

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Policy

The Board of Management (BOM) recognises critical incidents as one-off incidents, or sequences of events, that overwhelm the normal coping mechanisms of the school. Critical incidents may involve one or more students, staff members or other members of the school community and can include accidents, deaths, serious damage to school property or other traumatic or tragic events. They do not necessarily happen inside the school, but they do, by their nature, impact on the school community. Systems will be put in place to prevent critical incidents and build resilience in staff and students in terms of coping with such incidents, but these in themselves are not enough. The BOM and staff will draw up plans so that the school is in a position to respond quickly and effectively in the event of a critical incident, maintain a sense of control, and ensure appropriate support is offered to those who need it. In this way, the effects of the incident should be limited and the school should be able to return to normality as soon as possible afterwards.

Procedures

1 Responsibilities

1.1 BOM

The BOM has a duty of care to the school's students and employees and is responsible for ensuring that this policy is in place and up-to-date, and that a Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) is established in the school.

1.2 Principal

The Principal is responsible for assuring that these procedures are enacted. She will ensure that members of the CIMT are selected on a voluntary basis, are fully aware of their responsibilities and have all the required materials in order for them to undertake their respective roles. She will oversee the school's critical incident management plan, including the development of all relevant documentation for critical incidents and the keeping of accurate and detailed records.

1.3 Teachers

School is a significant part of children's lives. Teachers know children well and are in a strong position to offer strategic and specific support to those in their care. They are in a central position to observe behavioural changes resulting from trauma and are important role models for modelling healthy ways of coping. The BOM will ensure, resources permitting, that staff receive training in dealing with critical incidents and traumatised children.

1.4 The CIMT

At a time of crisis, there are potentially a large number of tasks that need to be carried out. The CIMT is set up in the context of ensuring that no aspects of the crisis are forgotten about and that no one individual is overburdened, but without creating a large unwieldy team.

1.4.1 Team leader

The team leader will alert the team members to the crisis and will convene team meetings. S/he will coordinate the team's tasks and will liaise as necessary with the family/families in question, the BOM, Gardaí, Department of Education and Science, National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and other appropriate external agencies. The role of team leader is ordinarily assumed by the Principal (or Deputy Principal if absent).

1.4.2 Staff liaison officer

The staff liaison officer will lead briefing meetings for staff on the facts as known, outlining daily routines and giving staff members an opportunity to express their feelings and to ask questions. S/he will keep staff updated as each day progresses and provide them with materials as necessary. S/he will advise staff on the procedures for identification of vulnerable students, and will also be alert to vulnerable staff members, making contact with them individually if necessary and advising them of the availability of the Employee Assistance Service (EAS). The role of staff liaison officer is normally undertaken by the Deputy Principal or another long-standing and trusted member of staff.

1.4.3 Parent liaison officer

The parent liaison officer will act as the main point of contact for the parents/guardians. S/he will arrange and facilitate parent/guardian meetings as necessary and may meet with individual parents/guardians if required. S/he will provide appropriate information materials for parents/guardians and will maintain a record of parents/guardians seen. The role of parent liaison officer is ordinarily taken on by one or both of the parents' representatives on the BOM.

1.4.4 Media liaison officer

The media liaison officer will prepare press releases, give media briefings, undertake media interviews and deal with other issues relating to press coverage of the incident (filming, photography, etc). The role of media liaison officer is normally taken on by the Chair of the BOM or another appropriate person who would be comfortable talking to the media. S/he will undertake media training if necessary.

1.4.5 Administrative officer

The administrative officer will maintain up-to-date contact details of parents/guardians, staff, the emergency services and other relevant agencies. S/he will ensure readily adaptable templates of potentially relevant documentation are available on the school system. S/he will answer and respond to telephone calls, emails and letters, copy materials as needed and maintain accurate records. The role of administrative officer is ordinarily undertaken by the school Secretary.

2 Prevention

2.1 Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

The SPHE programme is an important element of the school's prevention work. SPHE has a key role to play in the creation of a healthy, nurturing and safe environment and supports children's physical, mental, emotional and social development and well-being. The school strives to integrate SPHE into the school curriculum in a broad-based, age-appropriate manner, addressing issues such as: loss; bullying; stress; anger; resilience; conflict; problem-solving; seeking help; mental health; etc.

2.2 Other relevant policies

The implementation and ongoing review of the following school policies are of particular relevance in terms of creating a physically and psychologically safe environment for the entire school community: behaviour, child protection, employment, health and safety, and play.

3 Preparation

3.1 Resources

The school will use this policy and procedures document as its primary resource, supplemented directly by the 2008 DES/NEPS publications *Responding to critical incidents guidelines and resource materials for schools*, which offers templates and other useful resources. Relevant documentation such as letters to parents/guardians will be available on the school server for immediate adaptation when required. Critical incident management folders containing key documents will also be prepared for each member of the CIMT.

3.2 Contact lists

Contact details (address, landline, mobile and email) are available at all times for all students, their parents/guardians and staff members. These are updated at least annually by the school Secretary. Furthermore, an annually updated emergency contact list (Garda, NEPS, Employee Assistance Service, members of the CIMT, etc) is on display in the staff room, Principal's office and Secretary's office. The school has a mobile phone and free telephone lines which can be used for important incoming and outgoing calls. It is important that there is ready access to emergency contact details on any school excursions.

