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**Children’s Services**

Educational Psychology Service

**Guidance on Critical Incidents:**

Using your Educational Psychology Service

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Settings and schools are expected to be able to manage a critical incident at a local level with support from the Educational Psychology Service; however some critical incidents may require further support from Milton Keynes Council. The Children and Families Incident Management Team (CF:IMT) will provide the necessary business continuity support to maintained settings and schools when required. The Chair of this team is the Head of Setting and School Effectiveness:

Telephone: 07920 147126

It is recommended that schools prepare and maintain a School Critical Incident Plan, which outlines tasks that may need to be undertaken after a critical incident, and provides sample texts and letters to communicate with parents

An electronic version of this and other related documents in relation to the tiered MK EPS Critical Incident Response is located on the MKC Website address:

<https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/schools-and-lifelong-learning/special-educational-needs/critical-incidents-schools-and-settings>

**Introduction**

**When critical incidents occur in schools and settings, a telephone call to the Educational Psychology Service (Tel: 07920 147126) will bring an offer of support.**

A critical incident is an event, usually sudden, which involves the experience of personal distress to a level which has the potential to overwhelm individuals. These incidents are wide-ranging and unpredictable in their form. They include:

* Bereavement as a result of the death of a member of the school community - for example, following an accident or illness
* Traumatic incidents in the local community affecting the school – for example, an arson attack on a home or a child being abducted.

A flexible and sensitive range of responses is required, based on sound psychological understanding of the variety of reactions and needs of children, young people and adults at such times.

**There are five principles that should be used to guide intervention. These are promoting:**

1. A sense of safety, for example re-establishing familiar routines; countering scaremongering by accurate information
2. Calming, for example by giving information about normal reactions to critical incidents; teaching relaxation skills
3. A sense of self and community efficacy, for example by helping children and young people regain some control over events
4. Connectedness, for example by enhancing social support through assemblies and tutor groups
5. Hope, for example by encouraging a focus on the future and on positive goals.

**This document:**

* Outlines the role that the Educational Psychology Service can take to support those likely to have important responsibilities and those directly experiencing such incidents
* Looks at people’s reactions to critical incidents
* Suggests responses the school can make when critical incidents occur
* Provides a resource list covering specific information such as bereavement, support and cultural concerns

**Using your Educational Psychology Service**

**Principles**

The work of the Educational Psychology Service in the event of a Critical Incident will be guided by the following principles:

* An Educational Psychologist will take primary responsibility for supporting the management team of a school, and will be supported by other members of the service
* Help will be actively offered to institutions
* Flexible and responsive support will be proposed in which needs will be carefully considered – as in other areas of work, the least intrusive and effective intervention will be offered.

The Educational Psychology Service is available to children, young people and their families, usually through their schools or early years settings. Exceptionally, the Principal Educational Psychologist may agree to work at other venues.

Communication between the school and the allocated Educational Psychologist will be established quickly and clearly. This will enable schools to access support in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic incident, and to continue to access appropriate support in the medium and longer term as the wider ranging impact of any trauma becomes evident. This work would usually take priority over other commitments made by the Educational Psychologist.

**Responses in the event of a critical incident**

Support offered may involve:

* Personal consultation with decision-makers or managers
* Help for children, young people, parent/carers and staff, individually or in groups
* Psychological advice, for example on bereavement and the grieving processes in children and young people, on post-traumatic stress reactions, or on accessing other agencies
* Making resources available to schools that may be useful in supporting children, young people, parent/carers or staff
* Longer term follow-up.

**Contact**

The Educational Psychology Service

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**Finding Out**

**First Reactions**

News of critical incidents occurs in a variety of ways – a Headteacher may find out directly from a parent/carer; rumours may be circulating for a few hours on social media and word of mouth, or there may be an official announcement from a credible source. For a while, those people managing the situation may have to tolerate an incomplete picture of events – the school’s planning and action should be based upon established facts.

