so they can be told together as a separate group.
- Provide staff with guidelines on how to inform children. For example:

“I’ve got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. There is an illness called cancer. Sometimes people with cancer get better, but other times people die from it. John has been ill with cancer for a long time. I have to tell you John died yesterday”.

or

“Sometimes people have accidents at work, at home, at school or on the road. People may be hurt or injured in the accident and they may have to go to hospital for treatment. I have some bad news to tell you that might upset you. Yesterday Stephanie was in an accident and she was very badly injured”.

- Give children time to verbalize their feelings and fears. Allow space for “If only’s . . .” to be acknowledged.
- Invite discussion, asking children to share their own experiences of death, eg. “When my pet / my gran died”
- Answer questions factually, avoiding using euphemisms like “passed away”, or “lost”. Use the words “dead”, “died” and “death”.
- Introduce a practical task, eg collage of memories / memory box / pictures of happy times shared with the deceased. Remember some children may be too shocked or upset to undertake this task for a while.
- End the discussion on a positive note - not all people who are ill or have accident die - many get better. Perhaps co-ordinate an assembly to end the discussion or ask the children to pray if appropriate.
- Refer to the name naturally, eg John died from cancer.
- Be prepared for children to say or do the unexpected. Experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. No apparent response does not mean that a child does not care.
- Children may want to contribute in some way - encourage discussion to establish the form of contribution. Help them think of simple, practical ideas. For example a short message from each class member to the classmate who has experienced the death of a parent could make the return to school easier for the bereaved child.
- Different ethnical religious groups may have varying experiences and traditions surrounding death. Consideration needs to be given to these when working with bereaved children. Schools could contact appropriate support services for further advice if needed. (eg travellers education support service, ethnic minority pupil services)

## 2.5 Supporting Children Through Bereavement and Loss

### Talking with Bereaved Children

A common statement by adults confronting the bereaved is “I didn’t know what to say”.

*However knowing what to say is far less important than knowing how to listen.*

Grieving can be an intensely isolating business and often those suffering just want sympathetic and sensitive companionship on their lonely journey.

The key points for school staff to remember are:

- make opportunities for private discussion e.g. ask the child to stay behind to help with a display
- show that you are concerned, sympathetic and willing to discuss the bereavement or loss, but do not attempt to force unwilling children to discuss these issues - their right to privacy should be respected
- listen carefully with full attention if a young person does want to talk
- avoid an emphasis on advice or interpretation
- use the following strategies as appropriate: -
  - a) simple acknowledgement of what the child has said, eg ‘uh - huh’, ‘mmm’ or a sympathetic nod.
  - b) reflect back what you think the child has said ‘So you heard nothing else?’ ‘You did not know what to do then?’ (reflecting back as a question gives the child the opportunity to correct you if necessary).
  - c) speak the emotions you hear eg ‘That sounds very sad’, ‘Did you feel angry then?’ ‘It must have been a very worrying time’.
- parents and families can be an important source of information when working with bereaved children

- d) from time to time it may help to summarise briefly what you have heard - this can give a helpful, fresh perspective to the child - 'So you didn't know when she went into hospital that she was so seriously ill'.
- e) try to answer as honestly and accurately as you can in words children will understand.
- f) let children know its OK to cry - give them the message that grief is a natural response to loss
- g) try not to hide your own feelings from children - it's OK for children to see you are upset - explain, in simple terms, that such events upset everyone
- h) it can be helpful to mention your own experiences of bereavement - it can make children feel less alone - but only providing it is done to help them, not to gain support for oneself or burden the child

## **Support for Bereaved Children**

- try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges or compensations - the child still needs to feel a part of his peer group and should be expected to function accordingly - temper your expectations with kindness and understanding, but continue to expect the child to function.
- maintain familiar routines and structures as these provide a sense of security.
- if possible, talk to a few of the bereaved student's friends to help them cope and explore how to be supportive - friends may be uncomfortable and awkward in their attempts to make contact
- help a student find a supportive peer group - perhaps there are other students in the school who are coping with similar losses - an invitation to share with each other might be welcome
- be patient and calm, if possible - the child, or children, you have contact with may behave in a 'younger' way and may become difficult to manage but this is natural
- ensure that members of staff, especially in a large school, are fully aware of what has happened to a bereaved child, so that that child is not unnecessarily hurt by a chance remark made in ignorance by a staff member

## 2.6 Welfare of Staff

Remember you will need time for yourself. Helping a bereaved child can be very distressing and may bring up all kinds of memories and feelings from your own life. Take care of yourself; take time to talk to others. Children will benefit from this.

If for personal reasons, it feels very difficult for a member of staff to offer a child the support they need, schools should arrange for other members of staff to take over this role.

Consider these points when looking after yourself and each other:-

- Identify and access your support network
- Talk about your feelings and concerns with a good friend, colleague, partner
- Staff groups often find it supportive to share their emotions and experiences. It is important to set aside time to do this effectively. A member of the Educational Psychology Service could facilitate this.
- Leave anything that can wait; do not take on extra work
- Do something for yourself to help you relax
- Ensure there are comforts available for the staff, as there may be heightened stress in the environment

If a teacher or adults in school would like some personal support the County Council Welfare Service runs a confidential counselling network, details of which are in the Contacts section of this Guidance.

