

# Coping with Crises in Schools

*Handling  
a traumatic event*

Traumatised schools, pupils and staff have often been at a loss as to how to deal with the aftermath of such crises.

What can a school do to plan ahead and avoid making a drama out of a crisis?

This leaflet outlines the support and services available from the Educational Psychology Service in the event of a death or near fatal accident involving pupils from your school.

It also briefly highlights the major issues schools would need to address.

## WHAT TO DO NOW

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### Develop a Contingency Plan

School management teams and governors should develop a plan that involves the following steps:

1. *Identifying Potential Critical Incidents*
2. *Identifying Support Agencies and Personnel*
3. *Develop a School Critical Incident Management Plan*
4. *Clarify Roles for All Personnel*

When a crisis occurs the first task is to obtain accurate information and relay it to senior management within the school. Uncertainty breeds rumour, which adds to distress.

- Ensure accurate information can get in and out of school
- Ensure several staff have access to next-of-kin lists

- Set up strategies for dealing with enquiries
- Inform parents (with care and sensitivity)
- Decide which member of staff will deal with the media
- Inform all staff and pupils in an appropriate and careful way
- Attempt to stick to normal school routines
- Inform governors and the appropriate authority
- Make plans for attendance at funeral

## **Consider the Curriculum**

Children and schools should not have to deal with issues of death, bereavement and serious injury for the first time following a disaster.

Such issues should be an integral part of your curriculum. By allowing time to talk about and consider these issues some of the mystery and taboo will be removed.

### **Steps you might take include:**

- Plan the curriculum to work with 'rites of passage' as a matter of course
- Set up strategies to support teachers working with painful emotions and sensitive subjects
- Be aware of multi-cultural and multi-faith issues
- Remember that inevitably blame gets attributed
- Develop strategies for increasing social support between staff and between pupils

# AFTER THE EVENT

## What can the Educational Psychology Service Offer?

1. Specific advice to children, staff and parents following the event
2. Diffusing the situation
  - Aims to reduce psychological after-effects
  - Takes place within a day or so of the event
  - Is appropriate for individuals or small groups
  - Provides immediate support
  - Allows planning for further assistance
3. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing
  - Aims to reduce unnecessary psychological after-effects
  - Takes place within days of the event
  - Conducted by psychologists with an understanding of group dynamics and trauma management
  - Comprises a meeting with clear processes, structure and format
  - Is appropriate for individuals or small groups
4. In-Service training on bereavement and a school's response to a traumatic event

## Short Term Action

Feeling shocked and numbed or feeling a strong urge to talk are normal reactions of those thrown into a major crisis. Ensure adults and pupils are able to make contact with those they and you trust.

## **Steps you might take include:**

- Organise reunion of children and parents
- Activate those on the list of outside contacts
- Arrange briefing meeting for all staff
- Arrange de-briefing meeting for directly affected staff
- Check procedures for monitoring staff and pupils are in place
- Activate strategies for allowing young people to express their feelings about the situation if they wish
- Contact families of those hurt or bereaved and express sympathy

## **Medium Term Action**

Whilst schools will want to maintain as normal a routine as possible, some changes are inevitable.

## **Steps you might take include:**

- Ensure a member of staff contacts children at home or in hospital
- Make sensitive arrangements for a return to school
- Arrange alternative teaching if necessary
- Arrange support for affected staff
- Arrange consultation so staff can better support pupils
- Clarify procedures for referring pupils for individual help

- Liaise with parents, send them bulletins
- Decide about attendance at funerals
- Share planning of special assembly/memorial
- Check monitoring procedures are in place and followed

## **Long Term Action**

The effects of a crisis can reverberate for years both within the school and the local community.

### **Steps you might take include:**

- Introduce strategies to continue monitoring vulnerable pupils and staff
- Consult and decide on whether and how to mark anniversaries
- Ensure new staff are aware of pupils affected and in what way.
- Ensure they know how to obtain further help if necessary.
- Remember legal processes, enquiries and even news stories may bring back distressing memories and cause temporary upset in school.

Source: *“Wise before the Event”* W. Yule and A. Gold.



## Other leaflets in this series

- The grieving process
- Helping a bereaved child

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