

Coping with a Crisis at School

**Advice and Guidance for Headteachers,
Teachers and Governing Bodies**

Educational Psychology Service

September 2023

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INTRODUCTION

There are two documents that give schools guidance when they are coping with a crisis.

- The Schools Business Continuity Plan
- Coping with a Crisis at School

The following paragraphs outline which of the two documents would be the most appropriate to use in the circumstances.

If your incident threatens or continues to threaten personnel, premises or the operational structure of the school and requires special measures to be taken to restore a normal service, the school would be advised to use the Schools Business Continuity Plan as a framework (rather than this document). Examples might be where the premises are affected or where there are multiple casualties. The Schools Business Continuity Plan Document can be found at [Business Continuity \(sharepoint.com\)](#).

If your incident relates to the management of a death or serious injury of a pupil or member of school staff but does not threaten the wider functioning of the school, then this document - Coping with a Crisis at School - provides the appropriate framework.

This Coping with a Crisis document contains more detailed advice and guidance to support the Schools Business Continuity Plan with particular reference to the needs of staff, pupils and parents. Issues concerning premises are not covered in this document.

In the event of a crisis, please contact the Director on call – 07623 910065.

COPING WITH A CRISIS WITH REFERENCE TO THE NEEDS OF STAFF, PUPILS AND PARENTS

IMMEDIATE ACTION

1. Obtain and collate information

When a crisis occurs, the first task is to obtain accurate information and to relay it to senior leadership team within the school. In many cases, 'information' will be widely available on social media: this may include inaccuracies and speculation. It is the school's role to work with the facts as they become known.

Details may be unclear for many hours, but there is still a need to convey as much accurate information as possible.

2. Inform Support Contacts

The school senior leadership team need to contact the Principal Educational Psychologist of the Educational Psychology Service who will inform the District Senior Educational Psychologist to initiate critical incident support. Depending on the nature of the crisis the school leadership team may also need to contact the Corporate Communications Department and the Director on Duty.

All the relevant telephone numbers can be found in Appendix A.

The Chair of Governors and, if a faith school, the school's religious leader will also need to be informed.

3. Nominate and brief the School Critical Incident Management Team

As soon as an incident is confirmed, the senior leadership team needs to meet to plan their strategies. This group should appoint a small team to manage the incident (School Critical Incident Management Team), relieve them of their duties, and allow them to manage the crisis over the next few hours.

4. Start the incident log

A suggested Staffordshire County Council log sheet is included in the Appendix.

5. Managing communication

In the event of a tragedy, the school is likely to be inundated with telephone calls. This means that people will need to staff the school phone line. Dealing with distressed and worried enquirers, especially when there is uncertainty or bad news, can be a stressful task.

Personnel answering the phones should keep notes and have them checked against appropriate records, so that there is certainty about who has phoned in and who still needs to be contacted.

Where there has been an accident away from the school premises, the leader of the school trip needs to have an emergency number on which to make contact with senior management back at school or at their homes. If possible, this should be different from the regular school number.

Senior school management can then also use this different line or mobile number to maintain contact with Staffordshire CC staff and other agencies. This will enable the school line to continue to be used for routine school business and for responding to the parents and press who are trying to phone in.

Staff need to be aware of the social media platforms that are being used to share information. Schools need to ensure that their own platforms are kept up to date and convey factual messages and encourage others to share factual information, for example updating the school twitter feed to encourage parents and students to retweet the school's message.

6. Consult with the District Senior Educational Psychologist

The Educational Psychology Service offers support and advice to schools in such situations. Different levels of support are available depending on the requirements of the school. This does not usually include working with individual pupils because research evidence suggests that pupils are best supported by adults they already know and trust.

