

FACING UPSETTING EVENTS

- a guide for Parents

**Strategies to support children
and young people during a critical
incident (CI)**

This guide has been written by the Educational Psychology Team, City and County of Swansea.

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This booklet intends to provide advice and guidance to parents and schools facing a traumatic event which is referred to as a critical incident.

WHAT IS A CRITICAL INCIDENT ?

A critical incident is a sudden, unexpected and traumatic incident or sequence of events. Someone close to you may have died. You may have been injured yourself. You may have witnessed a death, and injury to others.

The trauma caused by critical incidents challenges individuals in many different ways.

A critical incident will often involve the death of an individual(s). As a result some strategies in dealing with bereavement have been included.

WHAT CAN HELP ?

- **Adult Support**

The ability of children and young people to cope with the CI events is largely dependent upon the support of parents, family, carers and teachers. It is also affected by the ability of adults to respond to these events in an honest, balanced and sensitive manner. This can be achieved by being with them and supporting them as much as possible but without overdoing it.

- **Reassurance**

Children and young people may not be ready for elaborate explanations of events and consequences so their reactions are largely dependant upon the level of reassurance offered by adults around them. When trying to reassure children and young people after a traumatic event it is important to:-

- be able to distinguish between the child/young person and adults own emotions,
- be guided by children and young people's own emotional and behavioural responses without unintentionally prompting,
- be aware that an inappropriate response from adults can sometimes cause a higher degree of insecurity to children/young people.

If you are unsure about the best way to help, you can contact your school to receive advice.

- **Routine**

Without depriving children/young people from the truth it is important to reassure them that they will soon be able to return to normality and that everyone can overcome the effects of CI events. This can be achieved by :-

- continuing with their routine at home and at school,
- continuing with their social life with other children/young people
- rewarding their ability to cope by continuing their lives as normally as possible.

HOW DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE REACT WHEN SOMEONE DIES ?

Grief is a normal response to a loss. Children, young people and adults may experience all or some of the reactions listed below. They are all normal and individuals may experience movement backwards and forwards between different stages, some being missed out altogether in some cases. The reactions experienced and the types of symptoms will vary from person to person and there is no set time scale for working through the stages. The following outline of the grieving process is applicable to children, young people and adults.

- 1) Shock
- 2) Denial – it can't be true!
- 3) Growing awareness – searching, despair, anger, anxiety and guilt
- 4) Acceptance – readjustment

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT PRE-SCHOOL AND PRIMARY AGED PUPILS DURING A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Very young children will be affected by their parents' emotional response and by changes in their routine. They may react by becoming unsettled and may be affected by their parents' temporary difficulty in maintaining routine.

Young children do not understand the finality of death and may ask questions such as 'Who will feed Daddy now?'. Children may become anxious and this anxiety may be increased if they over hear or are told euphemisms such as The dead person has gone on a long journey or has gone to sleep..... Children may take this information literally and become fearful of separations, journeys or going to bed.

Parents and teachers may be able to help by answering such questions honestly and factually.

Children between 5 and 11 are generally more able to understand that death is irreversible and inevitable. It may be appropriate to involve them in the rituals of death and in the sharing of grief. Sometimes adults may wish to protect the child by excluding him or her from their grief. At this age children may need concrete experience to shape their understanding and the opportunity to express their loss and to grieve in their own way. Children should be given the opportunity to explore ideas as well as feelings at this time. They may ask concrete and probing questions which grieving adults may find difficult to answer eg 'What happens to the person after he is cremated?'. As far as possible it is important that adults try to respond in an honest, balanced and sensitive manner.

Children in this age group may need a great deal of reassurance that the death was not their fault.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT SECONDARY AGED PUPILS DURING A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Young people will be generally more able to comprehend the longer term consequences of death. They may display strong reactions of shock, anger or denial. They may need answers to such practical questions as 'Will I still be able to go to school?'

They may be anxious about changes in roles within the family and be concerned that they will need to take over adult responsibilities.

They may be more able to empathise with others and offer support.

Some of the information in the previous sections relating to younger children may apply. There are also some reactions that are more particular to this age group.

