



CRITICAL INCIDENT POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

Handling crises is not a normal part of school life, but they do sometimes occur. Some incidents, however, are of a more critical and overwhelming nature in which staff, pupils and parents may experience acute, even prolonged distress. A critical incident can be described as an event or events outside the range of normal human experience, of significant personal distress to a level which potentially overwhelms normal responses, procedures and coping strategies and which is likely to have emotional and organisational consequences.

EXAMPLES OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

A list of critical incidents may include:

- The sudden death of a pupil or member of staff
- A serious accident involving pupils and/or school personnel on or off the premises
- A violent act on school premises by malicious persons, either in person or by means such as arson, bomb, vandalism etc.
- A school building becoming unsafe as a result of fire, flood or another incident
- A more widespread emergency in the community, for example the release of hazardous substances, severe weather, flooding etc.
- Severe power loss
- Public health threats (e.g. meningitis)

OTHER EVENTS ALSO DEEMED TO BE EMERGENCIES

These include:

- An incident in the community which is seen or experienced by pupils or staff
- An incident affecting relatives of pupils which is known about in the school
- An incident affecting a nearby school
- Civil disturbances or terrorism

IMPORTANT FACTORS

These include:

- The suddenness of the occurrence
- The shock effect
- The apparent uniqueness of the occurrence
- The need for any support to be available very rapidly
- The publicity and attention which sometimes follow
- The need to communicate with a number of people quickly
- The need for support for those directly affected, and for the large number who might be indirectly affected (pupils, teachers and parents)

CRITICAL INCIDENTS PROCEDURES

INTRODUCTION

When schools face a critical incident, research suggests that they cope best when they have clear procedures and know how to use support networks. Staff need to be as fully prepared as possible before any such incident occurs. Many schools and organisations have found it useful to have a Critical Incident Team (CIT), which may be part of their emergency planning procedures and policies, such as evacuation procedures. St John's CIT consists of all teaching staff.

IMMEDIATE ACTION

Notify the appropriate emergency services and convene the CIT.

GATHER INFORMATION

It is important to collect as much information as possible about the incident. This information should be documented and kept as a written log. The following should be included:

- What happened
- Where and when the incident took place
- Whether there is still a continuing danger
- If the incident happened off-site, what help is required from the school
- The numbers and names of those injured and the extent of their injuries
- The current location of those injured, and the name and contact number of an adult present
- The location of pupils who were involved but not injured, plus the name and contact number of an adult present
- The name and contact number of an adult at the incident site (if off-site)
- The name and contact number of local police

ASSESS CONTINUING RISK

Is it likely that further injuries or damage may occur? If there is a continuing risk, the first priority must be to safeguard the welfare of the pupils, staff and visitors. Ensure that any immediate action to protect people or property does not give rise to further risk.

BRIEF THE CRITICAL INCIDENT TEAM

Additional members may be needed when the incident involves a particular group in the school. The Principal has responsibility for what happens in the school and is therefore responsible for the actions of the support team. However, he or she may choose to delegate the leading of this team to a prearranged member of staff. The purpose of the briefing is to share information gathered about the incident and allocate responsibility for immediate and short-term tasks.

The Principal should call a meeting of this team at least annually to update names, contact numbers, checklists and procedures.

CONTACT APPROPRIATE AGENCIES

In all circumstances contact the Chair of the Board of Governors. The Local Authority should be informed, and it may be appropriate to notify The Educational Psychology Service and Social Care Service.

ACTION WITHIN THE FIRST HOUR

Contact the families of those involved

St John's will maintain an up-to-date list of emergency contacts for pupils and staff, and ensure it has an effective procedure for knowing who is on site. In the event of serious injury or death, the police will be involved and are likely to take responsibility for informing relatives in person. However, it may be helpful for them to be accompanied by a member of staff. In other circumstances, contacting the families of those involved should be done quickly and sensitively by the school. If the contact person cannot be reached by telephone, leave a brief message asking them to telephone a particular number. Try to avoid leaving complex messages as these can become distorted when conveyed. When releasing information to a wider audience, e.g. parents, prepare the information with care. Give the appropriate facts and express sympathy or concern. Blame and liability should not be attributed. Remember that the media may get access to this statement.