**Breaking bad news to Children and Young People**

The following guidelines may help in informing children and young people of a death or serious illness or accident:

1. Identify those children and young people who had a close relationship with the hurt, ill or dead person so they can be told together as a separate group
2. Provide a brief context, and then give the news in simple terms. For example:

*‘I’ve got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. There is an illness called cancer. Sometimes people with cancer get better, but other times people die from it. John has been ill with cancer for a long time. I have to tell you John died yesterday.’* **OR ‘***Sometimes people have accidents at work, at home, at school or on the road. People may be hurt or injured in the accident and they may have to go to hospital for treatment. I have some bad news to tell you that might upset you. Yesterday Stephanie was in an accident and she was very badly injured.’*

1. Answer questions factually, avoiding using euphemisms like “passed away”, or “lost”. Use the words “dead”, “died” and “death” in context
2. In subsequent discussion refer to the name naturally – for example, ‘*John died from cancer’* or ‘*Yes, we’re all going to miss Satvinder’*
3. Be prepared for children and young people to say or do the unexpected. Experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. No response does not mean that a child or young person does not care.

**Sharing Information with the wider community**

Inevitably, bad news of critical incidents can travel quickly around the school community, and is often distorted along the way. The social media currently available to children and young people are likely to play a role in this. If possible, the management of the school should quickly provide a brief written statement, establishing the known facts. For example, in one school, after a pupil died from an illness, rumours circulated that the illness was contagious. The Headteacher knew that it was not, and that afternoon included this information in a more general letter sent to all parents that informed them of the child’s death. In another school, a rumour circulated that the school would be closed the next day – the Headteacher sent a letter assuring parents that the school would be open.

**Phases of grief**

**The terms ‘phases of grief‘ or ’stages of mourning‘ are often talked and written about, but it is important to remember that there is no formula for grieving. People vary in their response to loss. Similarly, there are no prescribed time scales for grief, although over time most achieve some degree of resolution and acceptance.**

The following aspects of grief may be helpful to consider:

**Shock**

The first response to news of the death of someone close is shock. A child or young person may react with silent withdrawal or an outburst of crying and screaming. A very young child who does not quite understand what is going on may feel a painful sense of confusion rather than shock.

**Denial**

The bereaved may act and talk as if the dead person is still there or might return. This is not due to a childish misunderstanding of the nature of death; some form of denial is experienced by many adults as well as children in the early days of bereavement.

**Searching**

The bereaved person may look and search for the lost person, and cling to objects or others who are close to them.

**Disorganisation**

When the permanent nature of the loss has registered, the bereaved person is likely to experience waves of intense feelings. These may include:

* Despair and extreme sadness
* Anger at the departed for leaving them
* Anger at themselves for missing opportunities lost for ever
* Guilt due to unresolved issues or negative feelings about the lost person
* Anxiety about the changed situation which may bring new responsibilities.

**Re-organisation**

Now grief subsides and a calmer emotional state takes over. Although feelings of sadness and loss may remain indefinitely, these lack the earlier intense quality, and the person becomes able to participate emotionally in new relationships.

It is possible, especially in the early stages, to go through this cycle repeatedly – every day expecting to see someone who is no longer there, or letting morbid thoughts prevail before rallying again.

**Supporting children through bereavement**

*Please see the Educational Psychology Service’s leaflet* [*‘****Helping Children and Young People cope when someone has died’***](https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/65038/5-Helping-CYP-cope-when-someone-has-died-generic-teal-branding.pdf)

Whilst schools *may* observe the phases of grief described above, more generally pupils may lack concentration, experience tiredness in school or show more immature behaviours (for example, sucking thumb or physical clinging). Teachers will need patience in managing withdrawn behaviour, irritability, increased nervousness or anxiety.

There is a developmental aspect to children and young people’s experiences of grief and sorrow. The pre-school or nursery child will experience a sense of loss but may not understand the permanence of the loss. During the primary school stage, children will develop an understanding of this permanence, and this may go along with feelings of guilt and responsibility for the death. In adolescence, powerful emotions of grief are likely to be experienced which may lead to the young person questioning the meaning of life.

When supporting children and young people, show that you are concerned and willing to discuss the bereavement. Make opportunities for a private discussion, for example, through the child or young person staying behind to ‘help’ with a task.

However, if the child or young person does not want to talk, respect their right to privacy. The child or young person may not want to express their feelings at all, or may prefer to use painting, drawing or unstructured play.

**If the child or young person *does want to talk***:

* Listen with full attention
* Avoid emphasis on advice or interpretation
* Basic supporting skills will be helpful, such as simple acknowledgement of what has been said, reflecting back what the child or young person has said, naming the emotions you hear, and summarising briefly what has been said
* Answer questions as accurately and honestly as you can
* Give the message that the feelings of bereavement are natural and normal.

