

# Critical Incident Guidance

**A Guide for Schools and Educational Settings in Durham**

Produced by the  
**Durham Children and Young People Mental Health Partnership**



**Durham  
CYP MH Partnership**

## Aims of Document

“A critical incident may be defined as any sudden and unexpected incident or sequence of events which causes trauma within a school community, and which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of that school.”

It is anticipated that there will be times when individuals and whole school communities are affected by a sudden loss or a critical incident which in the short-term requires additional support to help manage. This document aims to outline the support offer available through the Children and Young People’s Mental Health Partnership (CYP MH Partnership\*) to schools and education settings to help them to do this. It provides some specific information on bereavement, signposts local and national resources which can be accessed, and sets out the Children and Young Peoples Mental Health Partnership support offer to schools and education settings.

Different types of event can result in a critical incident, and not all involve the death of an individual. Any serious event that causes trauma within a school community, or to an individual within the school community, and which challenges the ability of the community to cope or know how best to support should be considered within this context.

\*The CYP MH Partnership includes Health teams such as CAMHS and the Emotional Health & Resilience Team (EHRT); Local Authority services such as Early Help, Social Care, Specialist SEND and Inclusion teams, and Education; Schools and Education Settings; Voluntary Community Sector organisations; and Stakeholder groups.



# Our offer to schools and communities

The CYP MH Partnership works in collaboration with schools and education settings to manage critical incidents, and the support offered is tailored to the nature of the incident and the needs of those impacted.

Following notification of a critical incident, the CYP MH Partnership will contact senior leaders from the affected settings and offer support. This typically might involve:

- Providing senior leaders with a space to talk and process the events
- Clarifying details of events where possible to do so
- Advising on how to best communicate with families
- Considering when and how to share information with pupils and staff
- Discussing how to mobilise existing support within school
- Offering advice on linking with other services or accessing on-line resources
- Considering ways to reduce anxiety and promote resilience within the school community
- Providing staff training and longer-term support to develop policy and curriculum.

If you would like support in managing a critical incident within your setting, please contact:

☎ 03000 263 333

🌐 epsdurham@durham.gov.uk

☎ 03000 263 532

🌐 hdft.0-25ehrt@nhs.net

Support is also available should a critical incident occur outside of term time.

Please refer to the Critical Incident/ Traumatic Event Support Guidance Flowchart available on the Early Help Toolkit (<https://durham-scp.org.uk/professionals/practice-guidance/believe>) for further information on how the CYP MH Partnership will coordinate around a critical incident. Once initial needs have been identified with you, an identified Link Partner will provide ongoing contact and support for a period of time until this is no longer felt to be necessary. Extended involvement is available if required.



## Rapid Review Meeting

The rapid review meeting is usually held within 48 hours of the sudden unexpected death of a young person under 18 years old. It is part of the statutory Child Death Overview Process (CDOP). The aim is to try and prevent deaths in childhood, to ensure that the family and community receive the support that they need, and all relevant information is shared. Within the meeting there will be a concise summary of the facts, so far as they can be ascertained, about the critical incident and relevant context. It is best practice to have 2 members of staff from school attend the meeting. Other professionals who may be present at the rapid review meeting might include doctors, paramedics, police or Local Authority professionals.





# Principles on managing critical incidents

## 1. Taking care of ourselves and others

In dealing with any critical incident, it is vital that we all take the time to care for ourselves and are mindful of the potential impact on us. All staff need the opportunity to talk and to debrief within their own management structures, and regular contact with each other should be encouraged to promote a sense of connection and access appropriate support.

Pupils may feel anxious about a number of things, including returning to school, and will need to be supported with this. Allowing time to talk and express feelings about what is happening is really important. Having a consistent structure and routine helps us to maintain some control over a situation which may feel overwhelming.

The 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' provides a framework to think about how children and adults can stay well.

### 5 steps to mental wellbeing


 [www.nhs.uk/](http://www.nhs.uk/)

Other useful resources for wellbeing:

#### Adults

 [www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/](http://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/)

#### Young People

 [www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/](http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/)

#### Mindfulness

 [www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/mindfulness/](http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/mindfulness/)

## 2. Ensure good communication and access to information

Careful consideration needs to be given as to how to establish the key facts, and what, how and when this information should be shared with other staff, pupils and families. Where a particular family is affected, make sure to establish what they are happy to share with the school community and have time to process the event. Stick to key facts and discourage any speculation. If in school, bad news is usually best broken within smaller groups rather than whole school assemblies. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the critical incident, it is also vital to encourage a normal routine.