Telephone communication

Inform CCMS, who will advise those responsible for press and media, to put them on alert for any press interest. When the news of an incident reaches the community, a large number of people will want to contact the school for details. This could jam the main telephone line, making it difficult for outside calls to be made and for others to get through. If possible, dedicate a particular line to outgoing calls for example a personal mobile phone. Callers phoning the usual school line should be given a factual statement and reassurance that action is being taken to manage the situation. If further details are requested, ask the caller to leave a name and number on which they can be contacted. Be courteous but concise to keep the line free for other callers. Parents will need to know whether to come to the scene of the incident, or whether their child will be returned to the school or home.

Inform staff

Provide staff with the factual details of the incident so that they can feel confident when handling questions and issues. Tell them when this information will be updated. Encourage staff to refer enquiries to the CIT when in doubt. Ask them not to talk to the media. This minimises the risk of mixed messages and misinformation.

Inform pupils

Tell pupils what has happened and allow them to ask questions. Decide whether it is better to talk to large groups, small groups or individuals. This process is often best managed in small groups, by a member of staff who is well known to the pupils and confident in handling their reactions.

Handling the media

Advice will be sought from CCMS on handling the media with their guidance rigidly followed.

The Principal should concentrate on the welfare of the school community and before dealing with press interest, which can be intrusive.

It may be necessary to control access points to the school site, allowing parents in but not the press. We are entitled to say who can enter the school and who cannot. Members of the press should not enter without permission.

ACTION WITHIN THE NEXT FEW HOURS

Arrange debriefing for staff and pupils involved in the incident

The nature of debriefing sessions will depend on the incident. We might find it helpful to consider a different process for:

- Casualties
- Witnesses
- The wider community

We will also bear in mind:

- Whether separate briefings might prevent the incident from escalating
- The differing needs of pupils of various ages and at different stages of development
- Whether all parties need to know all the facts, thereby exposing everyone to the same levels of stress
- The closeness of individuals to the incident
- Whether there is good reason to respect the confidentiality of someone involved

Inform the wider community

We will inform relevant community groups and other neighbouring schools, especially where siblings are at other schools.

Identify any inappropriate content of the curriculum

Pupils who have recently been traumatised are especially sensitive to reminders. Children's literature, assembly stories and episodes in history all provide sources of likely triggers. We will not avoid such references altogether but anticipate likely reactions and ensure that teachers feel able to manage them.

Develop a plan for handling the feelings and reactions of others

We will be alert to possible staff reactions, even among those who are not directly involved but for whom the incident triggers difficult emotions. Outside agencies can offer support and advice to staff.

LONGER-TERM ACTION

Support available

If we face a major critical incident we will galvanise the resources of our community – teachers, councillors, parents and other agencies – to support us through the difficulties.

In some circumstances we will need extra help to provide emotional support, debriefing and counselling from the Educational Psychology Service or from external agencies (e.g. health trusts).

In the aftermath of a major incident, especially one attracting media attention, we may be inundated with offers of help from voluntary groups and individuals. We will need to select and manage such offers carefully to meet the best interests of pupils and staff.

It is clear that anticipation of a critical incident, through basic planning and staff training, will be invaluable if such an event occurs.

Information sharing and planning with staff

St John's staff may feel responsible for supporting the pupil or class during a period of crisis. However, they also have to deal with their own emotions. A new loss may evoke memories of a previous one. Grief or other reactions may return for a while.

In addition, there are several reactions connected with being a professional person having responsibility for the support of children and young people. Feelings of helplessness and inadequacy in the face of others' grief and pain are not uncommon. Shock, embarrassment, guilt and a wish to push down the emotions are all natural reactions at such times.

