

Critical Incident Policy.

Introduction

This policy sets out the procedures to be applied in the event of a critical incident. This policy has special regard to the emotional wellbeing of the school community.

For the purposes of this policy, Scoil na Tríonóide Naofa recognises a critical incident to be an incident or sequence of events that overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the normal running of the school. Critical incidents may involve students, staff, the school or local community. Such events would include:

- The death of a member of the school community through sudden death, accident, terminal illness or suicide
- An accident involving students or staff on or off the school premises
- A physical attack on staff member(s) or student(s) or intrusion into the school
- Serious damage to the school building through fire, flood, vandalism etc
- The disappearance of a member of the school community
- An accident/tragedy in the wider community.

Scope

This policy applies to all of our school community, including members of Bam Facility, irrespective of where or when such a critical incident may occur.

Relationship to Mission Statement

This policy derives from the Mission Statement. It is directly linked to the aspiration in that statement that all in the school feel cared for and safe.

Rationale

This policy aims to build awareness among the school staff as to the potential impact disasters and critical incidents can have on the school community. It outlines the preparations that the school should undertake in order to ensure an effective response to crisis situations. It emphasizes the importance of having effective emergency plans in place before an incident occurs and it provides a framework for dealing with it.

Review

This policy will be subject to regular review by staff, students, parents/guardians and Board of Management.

Objectives.

- The policy is being proposed, based on guidelines developed by the Department of Education and Skills and the National Educational Psychological Service in their document 'Responding to Critical Incidents' Guidelines for Schools.
- It is designed to assist the school in responding in an effective way to a serious crisis within the school.
- The Principal along with the Deputy and in consultation, if necessary with the Board of Management and other critical parties will decide what constitutes a critical incident necessitating the implementation of this policy.

- The term 'suicide' should not be used until it has been 'established categorically that the student's or teacher's death was a result of suicide.' (ASTI Guidelines, NEPS) the phrase 'death' or 'sudden death' may be used instead.
- The crisis response team will usually consist of the Principal, Deputy Principal, Guidance Counsellor, Year Head of the student involved and any other member of staff deemed appropriate in the light of the circumstances. The Principal will convene the team.
- Visiting Counsellors may be invited to attend team meetings, which will usually take place immediately an incident has occurred and then before and after school for the following few days. The Principal may also decide to involve the NEPS psychologist for the school.
- It is particularly important that the work to be done is facilitated by good organisational policies, so lists of telephone numbers will be made available immediately by office staff to those involved.
- Organisers of school trips and outings will ensure that a list of all pupils and teachers involved, including the mobile telephone numbers of teachers, will be left with the Secretary prior to a trip or outing.
- Depending on the nature of the incident, judgements will have to be made regarding the appropriate response. Additional assistance may be sought from 'Responding to Critical Incidents'.

Procedures to Follow In the Event of Critical Incident.

Short-Term Actions (First Day)

Gather accurate information

It is important to obtain accurate information about the incident; this avoids the proliferation of rumours, which would add to the distress of those involved.

- What happened, when and where?
- What is the extent of the injuries?
- What is the location of those injured and not injured?
- How many are involved and what are their names?
- Is there a risk of further injury?
- What agencies have been contacted already?

Contact appropriate agencies

- Emergency services
- Medical services
- HSE Psychological Departments/Community Care Services
- NEPS
- BOM

- DES
- Trustees

Convene a meeting with key staff/Critical Incident Management Team

A list of possible topics to be covered follows:

- Agreeing a statement of the facts for staff, students, parents and the media. There should be a written version of this.
- Delegating responsibilities to the Critical Incident Management Team.
- Appointing someone to handle phone enquiries and to deal with the media
- Ensuring that a phone line remains open and available for enquiries.
- Organising the timetable/routine for the day. Adhering to the normal school routine as much as possible.
- Organising a staff meeting, if appropriate.
- Organising the supervision of students during the staff meeting.
- Deciding whether an outside professional be invited to the staff meeting.
- Arrange extra supervision of students if that is necessary.

Hold staff meeting

All staff will be asked to attend, including auxiliary staff and member of the BAM Facility Management. It may be necessary to do this in shifts. The areas which might be covered are as follows:

- An account of the facts known.
- An opportunity for staff to express their views and their feelings.
- Discussion with the staff about how the facts will be shared with the students. There should be an agreed approach to this if possible.
- An outline of the routine for the day.
- Information for staff about which outside agencies have been contacted, or are involved and the support that will be put in place for both student and staff.
- A procedure for identifying vulnerable students.
- Distribution of relevant handout material.

