Helping children after a critical incident

A critical incident can be defined as a sudden, unexpected event that is distressing to pupils and/or staff. It may involve violence against members of the school, a serious accident or the sudden death of a child or teacher, or it could be that the school is subjected to major vandalism, such as an arson attack, or child abduction.

There has been a critical incident involving your school and this leaflet has been written to give you some general guidance.

Reactions will vary depending upon how directly a child or member of staff has been involved in the incident and upon past experiences.

Following an incident, a range of feelings may be experienced. Some feelings may be very powerful. Children often do not have the same understanding as adults. They may have more difficulty talking about, and controlling their responses to the feelings aroused by the incident.

The following responses are common after a critical incident:

- shock – a child may be very quiet or they may cry uncontrollably;
- denial – they may find it difficult to believe that something so awful has happened. If someone has died, even though they know the person has died, they may think that the person will return;
- searching – they may worry about losing other people or worry whether the incident will happen again;
- despair – the child may become tearful and reject the affection of others;
- anger – towards the people around them or people involved in the incident, including those who may have been injured or died;
- anxiety – about things they may or may not have done, or said, to have caused the incident;
- guilt – they may feel that in some way they might have stopped it from happening;
- confusion – about what has happened to those involved in the incident, particularly if someone has died

Children may show their feelings through behaviour rather than words. These behaviours might include:

- behaving like a younger child;
- being more irritable, naughty or aggressive;
- becoming very withdrawn;
• sleep disturbance, including bad dreams and flashbacks to the incident, fear of being alone or fear of the dark;

• wanting to be with their parents, or a trusted adults, at all times;

• difficulty concentrating, especially at school;

• changes in appetite or eating habits;

• fears for their own safety, or for the safety of family or friends;

• reluctance to talk;

• being easily upset;

• unwilling to go to school

All of these can be normal reactions to a distressing event.

**How can you help children**

• Do try to answer questions as honestly and accurately as you can.

• Do continue to do the things that you normally do. Familiar routines and events will provide security.

• Do be patient and calm.

• Do be ready to listen if your child wants to talk about his feelings.

• Do treat your child in your usual way, provide continued assurance of love and support.

• Do allow children to go through their own individual stages of grief.

• Don’t use words that the child cannot understand.

• Don’t discourage the emotions of shock or grief.

• Don’t become upset if your child does not want to talk about his or her feelings.

• Don’t be too protective.

**When to seek help**

Children’s reactions to a critical incident vary. Some may have reactions that are short-lived. Others may have more severe and long-lasting reactions.

If you are concerned about your child, talk to your child’s class-teacher or the Headteacher, who may suggest involving the Educational Psychologist. Alternatively, a range of child mental health or psychiatric services may be available through your GP.
How do I get in touch with the service?

Educational psychology service
Futures House
The Moakes
Luton
Bedfordshire
LU3 3QB

Tel: 01582 548150