It is important that staff members have support networks readily available and feel able to ask for help.

The Principal needs to be aware that these reactions may occur and should seek appropriate guidance from outside agencies.

It may be helpful for teachers to discuss the difficulties they may face collectively. We will endeavour to maintain as normal an atmosphere as possible, therefore providing a stable environment that will help our pupils and staff to cope with any stress arising from their personal circumstances.

It is also important to remember that staff are not trained counsellors. They are not expected to offer bereavement counselling. Listening and being available for comfort are the main skills required. However, if a member of staff feels unable to offer support because of their own reactions, this should be acknowledged and accepted, and another colleague should be considered for the role.

Specialist support can be provided to help a group of staff come to terms with a critical incident and to plan their responses to pupils, colleagues and parents.

Information sharing sessions for pupils

Evidence suggests that when pupils are directly involved as witnesses to a traumatic incident, they benefit from structured debriefing sessions. Debriefing can also benefit pupils on the periphery of an incident. This enables them to express what they saw or heard, how it affected them and how they feel about it in retrospect.

We will usually handle this process ourselves. For more demanding and emotive situations, however, specialist support is valuable. Specialist help needs careful planning and is likely to be given between one and four weeks after the incident. It is essential to get parental consent to pupil's involvement.

MANAGING TRAUMA

Introduction

The management of a critical incident can result in a great deal of stress for those involved. It is therefore important to:

- Acknowledge the emotional state of staff and pupils and allow time and space when needed
- Acknowledge that some staff may not wish to or be able to be directly involved in supporting pupils
- Be aware that the burden of support may fall disproportionately on a small number of staff
- Acknowledge that the incident may act as a trigger to pupils who are emotionally vulnerable, even if they are not directly involved. This may result in difficulties in behaviour and relationships

Providing opportunities to talk through or otherwise express personal reactions

While attempting to ensure continuity and normality, staff should encourage pupils to talk about their feelings and be prepared to listen to them.

It is often difficult for pupils to make sense of, and talk about, what has happened because of their limited thinking and communication skills. It is therefore helpful if familiar adults are particularly alert to the signals which show that the pupils are still working through what has happened.

Groups of pupils may be offered support from outside professionals who can debrief them, to help them understand their reactions and develop coping strategies. Parental permission should be sought in this instance.

Staff closely associated with the pupils involved should be offered opportunities for debriefing and counselling. Be aware of the possible delayed reactions of those actively involved in responding to a critical incident. Staff who are co-coordinating the school's response should be supported and scheduled for relief periods.

Some pupils and staff may need therapeutic help for a considerable time or at some time after the event. New staff would need to be made aware of loss, etc.

Continuing or quickly re-establishing normal routines

Every attempt will be made to provide as much continuity as possible for pupils. We will maintain the normal school day, as far as possible, so that pupils are unsettled as little as possible.

Formal and informal recognition and rituals

Arrangements may be made to express sympathy to the families directly affected by the incident, for example:

- Injured pupils can be visited in hospital
- Pupils can be encouraged to send cards and letters. Set up a memorial area where pupils can leave messages of condolence
- Plan to attend a funeral, if welcomed by the family involved
- Discuss the desirability of holding special assemblies and memorial services
- Anniversaries are key times, and we will ensure such times are planned for and handled with sensitivity

Return to school by pupils or staff

Pupils and staff who were injured or distressed as a direct result of the incident will need significant support to reintegrate back into school life. We must remember to provide help to others returning to school after an absence, for example:

- Staff and pupils on sick leave at the time of the incident
- Anyone who missed the debriefing sessions
- Those who were not at school on the day of the incident and who learned of events afterwards.

IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING, EVALUATION AND REVIEW

St John's PS will review this policy at least every two years and assess its implementation and effectiveness.