

**Learning and Development Directorate**  
**Education Department**

*Guidelines for Schools*

Responding to Critical  
Incidents:  
Using Your Educational  
Psychology Service

September 2004





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## Introduction

A critical incident is an event, usually sudden, which involves the experience of personal distress to a level which has the potential to overwhelm individuals. These incidents are wide-ranging and unpredictable in their form. They include

- bereavement as a result of the death of a member of the school community - for example, following an accident or illness
- traumatic incidents in the local community affecting the school – for example, an arson attack on a home or a child being abducted

A flexible and sensitive range of responses is required, based on sound psychological understanding of the variety of reactions and needs of both children and adults at such times.

This document:

- outlines the role the Educational Psychology Service can take to support those likely to have important responsibilities and those directly experiencing such incidents. The Service's policy document is included as Appendix A.
- looks at children's reactions to critical incidents
- suggests responses the school can make when critical incidents occur
- provides a detailed resource list covering specific information such as bereavement and counselling, cultural concerns

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## Using Your Psychology Service

### Principles

The work of the Educational Psychology Service in the event of a critical incident will be guided by the following principles:

- the school's link educational psychologist will normally take primary responsibility for the work, but will be supported by other members of the Service
- help will be actively offered to institutions and to individuals
- flexible and responsive support will be offered in which individual and institutional needs will be carefully considered – as in other areas of work, the least intrusive effective intervention will be offered.

The service from the Educational Psychology Service is available to children and their families and carers, usually through their schools, nurseries and playgroups. Exceptionally, the Principal Educational Psychologist may agree to work in other venues.

Communication between the school and the educational psychologist with primary responsibility will be established quickly and clearly. This will enable schools to access support in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic incident, and to continue to access appropriate support in the medium- and longer term as the wider ranging impact of any trauma becomes evident.

This work would usually take priority over other arrangements made by the educational psychologist.

### Responses in the Event of a Critical Incident

Support offered may involve:

- personal consultation to decision-makers or managers
- counselling for children, parents and staff, individually or in groups
- psychological advice, for example, on bereavement and grieving processes in children, on post-traumatic stress reactions or on accessing other agencies
- making resources available to schools that may be useful in supporting children, parents or staff
- longer term follow up

### Contact

The Educational Psychology Service is based in:

The Holne Chase Centre  
Buckingham Road  
Bletchley  
Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire  
MK3 5HP

and can be contacted by:

Phone 01908 367333  
Fax 01908 643256

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## First Reactions

### Finding Out

News of critical incidents occurs in a variety of ways – a headteacher may find out directly from a parent, rumours may be circulating for a few hours or there may be an official announcement from a credible source. For a while, those people managing the situation may have to tolerate an incomplete picture of events – the school’s action and planning should be based upon the established facts.

### Breaking Bad News to Young People

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

1. Identify those children who had a close relationship with the hurt, ill or dead person so they can be told together as a separate group.
2. Provide a brief context, and then give the news in simple terms. 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.*

3. Answer questions factually, avoiding using euphemisms like “passed away”, or “lost”. Use the words “dead”, “died” and “death” in context
4. In subsequent discussion refer to the name naturally – for example, *John died from cancer* or *Yes, we're all going to miss Satvinder.*
5. 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.

### Sharing Information in the Wider Community

Inevitably, bad news of critical incidents can travel quickly around the school community, and is often distorted along the way. If possible, the management of the school should quickly provide a brief written statement, establishing the known facts. For example, in one school, after a pupil died from an illness, rumours circulated that the illness may be contagious. The headteacher knew that it was not, and that afternoon included this information in a more general letter sent to all parents that informed them of the child’s death. In another school, a rumour circulated that the school would be closed the next day – the headteacher sent a letter assuring parents that the school would be open.

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## Phases of Grief

The terms “phases of grief” or “stages of mourning” are often talked and written about, but it is important to remember that there is no formula for grieving. People vary in their response to loss. Similarly, there are no prescribed time scales for grief, although most achieve some degree of resolution and acceptance eventually.

The following guidelines may nevertheless be helpful.

### **Shock**

The first response to news of the death of someone close is shock. A child may react with silent withdrawal or an outburst of crying and screaming. A very young child who does not quite understand what is going on may feel a painful sense of confusion rather than shock.

### **Denial**

The bereaved may act and talk as if the dead person is still there or might return. This is not due to a childish misunderstanding of the nature of death; some form of denial is experienced by many adults as well as children in the early days of bereavement.

### **Searching**

The bereaved person may look and search for the lost person, and cling to objects or others who are close to them.

### **Disorganisation**

When the permanent nature of the loss has registered, the bereaved person is likely to experience waves of intense feelings. These may include:

- despair and extreme sadness
- anger at the departed for leaving them
- anger at themselves for missing opportunities lost for ever
- guilt due to unresolved issues or negative feelings about the lost person
- anxiety about the changed situation which may bring new responsibilities

### **Re-organisation**

Now grief subsides and a calmer emotional state takes over. Although feelings of sadness and loss may remain indefinitely, these lack the earlier intense quality, and the person becomes able to participate emotionally in new relationships.