Inform parents/guardians:

Children directly involved:

Parents/guardians will be contacted as soon as possible, and this first contact will be handled with great sensitivity. The steps involved are set out below:

- Agree who should share information with parents and how this should be done.

- Make a list of parents/guardians who have been contacted and those who still need to be told to avoid duplication of messages.
- Give parents/guardians relevant and factual information.
- Set a room aside for distressed students to meet their parents/guardians.
- Provide support to parents who are on their own when they arrive at the school.
- Give telephone numbers for enquiries.

Children not directly involved:

The parents of other children in the school will be informed of the incident and that their child may be upset. Communication will be made with parents stating the facts and brief details of the incident. It may not be appropriate at this point to disclose the names of those involved.

Inform students

Careful preparation is important when meeting students to inform them of a critical incident.

Consideration should be given to the age of the pupils and the optimum group size. It is best to do it in class groups or sub-groups. The suitability of the 'messenger' should also be considered, remembering that it is generally thought that support is best given by an adult known to the child. Any outside 'expert' might help by assisting the people undertaking this task to prepare for it and by providing ongoing advice and support to manage it. The nature of the event will clearly have an influence on how students are informed.

The key points in the process are as follows:

- Give facts and avoid speculation. This will help to dispel rumours which can cause unnecessary stress.
- Allow students to ask questions, tell their story and express feelings.
- Help students realise that overwhelming emotions are natural and normal following a critical incident.

Make contact with the bereaved family or families

- Arrange a home visit by two staff representatives within 24 hours, if appropriate.
- Plan visits to those injured.
- Liaise with the family regarding funeral arrangements/memorial service.
- Designate a suitable staff member to liaise with the family, to extend sympathy and to clarify the family's wishes regarding the school's involvement in the funeral/memorial service.
- Decide on the school's role in the funeral service following consultation with parents, school management and close family friends.
- Have regard for different religious traditions and faiths.

Dealing with the media

Prepare a written statement to include:

- The facts of the incident
- What has been done already
- What is going to be done
- Positive information or comments about the deceased person

If asked to give a live interview

- consider assigning the task to someone skilled or familiar with dealing with the media
- take some time to prepare
- remember that everything you say is on record and, therefore, keep it simple, factual and brief
- decline if you are not ready or think it inappropriate

Set a room aside for the media. This will help control access to students and staff

Brief staff and media and advise them on dealing with the media.

Organise the reunion of students with their parents, if necessary.

Inform students that their parents/guardians will be collecting them as soon as possible.

Facilitate distressed students and their parents by providing a private room where they can meet following the incident.

Procedures to Follow In the Event of Critical Incident.

Medium-Term Actions (24-72 hours)

Review the events of the first 24 hours

- Reconvene key staff/Critical Incident Management Team.
- Briefly check how each person on the team is coping.
- Decide arrangements for support meetings for parents/students/staff.
- Decide on mechanism for feedback from teachers on vulnerable students.

- Have review staff meeting with all staff if necessary. Ensure all staff are kept up to date on any developments.
- Be sensitive as to how all staff are coping on a personal and professional level.
- Establish contact with absent staff and students.
- Update media, if necessary.

Arrange support for individual students, groups of students and parents if necessary.

- Provide a suitable room.
- Hold support/information meeting for parents/students in order to clarify what has happened.
- Offer advice and reassurance. Inform them about support services and provide relevant handouts.
- Give any teacher who feels uncomfortable with involvement in support meetings the choice of opting out.
- Arrange, in consultation with outside agencies, individual or group debriefings or support meetings with parental permission.

Plan for the reintegration of students and staff (eg absentees, injured, siblings, close relatives)

Decide on person(s) to liaise with above on return to school.

Plan visits to injured.

Decide on key person(s) to visit home/hospital.

Liaise/Follow up with the family regarding funeral/memorial service arrangements.

Decide in accordance with the family's wishes what kind of attendance and participation should the school have, if any, at this event.

School closure

Request a decision on this from the Board of Management/DES.

Procedures to Follow In the Event of Critical Incident.

Longer Term Actions.

Monitor students for signs of continuing distress

A referral to the Health Board may be necessary.