3.3 School closures

The BOM strives to ensure school closures are kept to an absolute minimum. It accepts that at times, however, there may be no choice but to close the school for a limited period of time due to health and safety concerns, for example: fire, flooding, explosion, chemical spill, serious infection, etc. Parents and guardians will be informed of closures as early as possible using as many communications methods as feasible.

3.3 Rooms

In the event of a critical incident, the following rooms will, as far as possible, be used for these specified purposes:

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| • Staff room | for meeting with staff |
| • Hall | for meeting with students as a group |
| • Hall | for meeting with parents/guardians as a group |
| • Multipurpose room | for meeting with students or parents/guardians individually |
| • Multipurpose room | for meeting with the media |
| • Multipurpose room | for other visitors |
| • Backstage room | 'quiet room'. |

3.4 NEPS psychologists

NEPS psychologists may be made available at times of critical incident to provide individual or group support sessions. Parental consent is required for individual sessions. The school will make provisions for seeking such consent either on an advance basis or on an incident-by-incident basis.

3.5 Privacy/good name

The BOM, CIMT and staff all have a responsibility to protect the privacy and good name of the people involved in critical incidents and will be sensitive to the consequences of any public statements made. For example, the term 'suicide' will not be used unless there is solid information that the death was due to suicide and that the family involved consents to its use (alternatives: 'tragic death' or 'sudden death'). Similarly, the term 'murder' will not be used until it is legally established that a murder was committed (alternative: 'violent death'). Staff will seek to ensure that students also understand the importance of these concepts.

3.6 Media

The school understands that high profile incidents will inevitably attract media attention. Whilst this adds a further layer of complexity to a crisis, the school also recognises that dealing with the media in a controlled and cooperative manner will ultimately be in the best interests of the school community.

The school will appoint one media liaison officer (see section 1.3.4) and students, parents/guardians and staff will be informed that this is the only individual nominated to act as the school's media spokesperson for the incident. Where necessary, brief and carefully considered press statements will be prepared, which will be emailed to journalists on demand. The school will not issue photographs of children or employees to the media, unless they have been given express permission to do so by the affected family/families. Members of the media are denied access to the school grounds, except when it is deemed essential to hold a press conference. In view of their lack of maturity, the school will not allow children to be interviewed during school times and parents/guardians will be advised not to allow their children to be interviewed either.

4 Intervention

Where staff are referred to below, this means all employees; not just teaching staff. Whilst it may not always be practical for all employees to meet at the same time (for example, because of student supervision demands) it is nevertheless important that ancillary staff are also provided with all the necessary information and support.

4.1 Short term

In the immediate aftermath of a critical incident, focus firstly on 'make safe' followed by 'restore calm'.

The following is a summary checklist for the Team Leader for day 1:

- Gather accurate, factual information.
- Consult resources (see section 3.1).
- Decide whether the incident requires a level 1, 2 or 3 NEPS response.
- Contact external agencies as appropriate.
- Convene a CIMT meeting.
- Arrange for supervision of students.
- Hold staff meeting.
- Ensure relevant documentation is prepared.
- Identify vulnerable students.
- Inform students.
- Make contact with the affected family/families.
- Ensure parents/guardians are informed.
- Ensure media matters are dealt with.
- Hold end of day staff briefing.

4.2 Medium term

The following is a summary checklist for the Team Leader for the days immediately following day 1:

- Undertake any actions that were not completed on/that arose out of day 1.
- Meet with the CIMT (daily until the school returns to normal functioning).
- Meet with the staff (plan and hold further staff meetings as necessary).
- Meet external agencies, if involved, to agree on role and procedures.
- Undertake actions arising from meetings with CMIT, staff and external agencies.
- Provide appropriate supports to students, staff and parents/guardians.

The actions that might be undertaken during this period are very wide-ranging and will depend on the nature of the incident and level of trauma, but may include: holding parents'/guardians' meetings; classroom sessions with the children; visiting injured parties; paying respects/funeral arrangements; provision of books and fact sheets; seeking alternative accommodation, etc.

4.3 Long term

Follow-up is the work carried out - under the guidance of the Principal - in the weeks, months and sometimes years following a critical incident. The goal of follow-up is to help the school community cope with the impact of the event(s) in the longer term. A list of affected individuals (students and staff), especially those who are suffering ongoing difficulties, will be drawn up and responsibilities for monitoring these individuals will be allocated. If people continue to show significant distress after approximately six weeks following the incident, onward referral may be necessary.

After deaths, plans will have to be made for the return to school of bereaved students, the return of belongings to bereaved parents/guardians, memorial strategies, anniversaries and other significant dates, etc.

It is also helpful to evaluate the effectiveness of this document in light of the incident(s) having taken place and actions adopted.

5 Review

This policy and these procedures will be amended as a result of changed circumstances, and shall in any case undergo full review in 2015.

Approved by the BOM on 21 June 2011