It is possible, especially in the early stages to go through this cycle repeatedly – every day expecting to see someone who is no longer there, or letting morbid thoughts prevail before rallying again.

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## Supporting Children Through Bereavement

Whilst schools *may* observe the phases of grief described above, more generally pupils may lack concentration, experience tiredness in school or show more immature behaviours (for example, sucking thumb or physical clinging). Teachers will need patience in managing withdrawn behaviour, irritability or increased nervousness and anxiety.

There is a developmental aspect to children and young people's experiences of grief and sorrow. The pre-school or nursery child will experience a sense of loss but may not understand the permanence of the loss. During the primary school stage, children will develop an understanding of this permanence, and this may go along with feelings of guilt and responsibility for the death. In adolescence, powerful emotions of grief are likely to be experienced which may lead to the young person questioning the meaning of life.

When supporting pupils, show that you are concerned and willing to discuss the bereavement. Make opportunities for the child to have a private discussion – for example, through staying behind to help with a task.

However, if the child does not want to talk, respect their right to privacy. The child may not want to express their feeling at all, or may prefer to use painting, drawing or unstructured play.

If the child *does* want to talk:

- listen with full attention
- avoid emphasis on advice or interpretation
- basic counselling skills will be helpful, such as simple acknowledgement of what has been said, reflecting back what the child has said, naming the emotions you hear, and summarising briefly what has been said
- answer questions as accurately and honestly as you can
- try to give the message that the feelings of bereavement are natural and normal

Some people may not feel they are the 'best person' to do this kind of thing, but if they are trusted by the child, and have a pre-existing relationship, then they may be more useful than a more experienced, but unfamiliar, adult. However, if the teacher, for whatever reason, would rather not attempt to engage the child, then the management team in the school must be sensitive to this and offer someone else.

Try not to single out the child for special privileges – they need to feel part of their peer group and should be expected to take part in the normal activities of school and classroom. At the same time, allowances may have to be made in terms of the quantity and quality of work expected of the child.

The pupil's friends may benefit from a discussion to help them explore the best ways of being supportive.

Ensure that other members of staff are aware what has happened, so that the pupil is not unnecessarily hurt by a chance remark.

It will be important for a teacher supporting a pupil to be aware of the family's cultural or religious influences, particularly beliefs and attitudes to death. For example, some cultures resist talking about death openly, whereas others have formal procedures relating to loss and bereavement.

Long term, remembering special days (such as a birthday or the anniversary of the death) may be helpful. It may be a particularly difficult day, but teachers

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can acknowledge the loss, whilst at the same time helping pupils to realise how far they have come.

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## How Schools Can Help After a Critical Incident

This section is relevant when many children have been affected – perhaps after a larger scale incident. Schools will have sought advice and support from Milton Keynes Council on matters such as dealing with the press or engaging relevant agencies (such as Police or Children’s Services) to act together with the school.

### Classroom management

Maintain normal classroom routine or re-establish it as soon as possible. Although pupils may benefit from opportunities to discuss what has happened and express their feelings about this, there is some security in knowing that their school life is continuing as usual under the guidance of responsible adults.

Some adjustment to the curriculum may be helpful. It may not be a good time to introduce new material. ‘Busy work’ may be particularly helpful to pupils – a temporary avoidance of more reflective tasks and a focus on more active ones. Also, encourage resumption of extra curricular activities – for example, after school clubs or team sports.

### Classroom Support

Consider classroom support or debriefing sessions – schools may want to request additional support for this. If possible, the classteacher should take an active role in these sessions, perhaps working with an educational psychologist as co-facilitator. There could be one or more sessions, possibly structured around a four stage process:

#### 1. Providing facts about the incident

This is the most important task of the process. It involves providing the children with the facts as far as they are known, and dispelling rumours. Rumours often proliferate following a critical incident, and establishing an accurate picture is a key step for children in coming to terms with what has happened.

#### 2. Sharing stories

Children are encouraged to give their accounts of the event, or how they heard about it. This will encourage the development of a shared understanding, and the facilitator can make links between accounts. For younger children it may be more helpful to encourage non-verbal expression – for example, through art activities.

The teacher should also encourage the sharing of the children’s feelings and reactions since the event. Here the role is to explain that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances, that these will pass, but more help will be available if any pupil feels they cannot cope

#### 3. Empowerment

We need to help the children regain a sense of control. In some situations it may be appropriate to generate strategies for prevention of a reoccurrence of the event. Pupils can also be helped to identify strategies that will help manage crisis symptoms – for example, the importance of adequate sleep, eating and exercise.

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#### **4. Focus on the future**

This part of the process attempts to mark an ending of the event and a turning to the future. Where an incident has involved death, planning memorials, or writing letters of condolence help in this process. It should be possible to discuss funeral arrangements, and whether the pupils should attend. Alternatively, for people who have been physically injured, writing 'Get Well' cards would also fit naturally. If a fellow pupil will be returning to school after some major event, the other pupils may want to think about how they will encourage that return and support the pupil through an uncomfortable period.

