



Longwood Primary School

Coping with a Crisis at School

**A Handbook of Advice and Guidance for Head teachers, Teachers and Governing Bodies
February 2012**

Preface

This document outlines **Staffordshire's guidelines for schools/educational settings**.

Schools/settings that have considered and developed **in advance** a plan to respond to a critical incident will be much better able to cope. It is therefore recommended that each setting develop its own contingency plan. The following document provides guidance for governing bodies, head teachers and staff in our schools/settings on this process. It also includes some suggestions for inclusion in the plan.

This document is an updated version of the Staffordshire Pupil and Student Services 'Coping with a Crisis at School' booklet produced in July 1997. This document, like the earlier document, builds on the guidance offered by William Yule and Anne Gould in their booklet, 'Wise Before the Event' published in 1993 by the Gulbenkian Foundation.



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Introduction

1.1 Over the past few years there have been a number of disasters or incidents that have had an effect on a school community. The consequences of such crises for the pupils, staff, parents and governors of the school have been highlighted for us all by the increased involvement of the media.

1.2 A crisis is defined, in this document, as an incident that has a traumatic effect on a school community and challenges the usual procedures and coping mechanisms.

Examples might be:

- the death of a pupil or member of staff;
- an accident involving a pupil or member of staff;
- an act of violence;
- a school fire;
- deaths or injuries on a school journey

2. Developing a Contingency Plan

2.1 Every school is different and the head teacher, staff and governors need to agree a definition of a crisis or critical incident for their school. Having considered the range of events which could affect the pupils and staff of the school, staff and governors need to consider what the school can do to minimise the impact of such crises. First and foremost this will involve planning ahead by developing a contingency plan.

2.2 Although the development of a contingency plan ready for use in a crisis may initially seem unnecessary and time-consuming, it is not easy to make good decisions in a time of great stress. Having an agreed plan in place will enable a school to reference decisions already made about practical arrangements and then focus on the specific requirements of the particular 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.

2.3 The plan should outline the steps the school will take in a crisis, in terms of immediate, medium-term and long-term actions.

2.4 The contingency plan will need to include a list of the telephone numbers of people potentially able to offer support. The list of significant contacts and their telephone numbers will require research, but the time involved will be worthwhile should an emergency arise. Staffordshire has personnel available for support (see Appendix A) but the school will also need to consider appropriate local and religious contacts. Some suggestions for useful contacts to consider are made in Appendix B.

2.5 It is suggested that a member of the school senior management team is nominated to review and update the plan periodically and make it easily accessible to all, including new, members of staff.

2.6 The following pages are divided into three sections:



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2.7 The first section is an example of a possible contingency plan, subdivided into actions that need to be taken immediately, followed by actions that need to be taken in the medium and in the longer term. Each individual school will need to consider appropriate amendments for its own particular requirements. For example, some schools may wish to involve church/religious personnel very early in the plan. Other schools with split sites may need to consider how to co-ordinate the plan across the sites. Schools that have undertaken work on emotional well-being as part of the curriculum with their pupils may wish to cross-reference this work in the plan.

2.8 The second section gives more details on aspects of the contingency planning for schools to consider. This section cross-references the example contingency plan, but could be used in any order. It is subdivided into issues for the immediate, medium and long term planning.

2.9 The final section is an appendix:

- Appendix A is an explanation of how Staffordshire LA, once informed of a crisis in a school, will activate its support for schools experiencing a crisis
- Appendix B is a suggested phone contact sheet for adaptation and completion by the school
- Appendix C is a list of potentially useful phone contacts

3. Example School Contingency Plan Immediate (within hours)

Obtain and collate information and contact the County Improvement Manager for the school, who will in turn inform the District Senior Educational Psychologist

Nominate and then brief the school critical incident management team

Identify an incident management room and dedicated phone line

Consult with the District Senior Educational Psychologist

Contact families whose children/next of kin are involved

Make arrangements for informing other parents

Inform teaching and support staff

Inform pupils

Nominate a senior member of the school staff as press officer to liaise with the County Improvement Manager (and the Corporate Communications Department if appropriate) re media contact.



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Medium Term (1-3 days)

Organise update of information if appropriate

Arrange opportunities for support for everyone involved in the incident

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

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

Long Term

Implement medium term actions

Ensure there is a return to school routines as soon as possible

Identify appropriate support

Organise any long term counselling necessary.

Consider the issue of memorials and anniversaries

A contact list of Staffordshire LA staff is at the back of this document.