Examples of the types of support available are:

- Telephone discussion of the incident, which may include advice on the management of practical and emotional issues.
- An EP visit to the school to listen to the immediate concerns and to support the school in planning its response. The support for planning may include the following examples:
 - Advice on sharing information with the pupils
 - Information about the development of the understanding of death
 - Information about trauma

- Contributing to the school action plan, for example by providing input to a staff meeting

7. Contact families whose children/next of kin are involved

The families of the young people caught in a tragedy will need full and accurate information. Parents need to be contacted promptly, but the speed will depend upon the nature and scale of the incident. This may be done in person or may have to be undertaken by telephone.

It is difficult, in this document, to give very specific advice on the best way to pass on distressing information, because the nature of the crisis will vary. However, the following general suggestions will help to ensure that the information is passed on as effectively and sensitively as possible:

- a) Prepare a brief for the member of staff making the contact, perhaps suggesting that they rehearse the message first
- b) Take careful note of those parents who still need to be informed so that those who already know are not contacted again
- c) Check that the parents are not left alone in distress, perhaps making suggestions for making contact with relatives or neighbours
- d) Give useful phone numbers, either for support or for more information. For example, the emergency disaster number or the hospital number

8. Inform teaching and support staff

All staff should be informed as soon as possible, preferably at a specially convened staff meeting. It is essential that both teaching staff and ancillary staff share the same information so that rumours do not start to circulate.

Some members of staff will need support and advice at this stage. This should be managed by the school critical incident management team (in consultation with the Educational Psychology Service).

9. Dealing with the media

In a crisis, media relations are especially important. In most circumstances it is recommended that the Staffordshire Corporate Communications Department is contacted for advice (see appendix for contact telephone numbers). One of the tasks of schools must be to protect children, parents and staff from the glare of publicity. While the media can help inform the public responsibly, it can also be intrusive at times of stress and personal grief.

A senior person on the school staff, working alongside the Corporate Communications Department if appropriate, should be nominated as press officer to deal with the media. It is not advisable to permit press and television on to the school premises nor to give them unsupervised access to staff or children. While factual information may be given to the press, the privacy of staff, young people and their families should be maintained. Pupils should only be interviewed with the expressed permission of their parents or carers.

Members of staff dealing directly with families involved in the crisis should not be asked to take on the task of dealing with the press. All enquiries should be directed to and through the Corporate Communications Department, who will be able to advise on the appropriate information that can be shared with the press. They can arrange briefing sessions with the press if necessary. If the press are aware of these arrangements, they may be less inclined to crowd the school gates or try to interview individual pupils, staff or parents.

10. Inform pupils

Pupils should be told simply and clearly what has happened. It is recommended that this is done in the smallest groups possible, for example in classes or tutor groups. Their questions should be answered as straightforwardly as possible. Staff who undertake this task should be asked to pass on facts only and never to speculate on the causes of the crisis or its consequences. It may be helpful to prepare a fact sheet for staff to use. Where questions cannot be answered at the time, this should be acknowledged.

It is important to provide time for discussion and expression of emotion, which will need to be managed sensitively by the adult.

School closure and sending selected pupils home should, on the whole, be avoided as experience has shown that the school can be the point of individual and community support at times of crisis.

11. Make arrangements for informing other parents

Wherever possible, parents of all the other children in the school who may be affected should be informed that the school community has experienced a crisis and that their child may be upset.

This might most easily be achieved through a letter sent home with the pupils. The advice of the Staffordshire Corporate Communications Department concerning the appropriate information to share with the press and others is likely to be helpful here too.

In some circumstances, if possible, it can be helpful to directly contact the parents of the pupil or pupils affected.

The Educational Psychology Service will be able to provide some suggestions for the wording of these letters/conversations.

Other Important Points

Maintain a normal routine

As far as possible the school's normal routine should be followed. This is to ensure some security in the lives of the pupils at a time of crisis.

Attendance at funerals or burials

People from differing backgrounds and religions have different burial rites. Some may hold funerals within 24 hours of death. There is not always time therefore to prepare staff and pupils for attendance. In this case a member of staff should swiftly make enquiries about the burial customs (for example, if flowers are in order and whether women and men and representatives from the school – including pupils – would be welcome) and this needs to be shared with the wider school community.