For example, if over a prolonged period of time, a student continues to display the following he/she may need assistance from the HSE:

- Uncharacteristic behaviour
- Deterioration in academic performance
- Physical symptoms
- Inappropriate emotional reactions
- Increased absenteeism

Evaluate response to incident and amend the Critical Incident Management Plan appropriately

- What went well?
- Where were the gaps?
- What was most/least helpful?
- Have all necessary onward referrals to support services been made?
- Is there any unfinished business?

Inform new staff/new school pupils affected by Critical Incident where appropriate

- Ensure that new staff are aware of the school policy and procedures in this area
- Ensure they are aware of which pupils were affected in any recent incident and in what way

Appropriate ways to deal with anniversaries

- Anniversaries may trigger emotional responses in students/staff and they may need additional support at this time.
- If necessary discuss anniversary with the family and how to commemorate this event.

Dealing with the Aftermath of a Suicide or Suspected Suicide.

The term 'suicide' should not be used until it has been 'established categorically that the student's or teacher's death was as a result of suicide'. (ASTI Guidelines 1997)

The phrases 'tragic death' or 'sudden death' may be used instead.

The following is a guide to how school can support a bereaved family, school staff and students.

Family

- A staff member should contact the family to establish the exact facts and the family's wishes about how the death should be described.
- Acknowledge their grief and loss.
- Organise a home visit by two staff members.
- Consult with the family regarding the appropriate support from the school.

Staff

- Convene a staff meeting to brief staff on the above details. It may be necessary to do this in two shifts therefore ensuring staff are available for support to students and for cover at all times.
- Students need to be with people they know and trust. If possible it is better if the teacher provide support for the students. The external 'expert' visitor should therefore be primarily used to brief the teachers.
- Help teachers to prepare for breaking the news to students. Close friends and relatives of the deceased in the school need to be told first. This needs to be done in a private location.
- Outline the possible reactions.
- Identify the high risk students and what supports are available.
- Remind them of the school's critical incident plan.
- Decide on the strategy do deal with queries from parents/guardians.
- Ensure that a quiet place can be made available for students/staff.
- Hold further staff briefings during the day to update information, to offer support and to further identify high risk students.

Students

- Give the facts as they are known.
- Create a safe and supportive space for the students where they can share their reactions and feelings.
- Advise them on their possible reactions over the next few days.
- Avoid glorifying the victim and sensationalising the suicide.
- Advise the students of the support that is available to them.
- Take any talk of suicide seriously and provide support or refer on immediately.
- Students may wish to confide in and seek support from each other rather than adults. Facilitate this if appropriate and if it is possible. However, information should be provided about how to get further help if they, or their friends, should need it.

Related Policies

- Code of Behaviour
- Anti-bullying Policy
- Safety Statement

Implementation

Details of procedure to be followed in implementing the policy are included in the Policy Content section of this document. The implementation of this policy will be consistent with the whole school planning process.

APPENDIX 1.

Summary Checklist Principal -Short-term Actions.

- 1. Gather the facts-Who? What? When? and Where?**
- 2. Contact appropriate agencies.**
- 3. Convene the Critical Incident Management Team.**
- 4. Organise the supervision of students.**
- 5. Inform staff**

6. Agree on a statement of the facts
7. Identify high-risk students
8. Appoint someone to deal with phone enquiries
9. Organise timetable for the day

MAINTAIN THE NORMAL ROUTINE WHEN AT ALL POSSIBLE

10. Inform parents/guardians
11. Inform students
12. Make contact with the bereaved family
13. Organise support
14. Respond to the media

APPENDIX 2.

EMERGENCY CONTACT LIST.

Garda

Ambulance

Fire Brigade

Hospital

Local GP's

HSE

DES

Chairperson of Board of Management

Local Clergy

CEIST

DES

NEPS

Local Counselling Services

APPENDIX 3.

Letter to Parents (1)

(Sample letter in the event of a tragedy)

Dear Parents,

The school has experienced (the sudden death, accidental injury) of one of our students. We are deeply saddened by the death/event.

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

We have support in place to help your child cope with this tragedy.

(Elaborate)

It is possible that your child may have some feelings that he/she may like to discuss with you.

You can help your child by taking time to listen and encouraging them to express their feelings.

It is important to give them truthful information that is appropriate to their age.

If you would like advice or assistance you may contact the following people at he school.

Yours sincerely,

APPENDIX 4.

Letter to Parents (2)

(Sample letter requesting consent for involvement of outside professional/s)

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/daughter.....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 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/daughter met by a psychologist employed by the Minister for Education and Skills.

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

Name of Student:

Date of Birth:

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

Signed..... (Parent/Guardian)