4. Information to Support School Contingency Planning Immediate (within hours)

4.1 Obtain and collate information

When a crisis occurs the first task is to obtain accurate information and to relay it to senior management within the school.

Details of disasters happening away from the school premises may be unclear for many hours, but there is still a need to convey as much accurate information as possible.

The County Improvement Manager and Governors should be informed as soon as possible.

Your County Improvement Manager is responsible for coordinating the Staffordshire support for a school coping with a crisis.

4.2 Nominate and brief a school critical incident management team

As soon as an incident is confirmed, the senior management team needs to meet to decide their strategies. This group should appoint a small team (e.g. the class teacher, deputy head, County Improvement Manager), relieve them of their duties, and allow them to manage the crisis over the next few hours.

Some of the tasks facing the team will already have been thought through and need only to be activated, but the nature of the incident and the immediate availability of staff may require some adjustment to the original plan.



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4.3 Identify an incident management room and dedicate a phone line

In the event of a tragedy, the school will be inundated with telephone calls.

This means that people will need to staff the school switchboard. 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 should still be contacted.

Where there has been an accident outside the school, the party leader 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 the Staffordshire LA staff.

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.

4.4 Consult with the District Senior Educational Psychologist.

The Educational Psychology Service offers support and advice to schools in such situations. It does not usually include working with individual pupils because, at this stage, pupils need to be supported by adults they already know and trust.

Different levels of support are available depending on the requirements of the school.

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 bereavement

- Participation in the school action plan to support teachers and pupils. An example would be contributing to a staff meeting.

4.5 Contact families whose children/next of kin are involved

Schools should always have an up-to-date list of pupils' next of kin and where to contact them. When groups of children and teachers go off the premises, a named member of staff still at school should have a copy of the list. Other members of staff should at least know where to find it.

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. In some circumstances parents may need to come into the school to receive the information. It is difficult, in this document, to give very specific advice on the best way to



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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 rehearsing 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.

4.6 Make arrangements for informing other parents

Wherever possible, parents of all the other children in the school should be informed that the school community has experienced a crisis and that their child may be upset. This might be best achieved through a letter sent home with the pupils.

4.7 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 may need support and advice at this stage. This should be organised in advance by the school critical incident management team.

4.8 Inform pupils

Pupils should be told simply and clearly what has happened. It is probably best if this is done in the smallest groups possible, for example classes, tutor groups, year groups, or however the school is organised. Their questions should be answered as straightforwardly as possible. Staff who undertake this task should be told 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 teacher. If a school is to close, children and parents should be told by the end of the school day, preferably at the same time as parents are told about the incident.

Closure should, on the whole, be avoided.

4.9 Nominate a senior staff member to deal with the media

In a crisis media relations are especially important. One of the tasks of schools must be to protect children, parents and staff from the glare of publicity, particularly during the first week or so. 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 County Improvement Manager (and 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



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the school premises nor to give them unsupervised access to staff or children. All enquiries should be directed to and through the Corporate Communications Department, who can arrange to have briefing sessions with the press if necessary (i.e. journalists may be invited to a particular part of the school at a specified time). 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.

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.

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).

5. Information to Support Contingency Planning

Medium Term (1 – 3 Days)

5.1 Organise update of information

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

5.2 Arrange opportunities for support

After a critical incident, staff and pupils may well feel shocked and numbed as well as under strong pressure to talk. A whole school is involved in a tragedy even though some may be more affected than others.

All staff and pupils will need an opportunity to express their emotional reactions to the crisis.

It is important that the school has considered beforehand who to contact in the event of a critical incident. Contact should be made, where appropriate, with local religious and community leaders who can advise on funeral and mourning rites, who can support the families during this time, and who could perhaps be invited into an assembly to talk to the whole school about issues previously agreed.

At such a time of crisis there may be many offers of help 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. When the head teacher invites help and advice from professionals outside, this is done by creating a partnership. The head teacher has the right to decide who has access to the children in school and clarify what arrangements are to be made for imparting information.



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Referring children to other agencies does not mean handing over all responsibility for them.

5.3 Develop a plan for responding to the feelings and reactions of the school community **Staff**

After a major trauma, staff need to know that it is perfectly natural to want to talk about the incident and to share their feelings. Many will need space and time to talk before getting on with their lives. Staff meetings could be organised simply to talk and share responses.

Pupils

After a disaster pupils as well as staff may feel an enormous pressure to talk about their experiences. Initially adults should 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. Adults should try not to be too intrusive. On the other hand experience has shown that children will not talk about their innermost feelings unless they are given strong signals that it is safe to do so. Some children may show their feelings through drawing, writing, or sometimes acting out behaviours. Opportunities for pupils to express their feelings should be organised. A room could be put aside for this purpose and needs to be supervised by a sensitive and responsive adult. It might have drawing and writing materials available for the pupils to use. It is important to ensure that staff providing this support receive the support they need too.