Schools should give careful consideration to school representation at the funeral. Key members of the school community may wish to attend. Children may also wish to attend the funeral and the decision about attending the funeral sits with the parent/carers.

It is not recommended that the school closes on the day of the funeral to maintain the routine and also to enable the school to support the children that haven't attended the funeral.

MEDIUM TERM ACTION (1 – 3 DAYS)

1. Organise update of information

Ensure that up to date information is provided to all those concerned as appropriate.

2. Arrange opportunities for support

After a critical incident, staff and pupils may feel shocked and numb: many will feel a strong need to talk. The whole school is often involved even though some sectors may be more affected than others.

Staff and pupils will need an opportunity to express their emotional reactions. Current research shows that the best people to provide support for the children and young people are the adults that the children and young people already know and trust.

At a time of crisis there may be many offers of help from a range of agencies from outside the school. It may be difficult to know when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no' and with whom to work. The head teacher has legal responsibility for what happens to the pupils in school and needs to check the credentials of anyone offering support. When the head teacher invites help and advice from professionals outside, this should be done by creating a clear partnership agreement.

3. Develop a plan for responding to the feelings and reactions of the school community

3:1 Staff

After a crisis, staff need to know that it is natural to want to talk about the incident and to share their feelings. Many will need space and time to talk before being able to focus on other things. An informal staff meeting could be organised to talk and share responses.

3:2 Pupils

After a disaster many pupils may need to talk about their experiences. Initially adults should try to listen, even though it might be disruptive to the task in hand. After a few days the young people should be encouraged to talk to a designated member of staff, although the young people themselves should obviously have some say in the choice of the listener. As always, it is important to observe and to **listen** to the child or young person. Adults should try not to be too intrusive. On the other hand experience has shown that children or young people will not

talk about their innermost feelings unless they are given strong signals that it is safe to do so.

Opportunities for pupils to express their feelings need to be organised: some children may find it helpful to show their feelings through drawing and writing.

Some children and young people may express their distress through challenging behaviour.

For most pupils continuing to follow the routine of the classroom provides some security in a time of great stress. For the small minority of pupils who are not able to cope in the lessons, a room could be put aside for the pupils to go to: it might have drawing and writing materials available for the pupils to use. This room needs to be supervised by sensitive and responsive adults. It is important to ensure that staff supervising this room and providing support for the pupils, receive the support they need too. Additional guidance on the use of this room is available from the Educational Psychology Service.

4. Ensure that high risk pupils and staff have been identified and are being monitored

Some members of the community will be vulnerable because of their relationship to individuals who were involved in the crisis. Others may be reminded of incidents in their life that were similar or have been very difficult to deal with. There is great variation in the way that children, young people and adults respond to crises. Some people that one might predict would need support may have good internal resources and/or support outside the school.

Check pupils and staff likely to be affected and provide support for individuals who identify themselves. If possible, ascertain the availability of support at home. Keep a record of individuals and regularly monitor how they are progressing. School may need to follow their Safeguarding Policy and/or contact First Response, if required (contact details in the Appendix).

LONG TERM ACTION

1. Follow up actions agreed

It is important that the School Critical Incident Team follows through all the actions agreed and clearly communicates how these are progressing to everyone in the school. This will give the community a good sense of security and support.

2. Ensure a return to school routines as soon as possible

Returning to usual school routines is essential to provide the security pupils will need at this time. This does not mean that the expression of emotion is not allowed, but rather that it is contained by the clear frameworks within the school organisation.

Tragedies can bring people together. In some schools the experience can be so profound that staff want to retain the sense of community that the event has generated. Schools should remember that the effects of a crisis can reverberate for several years.

It is important that new staff, and staff new to the children identified as vulnerable, are briefed on the most helpful way of continuing to offer support and regularly monitor how they are.

3. Identify appropriate support

School staff identified as having responsibility for the monitoring of specific children and young people affected by the crisis, need to check that these children and young people are progressing.