## Contact Details of Support Services and Organisations

### Key contacts at times of Critical Incidents and Tragic Events:-

Press Officer:

Departmental Communications Manager 01273 481365  
(Calls will divert to a mobile during out of hours)

Jenny Clench Head of Psychology & Learning 01273 481960

Denise Ford Principal Educational Psychologist 01892 655244

## Voluntary Organisations & Useful Addresses

Child Bereavement Trust Aston House High Street High Wycombe Bucks HP14 3AG	0845 357 1000 <a href="http://www.childbereavement.org.uk">www.childbereavement.org.uk</a>
Compassionate Friends 53 North Street Bristol BS3 1EN (Support for parents who have experienced the loss of a child)	01179 665202
CRUSE – Bereavement Care 126 Sheen Road Richmond Surrey T29 1UR	0208 9404818
CRUSE Secure chat room for bereaved young people Mon-Fri 9:30-5pm	<a href="http://www.rd4u.org.uk">www.rd4u.org.uk</a> 0808 808 1677
Brighton Branch Eastbourne Branch Hastings Branch	01273 234007 01323 642942 01424 732083
Gingerbread Association for One Parent Families 7 Sovereign Close London E1W 3HW	0207 4889300
Mind MIND info line Mon-Fri 9:15-4.:45 pm	01273 488660 0845 7660163
National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux Myddleton House 115-123 Pentonville Road London N1 9LZ	0207 8332181
NSPCC National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children 2 Sedlescombe Road South St Leonards on Sea	01424 428833
Stillbirths & Neonatal Deaths Society (SANDS) 28 Portland Place LONDON W1N 4DE	0207 4365881
Winston's Wish Childhood Bereavement Young people can email questions to a bereavement Counsellor, reply in 48 hrs	<a href="http://www.winstonswish.org.uk">www.winstonswish.org.uk</a> 0845 2030405

## References

### **Diagnostic & Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) for Mental Disorders**

Ashmore R, **Post Trauma Stress Disorder** Mental Health Nursing 1996: 16, 2:18-21

Barnard P, Morland I, & Nagy J, **Children, Bereavement & Trauma** Pub. Jessica Kingsley

Dyregrov A, **Grief in Children** Pub. Jessica Kingsley 1990

East Sussex Area Child Protection Committee **Child Protection Procedures** February 2001 [www.eastsussex.gov.uk/soc/I\\_policies/policies.htm](http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/soc/I_policies/policies.htm)

Hampshire County Council **Critical Incidents - Guidance for Schools**

Home Office **Dealing with Disaster** [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/epd/](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/epd/)

Kibble, D, **Safety & Disaster Management in Schools and Colleges** Pub. David Fulton 1998

Killick S, & Lindeman S, **Giving Sorrow Words** Book + Video (Video Inset) Pub. Lucky Duck 1999

Mallon B, **Helping Children to Manage Loss** Pub. Jessica Kingsley

Murray C, Parkes P, Laungaini B & Young (Eds) **Death & Bereavement Across Cultures** Pub. Routledge 1997

Pennells M & Smith S, **The Forgotten Mourners** Pub. Jessica Kingsley 1995

Pennells M & Smith S, **Interventions with Bereaved Children** Pub. Jessica Kingsley 1995

Somerset Educational Psychology Service **Critical Incident Support Pack**

Ward B et al **Good Grief 1** Pub. Jessica Kingsley 1993

Ward B et al **Good Grief 2** Pub. Jessica Kingsley 1993

West Sussex County Council **Critical Incidents - Guidance for Schools**

Available from: Mrs Chris Wells, Office Manager, West Sussex Educational Psychology Service - Education Office North, Centenary House, County Buildings, Woodfield Road, Northgate, Crawley, RH10 8GP - Tel: 01293 895239

Worden J W, **Grief & Grief Therapy** Pub. Tavistock 1983

Yule W and Gold A, **Wise Before the Event** Pub. Gulbenkian 1993



## Books for Children

### Books for Young Children (3 - 6 years)

Briggs R, **The Snowman** Pub. Puffin

Carle E, **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** Pub Puffin

O'Toole D, **Aarvy Aardvark finds Hope**, Mountain Rainbow Pubs.  
(This is available with a teaching guide and tape and available from Child Bereavement Trust)

Varley S, **Badger's Parting Gifts** Pub. Collins

### Books for Children 7 - 12 years

Carrick C, **The Accident** Pub. Clarian Books

Little J, **Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird** Pub. Puffin

Stickney D, **Waterbugs and Dragon Flies** Pub. Mowbray

White E B, **Charlotte's Web** Pub. Penguin

Wilhelm H, **I'll Always Love You** Pub. Hodder Children's Books

Wilson J, **The Cat Mummy** Pub. Doubleday/ Corgi Yearling Books

### Books for Teenagers

Abrams R, **When Parents Die** Pub. Letts 1992

Haughton E, **Dealing with Death** Cruse Publications

Lloyd C, **The Charlie Barber Treatment** Pub. Walker Books

Paton Walsh J, **Gaffer Samson's Luck** Pub. Puffin

Walibank S, **My Father Died and My Mother Died** Cruse Publications

### Books for Parents

Dyregrov A, **Grief in Children: A Handbook for Adults** Pub. Jessica Kingsley

Wells R, **Helping Children Cope with Grief** Pub. Sheldon Press

Wilkinson T, **The Death of a Child: A Book for Families** Julia Macrae Books

### Videos

**Coping with Bereavement** Video Directory Mental Health Media Council, The Resource Centre,  
356 Holloway Road, London N7 6PA

**Giving Sorrow Words** - book and video - Killick S. and Lindeman S. published 1999, Lucky Duck  
Publishing

**Someone Died - It Happened to Me** Child Bereavement Trust, Harleyford Estate, Henley Road,  
Marlow, Bucks SL7 2DX

**When a Child Grieves** Child Bereavement Trust (as above)

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