We have access to a constant stream of information through social media, which can cause speculation, misinformation and increased anxiety. Whilst it can feel useful to stay informed, encourage pupils and staff to stick to trusted sources and avoid

reading too much on social media. You can also help by explaining that even though the situation is serious, it's also important that we maintain a sense of community; letting pupils and staff know that different people will experience different reactions and feelings to this situation, and that's ok.



### 3. Identifying who might be vulnerable

With any critical incident, it's important to identify who your vulnerable pupils are, and consider how the nature of the incident might put certain groups more at risk. Think about which pupils and staff may be most at risk of experiencing anxiety or significant distress and plan for how you might offer them additional support either through your own arrangements, or by linking with the Partnership. Look out for changes in the behaviour of other young people as it is not always easy to predict who will need additional support.

### 4. Knowing when to ask for help

Best practice during critical incidents suggests that support is usually best given in the first instance by people who are familiar to us. This helps to maintain a sense of calm and consistency where possible. When traumatic bereavements occur, bringing in new professionals straight away can sometimes raise the anxiety of pupils in school, when the emphasis needs to be on pupils feeling safe. However, guidance can be offered through the Partnership as outlined above to support staff in having challenging conversations with pupils and in planning further support. Grief is a natural process that many of us will go through without the need for specialist support, particularly if we already have good support structures. We all respond to grief in different ways, and it can take time to come to terms with events.



# Loss and Bereavement

Grief is a normal process that we all go through and most CYP will not need to access specialist services. Common ways that grief in CYP can manifest include:

- Feelings of sadness, anger or guilt.
- Becoming upset by seemingly minor events
- Aggression or non-compliance
- Difficulty focusing on tasks
- Fear of being alone and separation anxiety
- Reluctance to go to school
- Complaining of headaches/stomach aches/minor illness
- Feeling tired or becoming unusually hyperactive
- Difficulties with peer relationships
- Sleep disturbances

The way a child processes their grief and the support they need may also depend on a number of factors:

- The relationship they had with the person who died
- The circumstances of the loss and if it occurred in a traumatic way
- Whether it was anticipated or not
- Whether they have experienced multiple losses
- The external support they have available to them
- Individual resilience factors.

When experiencing a bereavement, children and young people are usually best supported by people that know them best and those professionals already involved, especially in the first few weeks.



## Typical responses to loss in children

Everyone is affected differently by grief and is also dependent on the age and developmental stage of the child or young person. Observations may include:

- becoming upset by seemingly minor events
- aggression, anger and non-compliance
- difficulty focusing on tasks
- fear of being alone and separation anxiety
- feelings of guilt/confusion
- reluctance to go to school
- complaining of headaches/stomach aches/minor illness
- feeling tired or becoming unusually hyperactive
- difficulties with peer relationships
- sleep disturbances.

## Supporting children with loss and bereavement

- Allow time to listen to the child or young person, acknowledge their feelings and show warmth and empathy. Talking is an important way of processing traumatic events. Take the lead from the child and go at their pace.
- If you are asked a difficult question, it's ok to say "I don't know" or try asking the child or young person what they think. It's ok not to know what to say, just emphasise that you are here to listen.
- Avoid euphemisms and use plain language such as dead or death.
- Try and maintain structure and routine where possible.
- Allow breaks and time out if needed.
- If they are struggling due to the impact of not saying goodbye, help them find other ways to remember and celebrate their loved one; for example, writing a letter or a story, creating a memory box.
- Take some time to take care of yourself or talk to someone you trust after having difficult conversations.

More information relating to how schools can support children and young people through loss and bereavement, including supporting pupils with SEND, can be found on at the end of this document.

## On returning to school

In the case of bereavements, having consistent contact with familiar professionals will be invaluable during this difficult time, and can help to signpost parents to helpful resources and services, whilst also feeling that they are still part of a community.