5.4 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 are similar or have been very difficult to deal with. There is great variation in the way that children 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. Keep a record of individuals and regularly monitor how they are progressing.

6. Information to Support Contingency Planning

Long Term

6.1 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.

6.2 Ensure a return to school routines as soon as possible

This 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 framework of 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 years.



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

6.3 Identify appropriate support

The list of significant contacts and telephone numbers will require research, but the time involved will be worthwhile should an emergency arise. Previous personal contact with services listed will ensure there is a working relationship in a time of crisis.

6.4 Organise long term counselling as necessary

It will become clear over time if any individuals require long-term counselling. If there is any doubt about particular individuals then your Educational Psychologist or other outside support agencies could be consulted.

Agencies that can provide this counselling are medical services that are accessed through the local GPs or charities such as those listed in Appendix C.

Counselling for school staff is also available through the Staffordshire staff counselling service also listed in Appendix C.

6.5 Consider the issue of memorials and anniversaries

It is very helpful to mark the loss of a member/members of the community with a memorial service and symbol such as the planting of a tree or garden or the purchasing of a special bench.

The memorial service could include staff and pupils' writing, poems and art and also the individual's favourite hymns etc.

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.

Anniversaries are often difficult times. It is better if decisions about how to treat anniversaries are made collectively in good time before the anniversary.

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 must take account of the wishes and feelings of the family/families.

WHO TO INFORM

1. IN OFFICE HOURS:

When a school experiences a crisis, they need to contact their County Improvement Manager (see numbers below).

The County Improvement Manager will inform the Educational Psychology Service (and the Corporate Communications Department and the Director on Duty if they feel this is appropriate).

2. OUT OF HOURS

In serious situations a school needs to inform the Corporate Communications Department (see number below).

The Corporate Communications Department will be able to advise the school on contact with the press issues, which may be urgent.

The Corporate Communications Department will also contact the Director on Duty and the Educational Psychology Department where this is felt to be appropriate



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1. During Office Hours Schools to Contact

Their County Improvement Manager

Cannock and Lichfield: Lynn Hill **07800 626406**

Or via:

Lisa Porter **01785 278801**

The County Improvement Manager then informs:

District Senior Educational Psychologist or if unavailable County Manager Educational Psychology Service

Lichfield/Cannock District: Sally Williams/Jo Ward **01543 512050**

Other services as appropriate:

Corporate Communications: Gemma Styles **01785 277995**

Media office/On-call press officer **01785 895050**

2. Out of hours, in serious situations, school to contact

Corporate Communications Team (who will contact others as appropriate)

Out of Office Hours 01785 895050

Appendix B

Useful Contacts

As part of the contingency plan a list of contacts should be made. Their phone numbers can be added to this page and the whole list can be attached to the staff notice board or the school handbook, and regularly updated. Office support staff should also have such a list readily available.

Contact Number

County Improvement Manager

Chair of Governing Body

Local Police

Local Fire Brigade

School Doctor/School Nurse

Emergency Department at the Local Hospital

Educational Psychology Service

Education Welfare Officer

Social Services Area Team Leader

Local Religious Groups

Voluntary Agencies

This list was updated on **05/10/2012**

Appendix C

List of Potentially Useful Phone Contacts - updated February 2012

Charity Area of Work Phone Numbers

Child Death Helpline www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk



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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)

Winstons Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk/

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

08452 030405 Mon-Fri 9.00 am to 5.00pm

Cruse Bereavement Care www.cruse.org.uk

Website for young people (12 years upwards) www.rd4u.org.uk

National charity providing a telephone helpline, a useful website and face to face support where there is a local branch

Young Person's Helpline **0844 477 9400** **0808 808 1677**

Burton on Trent Branch Offers support for children

Lichfield Branch **01283 593167**

(Tues and Wed 9.00am to 1.30pm Thurs 8.30am to 9.30am)

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**

Staffordshire Staff Counselling Service **01785 277400/1**

Acknowledgements

This document is an amended version of the Staffordshire Pupil and Student Services document 'Coping with a Crisis at School' written by Vincent McDonnell in July 1997. In July 2001 Head teachers who had used the original document were asked for their views. Modifications to the document were made using the responses received, as well as suggestions from the County Improvement Managers and members of the Educational Psychology Service Critical Incident Response Team.

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