

Coláiste Choilm Tullamore



Critical Incident Management Policy

Definition of a Critical Incident

'A critical incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of the school'. Types of incidents might include but are not limited to:

- The death of a member/members of the school community through accident, illness or suicide
- A serious accident or tragedy in the school community
- A serious accident or tragedy in the wider community
- Serious damage to the school through fire, flooding, vandalism etc.
- The disappearance of a member of the school community
- A physical attack on a staff member or student
- Intrusion into the school.

The Role of the School

The school can offer security at a time of insecurity. It is within such a normal environment that students and staff can best be helped to deal with traumatic reactions to critical incidents. Most incidents require a multi-dimensional approach involving all aspects of the community. If teachers, students and parents receive information and support they can become important agents of recovery, dispelling rumours and encouraging coping throughout the community. It is recognised that the first 48 hours are crucial and that the first three weeks following a critical incident is a time of particular vulnerability for staff and students.

Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)

Purpose:

- By identifying key roles in advance there is clarity about who will do what, when and how
- No one person should be overburdened - Staff may need to be supported
- Nothing is forgotten or left to chance.

Members: Mr. Tadhg O'Sullivan
 Mr. Gearóid O'Regan
 Ms. Theresa Burke
 Ms. Charlotte Farrell
 Ms. Áine McCormack

Depending on the nature of the incident, others may be co-opted onto the CIMT e.g. The Year Head with responsibility for the year group most affected.

Aim

The aim of the CIMP is to help school management and staff to react quickly and effectively in the event of an incident, to enable us to maintain a sense of control and to ensure that the impact on students and staff will be limited. It should enable us to affect a return to normality as soon as possible.

Action Plan

While each school's response to a critical incident is dependent on the individual school context, many of the actions herein are based on the following resource documents provided to schools:

- Responding to a Critical Incident: Pack for Schools (NEPS 2003)
- Responding to Critical Incidents; Guidelines for Schools (NEPS 2007)
- Responding to Critical Incidents; Guidelines for Schools (NEPS 2016)
- Wellbeing Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools (2013)
- Template for the development of a Critical Incident Policy and Plan (NEPS)
- Suicide Prevention in Schools: Best Practice Guidelines (IAS, National Suicide Review Group 2002).

Immediate / Short Term Actions

1. INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE INCIDENT

Step 1: What type of response is needed?

- Response Level 1: the death of a student or staff member who was terminally ill; the death of parent/sibling; a fire in school not resulting in serious injury; serious damage to school property.
- Response Level 2: the sudden death of a student or staff member.
- Response Level 3: an accident/event involving a number of students; a violent death; an incident with a high media profile or involving a number of schools.

Step 2: Should a psychologist be involved?

- Consider the nature of the event and how your school is coping. What support do you need from NEPS and/or other agencies?

Step 3: How does the CIMT assess the needs of the school?

- Is there a feeling of being overwhelmed by this event?
- Has there been a previous incident? How recent? What kind of incident? If more than one, how many? (If the school has experienced a recent incident or a number of incidents staff may be exhausted or distressed. On the other hand, they may feel more experienced and better able to deal with the situation).
- Is there a critical incident plan/team in place?
- Is there a good pastoral care system in the school?
- Is there significant media interest in the incident?
- Are other agencies already involved?

Step 4: What action does the CIMT take?

- For an incident requiring a Level 1 response it may be sufficient to talk to the psychologist on the phone.
- Refer to Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools (2016). The psychologist will refer to these and talk you through relevant sections. A copy of these has been made available to all schools. It is also available on www.education.ie by following the links to NEPS.
- In the case of an incident requiring a level 2 or level 3 response, make contact with NEPS. Depending on the incident at least one psychologist will visit the school.

2. INITIAL ACTION PLAN

- Gather accurate information - rumours add to distress
- Establish the facts - what, when, how, number and names of children/staff involved, extent of the injuries, location of the injured
- Contact appropriate agencies - Emergency services
- Convene a meeting with key staff / CIMT
- Meet with wider staff group
- The school may need to contact parents through official channels
- Gardaí should NOT interview students on school premises
- Management should strive to maintain a normal routine if at all possible.

- At the first meeting of the CIMT, roles will be delegated, depending on the incident.