Grieving processes may be complicated and prolonged due to the complex and uncertain nature of the situation; therefore, it is likely that on returning to school, a number of children may still be processing the critical incident. In case of any losses within the school community, the impact of this may not be experienced fully until pupils and staff come back together. It is important to acknowledge the losses that the school community might have experienced by promoting opportunities to bring people together, helping to build resilience.





## Additional support for staff

Staff may also be affected either by their own personal loss or by those experienced in the school community. As mentioned earlier, think carefully about how support networks within school can be maintained.

Adults' response to bereavements can be as individual and varied as those of children. It is also important to consider that staff are often drawn upon to support pupils in relation to bereavements but that these events can trigger strong emotional responses; even staff without a direct connection to the loss may be significantly impacted.

The Employee Assist Programme is open to all staff in Local Authority maintained schools and provides information on wellbeing, including access to counselling. It can be accessed here:

 [www.healthassuredeap.co.uk/](http://www.healthassuredeap.co.uk/)

 0800 716 017

Counselling can also be accessed through

 [www.talkingchanges.org.uk/](http://www.talkingchanges.org.uk/)

 [www.cruse.org.uk/get-support/local-support-phone/north-east/](http://www.cruse.org.uk/get-support/local-support-phone/north-east/)

Where additional external support may be useful in managing emotions, which are primarily related to supporting children and young people, clinical supervision may be available to staff through existing SLA arrangements with the SEND & Inclusion Service. Supervision offers staff the opportunity to reflect on aspects of their work in a confidential manner outside of the usual line management arrangements and can be helpful in supporting their resilience to manage challenging situations.



Helpful resources and sources of further information

## Child Bereavement UK

### Support for Early Years and Primary Schools

 [www.childbereavementuk.org/managing-bereavement-a-guide-for-primary-schools](http://www.childbereavementuk.org/managing-bereavement-a-guide-for-primary-schools)

### Support for Secondary Schools

 [www.childbereavementuk.org/managing-bereavement-a-guide-for-secondary-schools](http://www.childbereavementuk.org/managing-bereavement-a-guide-for-secondary-schools)

## Support for Schools


 [www.cruse.org.uk/organisations/schools/](http://www.cruse.org.uk/organisations/schools/)

## Support for bereaved children and young people

 [www.griefcounter.org.uk/](http://www.griefcounter.org.uk/)

 [www.winstonswish.org/](http://www.winstonswish.org/)

## Traumatic Bereavements - Schools Guide

 <http://uktraumacouncil.link/documents/Traumatic-Bereavement-Schools-Guide-v02-UKTC.pdf>

## Support for Families

 [www.durham.gov.uk/bereavementsupport](http://www.durham.gov.uk/bereavementsupport)

For more information on resources for children and families, see the Local Offer

 [www.durham.gov.uk/localoffer](http://www.durham.gov.uk/localoffer)

## Willow Burn Hospice

Willow Burn Bereavement Service offers one to one counselling to support children and young people up to the age of 18 who are experiencing grief, loss and bereavement.

 [www.willow-burn.co.uk/children-and-young-people-bereavement-service](http://www.willow-burn.co.uk/children-and-young-people-bereavement-service)

 01207 529224




## St. Cuthbert's Hospice Jigsaw Children Bereavement

Our Children's Bereavement Team can help children and teenagers to make some sense of illness and loss using a range of activities and therapies.

 [www.stcuthbertshospice.com/our-care/bereavement-support/children-bereavement/](http://www.stcuthbertshospice.com/our-care/bereavement-support/children-bereavement/)

 [thejigsawproject@stcutberthospice.com](mailto:thejigsawproject@stcutberthospice.com)

 0191 374 6183




## Butterwick Hospice Family Support


 [www.butterwick.org.uk/ourhospices/family-support-services/](http://www.butterwick.org.uk/ourhospices/family-support-services/)

 [hazel.saunders@butterwick.org.uk](mailto:hazel.saunders@butterwick.org.uk)

 01642 607742

To access further support from the Durham CYP MH Partnership contact

 03000 263 333

 03000 263 532

 [epsdurham@durham.gov.uk](mailto:epsdurham@durham.gov.uk)

 [hdft.0-25ehrt@nhs.net](mailto:hdft.0-25ehrt@nhs.net)