If there are concerns, the children and young people, if asked, may be able to identify the type of support in school that would be helpful to them. For example, some young children may need their teachers to encourage other children to play with them, where their original friendships have been affected by the crisis.

4. Organise long term counselling as necessary

Children and young people will need time to come to terms with the impact of the crisis. However, in time, most children and young people will make progress towards their usual state of wellbeing.

Children and young people who are not starting to make this progress may need to be referred for more specialist support. Staffordshire County Council have

provided information about a range of quality assured Emotional Well-being support services available to support children and young people with mild/moderate emotional well-being needs. These providers are commissioned directly and listed on the Local Offer.

Counselling services can also be accessed through local GPs.

If there is any doubt about particular individuals then the Educational Psychology Service or other specialist support services could be consulted.

Staff in schools in Staffordshire can access services to support their own well-being via the ThinkWell service (see appendix).

5. Consider the issue of memorials and anniversaries

It is often helpful to mark the loss of members of the school community with a memorial service as well as a symbol such as the planting of a tree or the purchasing of a special bench. The memorial service could include staff and pupils' writings, poems, and art, and also the individual's favourite hymns, for example.

It is very important to liaise closely with the family/families to ensure they are happy with all the memorial arrangements and are included if they wish to be.

In the case of a death by suicide it is recommended that additional advice from the Educational Psychology Service is sought.

Anniversaries are often difficult times. It is better if decisions about how to treat anniversaries are made collectively in good time before the anniversary itself. These decisions could include an annual memorial prize; the planning of a special garden that blooms at the appropriate time; a commemorative assembly or a concert. Again, decisions need to take account of the wishes and feelings of the family/families.

6. Consider developing a Contingency Plan in advance

Schools that have considered in advance how they would respond to a critical incident will be much better able to cope. Having an agreed plan in place will enable a school to reference decisions already made about practical arrangements. The school will then be able to focus on the specific requirements of any future critical incident.

Moreover, as with many school policies and plans, having an opportunity to discuss with colleagues the issues involved and agree the best options for their school, is very important in enabling staff to understand and support the plan.

The Business Contingency Plan document suggests planning for the steps the school will take in terms of actions needed immediately, within the first twenty-four hours, medium term and post incident. It also includes templates allowing schools to compile a telephone list of people that the school may need to contact and the names of the staff nominated to take particular actions for example. Schools need to maintain an up-to-date list for all their pupils and staff of next of kin and contact details. Staff need to know where to find this list

This Coping with a Crisis document also includes suggestions that, if discussed in advance, would be easier to implement agreed decisions made could then be included in the plan. The appendix at the end of the document includes useful telephone numbers to consider for the plan.

It is recommended therefore that schools discuss and record their plans on regular basis (see recommendations in The Business Contingency Plan for Schools).

Acknowledgements

This document is an amended version of the Staffordshire Pupil and Student Services document 'Coping with a Crisis at School' originally written by Vincent McDonnell in July 1997. It has been reviewed and amended many times since then.

I am indebted to Paula Hodson for her many years managing the Critical Incident Response, Julia Anderson (former County Manager for Educational Psychology) and the Staffordshire Educational Psychology Service Critical Incident Lead EP team for help with this task

Jo Ward
District Senior Educational Psychologist
September 2023

APPENDIX A: Contact Details

Please use the telephone numbers below to contact the professionals listed. Please call rather than email so that the message is received as soon as possible.