3. MEETING WITH STAFF GROUP

- Teachers need accurate facts and need to be kept updated
- May need to see staff in two separate groups so children can be supervised
- Identifying vulnerable staff members
- Schedule for day - may be helpful to meet again briefly at the end of the day
- Agree with staff how students are going to be told (agreed Memo/Statement)
- Relatives need to be told separately.

4. STUDENTS

- It is best to keep students on school premises
- Let them talk in natural groupings
- Give them up to date information
- Assure them that life goes on. Every effort will be made by the school and support personnel to reassure and support students as they deal with the crisis at hand.

5. VULNERABLE CHILDREN

In an incidence of death or other emotional trauma the school community will endeavour to be particularly mindful of the following:

- Close friends or relatives of deceased
- Children who have been bereaved in the past especially bereaved by suicide
- Children who experienced a recent loss, e.g. death, divorce, separation
- Children experiencing serious difficulties within their homes, e.g. mental illness, child protection issues.
- Children with a history of mental health difficulties including children with a history of suicide attempts/self-harm.
- Children with a history of substance abuse.
- Non-communicative children who have trouble talking about their feelings including children with ASI), less fluent English and less able children.

6. CONTACT WITH AFFECTED FAMILY/FAMILIES

- Home visit in first 24 hours
- Liaise with family about funeral arrangements, clarify their wishes regarding the school's involvement
- Be aware of cultural differences, different religious traditions, and rituals.

7. NORMAL REACTIONS TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT

- Feelings: e.g. guilt, confusion, numbness etc.
- Thoughts: e.g. disbelief, preoccupation with images of event/person etc.
Physical Responses: e.g. tiredness, sleeplessness, headaches etc.
- Behaviour: e.g. nightmares, over dependency, loss of concentration, aggression, withdrawal etc.

8. SUICIDE

- Care is needed in the use of the term "suicide" - do not use it until it is established and be sensitive to the wishes of the family. Maybe use "sudden death" instead.
- Primary prevention is recommended - systems for identifying and supporting vulnerable students.
- Clear procedure is needed for any child who a staff member is concerned about.

Medium Term Actions

- CIMT continues to meet daily until normal functioning resumes
Review decision about closure of school
- Tasks for day-liaison with family and media
Funeral arrangements.
- Schedule for day
- Staff meeting
- Review vulnerable students and staff-plan how to monitor over next few weeks
- Prepare for return of bereaved children and siblings.

Longer Term Plan

- Monitor students
- Memorials - returning belongings to family
- Anniversaries, Significant dates
- De-brief, Evaluate Response - Amend Plan (CIMT)
- Inform new staff
- Follow-up care - Samaritans, Chaplain, Psychological services visits etc.
- Watch for - hostility, hero worship, shock, grief, guilt, blame, numbness, copy-cat
- Care for CIMT.

Role of NEPS Psychologists in Critical Incidents

In the event of a critical incident, NEPS psychologists provide:

- Immediate short term support, information and advice - by phone or in school
- Assistance to staff in planning how to respond to a critical incident
- Screening to identify children and staff in most need of support.

NEPS Psychologists do not provide counselling.

CONSENT

Signed informed consent is required from parents/legal guardians for NEPS to meet a child.

Consent Options:

- General letter stating support is available from NEPS psychologist in the event of a critical incident.
- Ask that parents complete a slip to say they do or do not give consent
- State that the school assumes agreement unless the slip is signed and returned saying they do not wish their child to be seen
- State that the school will seek verbal consent to be followed by written parental consent.

Dealing with the Media

- Advise parents, children and staff that only the designated spokesperson will deal with the media
- Allow limited and controlled access to the media
- Prepare a press statement - accurate, brief and carefully considered
- Protect and respect the privacy of the people most affected
- Major incidents - advice from DES press office, teacher unions
- Do not speak of situations outside school
- Media can be useful in dispelling rumours and stating that the school is coping well
- Seek legal advice
- Seek PR advice.