At this point, re-iterate the message about the normality of the children's reactions to the event and the fact that more help will be available if needed.

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## Seeking Further Support

There are several other agencies besides the Educational Psychology Service that offer support for children, parents and schools in dealing with critical incidents. As well as these agencies, schools will of course want to turn to friends and supporters in the local community.

### **Education Department**

*Initially headteachers will usually want to inform the education authority about the incident and receive immediate advice and support. The following officers can be contacted, and may well point the way to further sources of assistance:*

*Senior Education Officer (School Support) (Tel. 01908 253145)*

*Senior Education Officer (Pupil Support) (Tel. 01908 253242)*

*The school's attached adviser will also be able to offer guidance and support.*

### **Primary Behaviour Support Service** (Tel. 01908 254535)

*This team is based at Galley Hill Education Centre, Galley Hill, MK11 1PA and offers support for school staff and access to resources which could be useful for those working with children following bereavement or critical incidents.*

### **The community of schools within Milton Keynes**

*Staff in other schools may have had similar experiences and be able to offer advice and support.*

### **Milton Keynes Bereavement Service** (Tel. 01908 231292)

*This service is based at City Counselling Centre, 320 Saxon Gate West, Central Milton Keynes, MK9 2ES. Individual support and counselling is offered, which may lead on to attendance at a support group. Children are offered a choice of being seen at the Centre, at home or at school.*

### **CHATS** (Tel. 01908 231131)

*This service is based at City Counselling Centre, 320 Saxon Gate West, Central Milton Keynes, MK9 2ES. Individual sessions may be offered to children aged 6-12 years whose lives have become complicated by distress and change. Parents make the initial contact, and are asked to come to a first meeting with the CHATS co-ordinator.*

### **Youth Information Service** (Tel. 01908 604700)

*This service is based at Saxon Court, 502 Avebury Boulevard, Central Milton Keynes. The service offers advice, counselling and information to young people aged 13-25.*

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## Resources

### ***Responding to Pupil Bereavement*** by Lesley Ratcliffe

(Positive Behaviour Management, 2001).

A booklet for teachers, raising awareness of the issues surrounding bereavement.

### ***Giving Sorrow Words*** by Steven Killick and Stuart Lindeman.

(Lucky Duck Publishing Ltd, 1999).

A video and manual training package aiming to help children and schools deal with loss and bereavement.

### ***A pocket full of posies***

(Kent County Council, 2002).

A CD-Rom that aims to raise awareness of the needs of children dealing with grief and loss, looks at issues around staff support in crisis situations, and addresses the development of a school policy.

### ***Caring for Bereaved Children***

(Leaflet from Cruise Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Rd, Richmond.

ISBN 0 900321 06 7)

### ***Wise Before the Event – Coping with Crises in Schools*** by William Yule and Anne Gold.

(Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1993)

Aimed at school staff and governors: a guide for planning responses to any traumatic event.

### ***Multi cultural and religious practices when dealing with bereavement, loss and trauma.***

(Booklet from Northamptonshire Education Home School Liaison Officers)

A short outline of different approaches to bereavement.

### ***Helping Children Cope with Grief*** by Rosemary Wells

(Sheldon Press (1988)

A book for adults helping bereaved children.

### ***Finding a Way Through When Someone has Died*** by Pat Mood and Lesley Whittaker

(Jessica Kingsley)

A workbook by young people, for young people

### ***Talking with Children and Young People about Death and Dying***

(Jessica Kingsley)

A workbook designed to help children recognize and express feelings of grief and encourage open communication.

### **Books for young children (up to about 7 years)**

#### ***Badger's Parting Gifts*** by Susan Varley

(Collins, 1985)

A picture book – badger dies but leaves good memories

#### ***Fred*** by Posy Simmonds

(Puffin, 1989)

Fred the cat dies – a positive focus on how Fred will be remembered

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**Grandpa** by John Burningham  
(Puffin, 1989)

An account of the relationship between a little girl and grandpa through his ageing, illness and death.

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# **Appendix A – Educational Psychology Service Policy**

## **Responding to Critical Incidents**

### **Introduction**

A critical incident is an event, usually sudden, which involves the experience of personal distress to a level that has the potential to overwhelm individuals.

The Educational Psychology Team is often contacted when such crises occur. From past experience, these incidents are wide-ranging and unpredictable in their form. They include

- bereavement as a result of the death of a member of the school community - for example, following an accident or illness
- traumatic incidents in the local community affecting the school.

A flexible and sensitive range of responses is required, based on sound psychological understanding of the variety of reactions and needs of both children and adults at such times.

This document outlines the role the Educational Psychology Service can take within the Learning & Development Directorate, to support both those likely to have important responsibilities to fulfil in the event of a critical incident and those directly experiencing such incidents.

### **Principles**

Communication between the school and the educational psychologist with primary responsibility will be established quickly and clearly. This will enable schools to access support in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic incident, and to continue to access appropriate support in the medium- and longer term as the wider ranging impact of any trauma becomes evident.

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- longer term follow up