- 1) Grief during the teenage years can be particularly difficult if there are conflicting emotions already existing within the teenager. There are often other family stresses existing at this time and the teenager may have particular feelings of guilt relating to the loss eg that they didn't make more of an effort to get on with the deceased.
- 2) Sometimes friends may not know how to comfort or the bereaved adolescent might not know how to accept any comfort that is offered.
- 3) Boys may feel that it is not masculine to be affected by grief and that they have to try and put a brave face on things. They may laugh it off with their friends while suffering in silence underneath.
- 4) A bereaved teenager may seek refuge from grief by turning to alternative preoccupations in an effort to shut themselves off from the pain and confusion of their emotions and sadness within the family.
- 5) Teenagers may postpone their own grief in an effort to help those around them.
- 6) Teenagers may experience survival guilt eg feelings that they should have died instead of the deceased.
- 7) As with younger children, concentration can diminish and performance at school or college may suffer. Expectations of them, in relation to school work, may have to be redefined to allow them time to recover from the initial shock and grief. Communication between parents and school is vital to address any concerns as a result of a CI. They need to know that these problems will diminish over time.
- 8) During the teenage years pupils often begin to question issues such as morality, ethics, spiritual issues, ideological stand points etc. Often at this time pupils may begin to think about their own mortality. The death of someone close may lead to feelings of anxiety about their own mortality.
- 9) Discipline problems at this time may be difficult after bereavement due to uncertainty about whether their problems are due to grief or whether they would have been present anyway.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP ?

Children and young people can be helped by:

- (a) Being aware of their feelings and emotions
- (b) discussing what can help, e.g. providing support to continue to keep in touch with reality and maintain a routine
- (c) being encouraged to share their feelings with others

WHEN DO I REQUEST FURTHER HELP ?

It is important that adults are aware of children's/young people's behaviour after a CI and that observations and/or concerns are shared promptly between school staff and parents.

A small number of children and young people may need support from professionals and they may show some or all of the following signs which did not occur to the same extent prior to the critical incident:

- Frequent bedwetting.
- Anxiety separation which manifests itself through panicking, screaming and/or crying.
- Significant lack of appetite or drastic change in eating pattern.
- Significant change in sleeping pattern or lack of sleep.
- Aggressive behaviour.
- Significant changes in language eg becoming mute, stammer.
- Any other significant changes.

WHERE DO I GO FOR HELP ?

Initially, if you are concerned contact school, share your concerns and ask for advice.

In some cases, in agreement with parents, the Headteacher may contact the Educational Psychologist.

Occasionally, a small number of pupils may need to be referred to the Child & Family Guidance clinic (Trehafod) and this is normally done through the Family GP, the Community Paediatrician or the Educational Psychologist.

When bereavement is a matter of concern you can contact:

- * The Child Bereavement Trust 01494 446648 (Information and Support)
www.childbereavement.org.uk
- * ChildLine Tel: 01792 480111 www.childline.org.uk
- * Cruse Bereavement - tel: 01792 462845. www.cruselochaber.freeuk.com/youth.htm/
- * Winston's Wish www.winstonwish.org.uk
- * Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide
- Confidential National Helpline – Tel. 0844 5616855

HOW CAN THE TEACHER HELP IN THE CLASSROOM ?

Keep class routine and familiarity as much as possible.

Run small group/Circle Time activities using age appropriate stories aimed at developing resilience, hope, friendship.

Use playtime, adult support to monitor/observe children's behaviour.

Use personal diaries to monitor emotions eg sad/happy faces.

Creative activities which aim to:

- encourage discussion and exploration of feelings of loss or bereavement.

Activities could include:

- Writing and taping stories, possibly prompted by giving the young person a word or subject to focus thinking. Sometimes a story with a theme about loss could be used as a starting point. Drawing can be used as a way of encouraging young people to express their feelings. Drama, role play or some unstructured play may be used.
- Using poetry, rhymes and songs to express emotion.
- Young people might explore alternative ways of expressing feelings eg what things make you feel angry and what might help to make you feel better.
- Young people may be able to suggest ways of helping each other and together with the teacher might explore different techniques, such as relaxation.
- There are many books for young people which may help them through the grieving process. There are factual books which answer young people's questions about the practicalities of what happens when someone dies and there are story books which help the young people to understand and perhaps to experience feelings through the use of simple tales often using animals as characters (see below).

USEFUL BOOKS

Bereaved Children and Teen:

A support guide for parents and professionals

A Grollman (Ed.) 1995 Beacon Press

Fourteen different authors contribute their own expertise to this book. The style is straightforward. It is a very useful resource for any parent or teacher at a loss as to how to help a grieving child or teenager. A wide spectrum of issues is covered including how grief affects young people. Activities are suggested that may help young people gain insight into different faiths, customs and beliefs about death. Very readable.

Caring for Bereaved Children

Mary Bending 1993, Cruse Bereavement Care

A short practical booklet in which ways of explaining death to children of different ages is discussed together with a section on how children think and feel about death. There is a short chapter on violent or unexpected death. The book is an excellent starting point for any parent or teacher. Very easy to read.

Available from: Cruse Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, TW9 1UR.

Helping children cope with grief

Wells, R

Includes suggestions for primary school teachers.

On the death of a child

Hindmarch, C, Radcliff Medical Press 1993

Guidelines for the support of both adults and children affected by a child's death.

Talking about death

Grollman, EA, Beacon 1990

A guide for adults on how to talk to children about death with a read-together section for the adult and child (under nines).