Dos & Don'ts when dealing with the Media

- Do write a press statement
- Do consider contacting the ASTI or other relevant body for advice and guidance
- Do use careful and sensitive language and keep it short
- Do regard everything as recorded and quotable (generally the media will)
- Do ask whether there will be the possibility of editing the interview
- Do ask in advance for an outline of the questions that you will be asked
- Do avoid sweeping statements and generalisations
- Do avoid being drawn into speculation
- Do not go into personal details of those involved
- Do not read the statement to the camera
- Do not engage in rambling discussions afterwards
- Do not use "No Comment"
- Do not respond to "quotes" from others
- Do not answer questions you do not know the answer to
- Do not make "off-the-record" comments.

Summary Checklist for Principals

- Gather the facts - Who? What? When? Where?
- Contact appropriate agencies
- Convene the Critical Incident Management Team
- Organise for the supervision of students
- Inform staff
- Agree on a statement of the facts
- Identify high risk students
- Appoint someone to deal with phone enquiries
- Organise timetable for the day
- Maintain the normal school routine when at all possible
- Inform parents/guardians
- Inform students
- Make contact with the bereaved family
- Organise support
- Respond to the media
- Decide on school arrangements for funeral, services etc.
- Principal's letter to parents
- Information (if any) to be posted on website.

Suggested Agenda for Meeting with CIMT / Key Staff

- Share full details of the event
- Agree on the facts
- These will need to be relayed in a clear, appropriate and consistent manner by all staff to the students
- Discuss what agencies have been contacted and whether there are additional ones that should be informed.

- Managing communication needs careful attention. Use of social media can be a good medium for facilitating factual and appropriate communication
- When a number of external agencies are involved in a response, coordination will be needed and procedures will need to be agreed. An agency such as NEPS may take on this role
- Plan procedures for the day
- Discuss issues relating to school routine, including school closure. Remember it is important to maintain a normal routine when at all possible. It is recommended that the school timetable runs as normal. This will provide a sense of safety and structure which is comforting for many students. Teachers should give students the opportunity to talk about what has happened and temporarily shelve all academic activities if necessary.
- You may wish to consult students about what to do if there is an event scheduled such as a trip, concert, match, etc. This should reduce the likelihood of students being angry later on as a result of any school action or in-action.
- Discuss how to break the news to relatives and close friends and who should do this (remember that they must always be told separately)
- Discuss how to break the news to the rest of the students. It is often best to do this with class groups, rather than large assemblies.
- Discuss how to identify vulnerable students
- If there are students of various nationalities and religions in the school, this needs to be taken into consideration in organising prayer services, attendance at the funeral etc.

Ratification of policy

This policy was adopted by the Board of Management on 14th January 2021.

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Chairperson of Board of Management)

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Principal)

Review of policy

This Critical Incident Management policy is reviewed in compliance with the Board of Management's policy for the cyclical review of all school policies as set out in The School Plan.

APPENDIX 1: TEMPLATE LETTER TO PARENTS - VIOLENT DEATH

Dear Parents,

I need to inform you about a very sad event that has happened.

(Give accurate information about the incident, but avoid using the word murder as this will not be established until the court case is completed).

A child/young person from the neighbourhood, who is the brother of a student here at school, was killed as a result of (a violent incident in the street etc.) earlier this week. We are all profoundly saddened by his death.

We have shared this information and have had discussions with all of our students so that they know what has happened. School staff members have been available for students on an on-going basis today. Other support personnel (including psychologists etc., according to actual arrangements) are available to advise staff and, where necessary, to talk to students. This support will continue to be available for (if appropriate insert how long).

The death of any young person is tragic, but a violent death is even more difficult. It is hard to have to teach our children about the violence in our world and to accept that sometimes we do not have the power to prevent it.

This death may cause a variety of reactions in your child. Some children/young people may be afraid for their own life and for the lives of those they love. Take time to listen to their fears and reassure them that what has happened is rare.

We have enclosed some additional information that may be useful during this time.

The media are in the vicinity of the school and may approach you or your children. You need to respond to their questions if you are approached. We will not allow the media to interview your child at school and our general advice is that you should not let your children be interviewed. They are not mature enough to judge what to say and may say something they will regret later.

(If planned) A support meeting for parents is planned for (date, time and place). At that time, we can talk further about how to help ourselves and our children. Our thoughts are with (family name) and with each of you.

Sincerely,

Principal Name.

