

The Societas Trust

Coping with a Crisis at School

***Advice and Guidance for Headteachers,
Trust representatives and School Staff***

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INTRODUCTION

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

- The School's 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 restore a normal service, the school would be advised to use the School's Business Continuity Plan as a framework (rather than this document). Examples might be where the premises are affected or where there are multiple casualties.
- 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 C.E.O. or, if unavailable, the Deputy C.E.O.

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 the Headteacher. If the Headteacher is not available then the next most senior member of staff should be contacted. 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.

If the issue relates to the death of a pupil there is an expectation that the Admissions team will contact the school to confirm any information / inform the school that a pupil needs to be taken off role. For safeguarding reasons pupils must not be taken off role without the knowledge and consent of the Admissions team.

2. Inform Support Contacts

The Headteacher / Senior Leader needs to contact the C.E.O. of the Trust who will contact the relevant person in the relevant Local Authority. The Local Authority will contact the Leader / Manager of the Educational Psychology Service who will inform a Senior Educational Psychologist to initiate critical incident support.

The C.E.O. of the Trust will contact the Trust's Media Advisor and Legal Department if appropriate and will liaise with the Headteacher.

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

The Chair of Governors 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. If the incident is not to be dealt with by the Senior Leaders, they **may** appoint a small team to manage the incident (School Critical Incident Management Team). **If appropriate** they need to be relieved from their duties and allow them to manage the crisis over the next few hours.

4. Start the incident log

A suggested log sheet is included in Appendix B to use if appropriate.

5. Managing communication

In the event of a tragedy, the school is likely to be inundated with telephone calls / messages from parents. 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.

In case of any accident occurring away from the school premises, the leader of the school trip needs to have an emergency number on which to make contact with Senior Leaders 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 C.E.O. 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 the press who are trying to phone in.

All press enquiries must be directed to the Societas Trust via e-mail at: **media@societatrust.org.uk**

Staff need to be aware of the social media platforms that are being used to share information. School needs 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.

Any information, either written or verbal, should **only** be given to parents / carers in consultation with the C.E.O. of the Trust and Media Advisor support.

6. Consult with 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 Educational Psychologist 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 a school action plan if appropriate. E.g. by providing input to a staff meeting
 - Sign posting the school to other support agencies such as 'Windmill' and 'Winston's Wish'

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. If at the weekend as many staff should be contacted as soon as possible by telephone. It is essential that both teaching staff and support 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 Headteacher 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 C.E.O. contacts the Media Advisor who will work with him and the Headteacher. 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.

The Headteacher, working alongside the Trust Media Advisor will deal with all press enquiries and work as 'Press Officer'. 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. Statements should only be issued or pupils interviewed with the expressed permission of their parents or carers and checked with the C.E.O. and Media Advisor. In the case of split families, the wishes of all carers with parental responsibility **must** be taken into account.

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 the Societas Trust, who will be able to advise on the appropriate information that can be shared with the press. The e-mail address is: The Trust 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.

Any statements given to the Press should only be done so with the written permission of parents / carers concerned.

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. Staff should stress that as individuals we all

deal with stressful situations in a different way and that all expressions of grief (and none) are acceptable and normal.

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 or via a private electronic platform such as Classdojo. The advice of the C.E.O. and 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 Media Advisor and / or Educational Psychologist 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 final 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 Headteacher has legal responsibility for what happens to the pupils in school and needs to check the credentials of anyone offering support. When the Headteacher 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. Support from an Educational Psychologist may be sought for staff if appropriate

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 Senior Leaders follow 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

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. A list of agencies can be found as a Appendix B.

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' writing, poems and art and also the individual's favourite hymns for example. It could also take the form of a more informal day such as wearing bright clothing in celebration of someone's life or fundraising for a cause nominated by a child's parents / carers.

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. Thanks go to Jo Ward Senior Educational Psychologist.

Similarly, thanks go to Paula Hodson for her many years managing the Critical Incident Response, Julia Anderson (County Manager for Educational Psychology) and the Staffordshire Educational Psychology Service Critical Incident Lead EP team for their help with this document

Appendix A - 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 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	0808 8020021 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
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 lifechanging illness, at any time in their lives The Dove	01782 914455
	Service Is able to provide support for children and those with learning disabilities	

ThinkWell: Staffordshire County Council Staff Counselling Service	ThinkWell provides friendly, confidential access to prevention and early intervention services for SCC employees Self-referrals available for schools who have a Service Level Agreement with ThinkWell (chargeable). Management referrals available for all schools (chargeable).	01785 355777
Windmills Charity Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire www.windmillscharity.org	Windmill acute bereavement support for children and young people in Staffordshire to provide free support when someone significance in their life is dying, or has died. They provide bespoke, focussed supportive acute bereavement care. They also provide a range of helpful resources	01782 433435
Nurture UK www.nurtureuk.org	Providing ideas to support children and young people during / after significant events such as bereavement. They also provide a range of helpful resources	020 3962 0886

Appendix B

THE SOCIETAS TRUST INCIDENT LOG SHEET

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