In the event of a crisis at school, contact:	
Director on Duty	07623 910065
The Director on Call then informs:	
The Principal Educational Psychologist	Melissa Jones 07814 772157 melissa.jones@staffordshire.gov.uk
The Principal Educational Psychologist then informs the relevant:	
District Senior Educational Psychologist:	<p>Burton/Tamworth District: 01283 239755 Gemma Holmes 07976 650389 Vanessa Willis 07976 650427</p> <p>Lichfield/Cannock District: 01543 512050 Jo Ward 07976 681966 Julia Rudolf 07976 650288</p> <p>Newcastle/Moorlands District: 01782 297524 Lesley Schofield 07976 650224 Suzy Shaw 07929 848962 Lucie Rowlands 07815 652012</p> <p>Stafford/South Staffs District: 01785 356848 Emma Dodd 07976 681963 Jo Ward 07976 681966</p>

Other services as appropriate:	
Corporate Communications:	Gemma Styles 01785 277995 Media office/On-call press officer 01785 895050
Health, Safety and Wellbeing Service:	Duty Officer: 01785 355777
First Response:	0800 1313 126

2. Out of hours, in serious situations, school also to contact	
Corporate Communications Team (who will contact others as appropriate)	Out of Office Hours 01785 895050

List of Potentially Useful Phone Contacts

Charity	Area of Work	Phone Numbers
Child Death Helpline www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk	A service staffed by bereaved parental volunteers, with professional support, for all those affected by the death of a child	Freephone 0800 282986 (Every evening 7.00 pm to 10.00 pm and week day mornings and Tues afternoon)
Winston's Wish Winston's Wish - giving hope to grieving children (winstonswish.org)	National Charity providing a helpline for anyone caring for a child coping with death or serious illness. Provides individual child and family support, in some circumstances, where the bereavement is through suicide, murder or manslaughter	0808 802021 Mon-Fri 9.00 am to 5.00 pm (Free from landline and mobile) Email and webchat options also available on website
Cruse Bereavement Care www.cruse.org.uk	National charity providing a telephone helpline, a useful website and face to face support where there is a local branch	0808 8081677
Website for young people (12 years upwards) www.rd4u.org.uk	Young Person's Helpline Lichfield	0808 808 1677 01543 433479
Eclipse, Stafford	A child bereavement service based in Stafford, that seeks to support children and young people, aged 5 to 18, usually in their school	01785 660800
Dove Service in Hanley, Stoke on Trent	For North Staffordshire or people who can reach Hanley. For anyone affected by bereavement, significant loss, or a life-changing illness, at any time in their lives The Dove Service Is able to provide support for children and those with learning disabilities	01782 683155/ 01782 683153

<p>ThinkWell: Staffordshire County Council Staff Counselling Service</p>	<p>ThinkWell provides friendly, confidential access to prevention and early intervention services for SCC employees</p> <p>Self-referrals available for schools who have a Service Level Agreement with ThinkWell (chargeable).</p> <p>Management referrals available for all schools (chargeable).</p>	<p>01785 276284</p> <p>Think.Well@staffordshire.gov.uk</p>
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Please also refer to the Local Offer for more details of other providers of bereavement support – this webpage allows you to filter for your local area and whether the support is NHS or privately funded –

<https://www.staffordshireconnects.info/kb5/staffordshire/directory/results.page?localofferchannel=4-6-8>

APPENDIX B: Useful Checklist

IMMEDIATE ACTION:

1. Obtain and collate relevant information	
2. Inform the Relevant people - Assistant Director/Safeguarding Lead/CommsTeam - Educational Psychology Service - Chair of Governors/ Religious Leaders	
3. Start Incident Log to record information/actions	
4. Consider how communications are managed within school and with community and media, if relevant	
5. Contact family, if appropriate	
6. Inform school staff	
7. Inform children/young people	
8. Inform parents/carers	
9. Maintain routines as far as possible	

MEDIUM TERM ACTION:

1. Ensure information is updated as it comes in	
2. Consider opportunities for support for pupils	
3. Consider opportunities for support for staff	
4. Identify and monitor vulnerable pupils	
5. Identify and monitor vulnerable staff	
6. Consider and manage funeral arrangements	

LONGER TERM ACTION:

1. Follow up agreed actions	
2. Return to all school routines as soon as possible	
3. Identify follow up support for pupils and staff who need it.	
4. Manage inquest, if appropriate	
5. Consider memorials and anniversaries	
6. Review school's crisis response plans	