APPENDIX 2: TEMPLATE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE MEDIA

This can be used as a template by schools to be emailed, faxed or given to the media. It may help to decrease the number of media calls and callers to the school.

In some instances, it is not appropriate to provide names or information that might identify individuals.

This announcement will need to be changed based upon confidentiality issues, the wishes of the victim's family and the nature of the incident.

My name is (Name) and I am the principal of (Name) School. We learned this morning of the death of (one of students or Name of Student). This is a terrible tragedy for the _____ family(ies), our school and our community. We are deeply saddened by these events. Our sympathy and thoughts are with (Name) family and friends.

Name of student/students was a (5th Year boy) and will be greatly missed by all who knew him. We have been in contact with his/her parents and they have requested that we all understand their need for privacy at this difficult time.

Offers of support have been pouring in and are greatly appreciated. Our school have implemented our Critical Incident Management Plan.

Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) and (insert other information if relevant) have been with us all day supporting and advising teachers in their efforts to assist our students at this time.

The teachers have been helping students to deal with the tragic event. The school has been open to parents, to support them and to offer them advice and guidance. We would ask you to respect our privacy at this time.

Thank you.

APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE CONSENT LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parents,

Following the recent (tragedy, death of X) we have arranged professional support for students in school who need particular help. (X . . .) is available to help us with this work. This support will usually consist of talking to children, either in small groups or on a one-to-one basis and offering reassurance and advice as appropriate.

Your son has been identified as one of the students who would benefit from meeting with the psychologist. If you would like your child to receive this support please sign the attached permission slip and return it to the school by _____

If you would like further information on the above or to talk to the psychologist, please indicate this on the slip or telephone the school.

Yours sincerely,

I/We consent to having our son met by a psychologist employed by the Minister for Education & Skills.

I/We understand that my son may meet the psychologist(s) in an individual or group session depending on the arrangements which are thought to be most appropriate.

Name of Student: _____

Class/Year: _____

Date of Birth: _____

I would like my son _____ to avail of the support being offered by the psychologist.

SIGNED: _____(Parent/Guardian)

APPENDIX 4: TEMPLATE LETTER TO PARENTS - SUDDEN DEATH/ACCIDENT

Dear Parents,

The school has experienced (the sudden death, accidental injury etc.) of We are deeply saddened by the death/events.

(Brief details of the incident, and in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost).

Our thoughts are with (family name).

We have support structures in place to help your child cope with this tragedy. (Elaborate).

It is possible that your child may have some feelings and questions that he may like to discuss with you. It is important to give factual information that is appropriate to their age.

You can help your child by taking time to listen and by encouraging them to express their feelings. All children are different and will express their feelings in different ways. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty concentrating or to be fearful, anxious, or irritable. They may become withdrawn, cry, complain of physical aches and pains, have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares. Some may not want to eat. These are generally short term reactions. Over the course of the days to come, please keep an eye on your child and allow him to express his feelings without criticism.

Although classes will continue as usual, I anticipate that the next few days will be difficult for everyone.

(OPTIONAL) An information night for parents is planned for (date, time and place). At that time, further information about how to help children in grief will be given.

We have enclosed some information which you may find useful in helping your child through this difficult time.

If you would like advice you may contact the following people at the school. (Details).

Principal Signature

APPENDIX 5: SHORT TERM ACTIONS: DAY ONE

Task	Name of person responsible
Gather accurate information/facts	
Contact appropriate agencies	
Convene a meeting with key staff	
Arrange supervision of students	
Hold staff meeting & keep staff updated	
Organise timetable for the day	
Inform parents/parents council	
Inform students	
Make contact with the bereaved family	
Dealing with the media	
Taking care of vulnerable students	
Meet parents/groups of parents	
Setting up an incident room	
Inform former employees as appropriate	

APPENDIX 6: MEDIUM TERM ACTIONS AND ROLES ASSIGNED: 24 – 72 HOURS

Task	Name of person responsible
Review the events of the first 24 hours	
Arrange support for students/parents/teachers	
Plan the reintegration of staff and students	
Plan visits to the bereaved/injured	
Liaise with family regarding funeral arrangements	
Attendance and participation at funeral service	
School closure	