Some people may not feel they are the ‘best person’ to do this kind of thing, but if they are trusted by the child or young person, and already have a relationship, then they may be more useful than a more experienced, but unfamiliar, adult. However, if the teacher, for whatever reason, would rather not attempt to engage the child or young person, then the management team in the school must be sensitive to this and offer someone else. Try not to single out the child or young person for special privileges – they need to feel part of their peer group and community and should be expected to take part in the normal activities of school and classroom. At the same time, allowances may have to be made in terms of the quantity and quality of work expected. The pupil’s friends may benefit from a discussion to help them explore the best ways of being supportive.

Ensure that other members of staff are aware of what has happened, so that the pupil is not unnecessarily hurt by a chance remark.

It will be important for a teacher supporting a pupil to be aware of the family’s cultural or religious influences, particularly beliefs and attitudes to death. For example, some cultures resist talking about death openly, whereas others have formal procedures relating to loss and bereavement.

Long term, remembering special days (such as a birthday or the anniversary of the death) may be helpful. It may be a particularly difficult day, but teachers can acknowledge the loss, whilst at the same time helping pupils to realise how far they have come.

**How schools can help after a Critical Incident**

This section is relevant when many children and young people have been affected – perhaps after a large scale incident. Schools will have sought advice and support from Milton Keynes Council on matters such as dealing with the press or engaging relevant agencies (such as Police or Children’s Social Care) to act together with the school.

**Classroom management**

Maintain normal classroom routine or re-establish it as soon as possible. Although pupils may benefit from opportunities to discuss what has happened and express their feelings about this, there is some security in knowing that school life is continuing as usual under the guidance of caring adults.

Some adjustment to the curriculum may be helpful. It may not be a good time to introduce new material. ‘Busy work’ may be particularly helpful to pupils – a temporary avoidance of more reflective tasks and a focus on more active ones. Encourage resumption of extra-curricular activities, for example, after school clubs or team sports.

**Classroom support**

Consider classroom support – schools may want to request additional support for this. If possible, the class teacher should take an active role in these sessions, perhaps working with an Educational Psychologist as co-facilitator. There could be one or more sessions, possibly structured around a four stage process:

1. **Provide facts about the incident**

This is the most important task of the process. It involves providing the children and young people with the facts as far as they are known, and dispelling rumours. Rumours often multiply following a critical incident, and establishing an accurate picture is a key step for children and young people in coming to terms with what has happened.

1. **Sharing stories**

Children and young people are encouraged to give their accounts of the event, or how they heard about it. This will encourage the development of a shared understanding, and the facilitator can make links between accounts. For younger children it may be more helpful to encourage non-verbal expression, for example, through art or play activities.

The teacher should encourage the sharing of the children and young people’s feelings and reactions since the event. Here the role is to explain that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances, that these will pass, but more help will be available if any pupil feels they cannot cope.

1. **Empowerment**

We need to help the children and young people regain a sense of control. In some situations it may be appropriate to generate strategies for prevention of a reoccurrence of the event. Pupils can be helped to identify strategies that will help manage crisis symptoms, for example, the importance of adequate sleep, eating and exercise.

1. **Focus on the future**

This part of the process attempts to mark an ending of the event and a turning to the future. Where an incident has involved death, planning memorials or writing letters of condolence can help in this process. It should be possible to discuss funeral arrangements, and whether the pupils should attend. Alternatively, for people who have been physically injured, writing ‘Get Well’ cards would fit naturally. If a fellow pupil will be returning to school after some major event, the other pupils may want to think about how they will encourage their return and support the pupil through a difficult period. At this point, re-iterate the message about the normality of the children and young people’s reactions to the event and the fact that more help will be available if needed.

For a few children and young people the experience may lead to longer term difficulties. A child may experience reduced concentration, disrupted sleep, intrusive and distressing memories and/or nightmares. One possibility is that wrong beliefs about the causes and consequences of traumatic events arise and persist leading to strong negative emotions such as self-blame. When these problems arise work may focus on changing the distorted beliefs which prevent healthy grieving.

If you are worried that a child or young person is very distressed or continues to be distressed after a month or so, then you could consider consulting with parents/carers about involving other agencies that can offer more help, such as their GP.

**Seeking further support**

There are several other agencies besides the Educational Psychology Service that offer support for children, parents and schools in dealing with critical incidents. As well as these agencies, schools will of course want to turn to friends and supporters in the local community.

A full list of useful resources and information about grief and bereavement can be found [here](https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/65098/13-CI-Resources-Table.pdf).

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| **Local Resources** |  |
| Mind BLMK  [Mind BLMK](https://www.mind-blmk.org.uk/)  *self-referrals or third party referrals made at the clients request.* | Can provide bereavement counselling as part of the general counselling- it is not currently funded.  *\*This resource has been checked by Public Health England* |
| **Child Bereavement UK**  <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>  63 North Seventh Street  Milton Keynes  Buckinghamshire  MK9 2DP  United Kingdom  **Tel:** 01908 550895 | Child Bereavement UK supports families and educates professionals when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement. The following support is offered at our Milton Keynes office: Children and Young people - one-to-one support; Children and Young people - group support (YPAG & Family Support Groups); Support for bereaved families; Support for bereaved parents; Parenting support to a parent whose child might be grieving.  *\*This resource has been checked by Public Health England* |
| **MK Bereavement Service**  [MK Bereavement Service](http://www.bereavementservicemk.org.uk/)  <http://www.bereavementservicemk.org.uk/>  *(Not commissioned, free)* | One-to-one support either in your own home or at West Bletchley Wellbeing Counselling Service, with a Telephone Helpline and a Drop-in service three times a week. They have a comprehensive website, signposting to other local and national organisations which may be able to offer further support specific to the individual’s needs.  *\*This resource has been checked by Public Health England* |
| **YiS Youth Counselling Service**  [YiS Youth Counselling Service](https://www.mkyis.org.uk/)  Youth organisation  Margaret Powell House, 401-407 Midsummer Bouelvard  **Tel:** 01908 604700  <https://www.mkyis.org.uk/>  **Chat via Messenger** at: m.me/YiSMentalHealth | **This is a charity that provides free and confidential counselling for young people aged 11-21 who live, learn or work in Milton Keynes and the surrounding areas.**  Coronavirus Update: mkyis counselling service is continuing by telephone but they are unable to accept new referrals. However, young people or adults that support them can contact mkyis on Messenger to get informal support and advice from one of their trained professionals.  *\*This resource has been checked by Public Health England* |
| **Harry’s Rainbow**  [www.harrysrainbow.co.uk](http://www.harrysrainbow.co.uk) | Harry’s Rainbow started as a local charity in the name of a 5 year old who died in 2009. The charity provides excellent support, including activities and holidays for families as well as telephone support and monthly meetings. |
| **National Resources** |  |
| **Winston’s Wish**  [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/)  Freephone Helpline: 08088 020 021  (Mon - Fri 09:00 – 17:00) | This organisation offers practical support and guidance to bereaved children, their families and professionals.  Email their ASK email service for free advice and support following a bereavement: [askmailbox@winstonswish.org.uk](mailto:askmailbox@winstonswish.org.uk)  *\*This resource has been checked by Public Health England* |
| **Cruse Bereavement Care**  [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk) | Cruse supports people after the death of someone close. Their trained volunteers offer confidential face-to-face, telephone, email and website support, with both national and local services. They also have services specifically for children and young people.  *\*This resource has been checked by Public Health England* |
| **The Compassionate Friends**  [www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk) | The Compassionate friends support people when a child of any age dies through any cause.  *\*This resource has been checked by Public Health England* |
| **Bereavement Advice Centre**  <https://www.bereavementadvice.org/> | Bereavement Advice Centre supports and advises people on what they need to do after a death. They also provide support and resources for professionals.  *\*This resource has been checked by Public Health England* |
| **Grief Encounter**  [www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk) | This organisation offers a range of support and advice for bereaved children, young people and their families. |
| **Additional Support Services** |  |
| **Milton Keynes Council** | Initially Head Teachers will usually want to inform the Local Authority about the incident and receive immediate advice and support. The following officers within the People Directorate can be contacted, and may well point the way to further sources of assistance:  Head of Setting and School Effectiveness  (Tel. 01908 254419)  or, if unavailable:  Head of Delivery: SEN and Disability  (Tel. 01908 253138) |
| **Specialist Teachers, Inclusion and Intervention Team** | These colleagues offer support for school staff and have access to resources which could be useful for those working with children following bereavement or critical incidents.  The teams are based at:  Civic Offices  (Tel. 01908 657825) |
| **The community of schools within Milton Keynes** | Staff in other schools may have had similar experiences and be able to offer advice and support. |