

Introduction

Tragedy and trauma are part of life; however, coping with them is never easy. It is particularly difficult when it impacts on the lives of young people. This policy seeks to address the specific needs of the St Mary's CBS community following any traumatic event(s) in the context of the ethos of an ERST school. As critical incident management is an important part of normal school management practice, it must be carefully planned for. This policy sets out the procedures to be followed to ensure the safety and protection of the community of St Mary's CBS in the event of a critical incident. The guidelines set out in this policy will be used flexibly and in relation to each situation as no two incidents are exactly alike.

The Role of the School

The school can offer security at a time of insecurity. It is within such a normal environment that students and staff can best be helped to deal with traumatic reactions to critical incidents. Most incidents require a multi-dimensional approach involving all aspects of the community. If teachers, students, and parents receive support and information, within the bounds of GDPR legislation, they can become important agents of recovery, dispelling rumours, and helping all members of the school community to cope. It is recognised that the first 48 hours are crucial and that the first three weeks following a critical incident is a time of particular vulnerability for staff and students.

The Aims and Objectives of This Critical Incident Management Policy

- To respond to a critical incident in an informed way.
- To create a positive, open, communicative climate where the needs of the school community are met in critical incident situations.
- To recognise which incidents are critical for the school community.
- To create a safe school environment where the physical, social, and psychological health of students and staff are prioritised.
- To monitor and review the policy for dealing with emergencies.
- To promote active coping skills within the school curriculum.
- To establish positive working relationships and dialogue with outside agencies, enabling full and effective collaboration in the event of a critical incident.
- The development of a Critical Incident Management Policy will contain and limit the impact of an incident on the school community.
- To prevent or minimise a mass hysterical grief reaction

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Awareness of Critical Incident Management Policy

- It is important that all stakeholders in St Mary's CBS – Board of Management, staff, students, and parents – are informed and regular updates are provided.
- The Critical Incident Management Policy will be presented to all staff including new members of staff.
- The policy will be available on the school's website/App/VShare.
- Students will be informed of the policy as part of their induction programme.

The Definition of a Critical Incident

Critical incidents may involve one or more students, staff, or the school community. Critical incidents may occur in the school, during extra-curricular activities, school trips or within the wider school community. In the context of St Mary's CBS, we define that a critical incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school. These incidents may:

- be sudden or unexpected
- contain a real and intensive threat to life, health, property, security etc.
- cause severe disruption
- cause trauma to anyone

Different Types of Critical Incident

The list below outlines potential situations that can arise and impact on the School community. However, for the purposes of this policy, this list is not exhaustive.

- Death of a student or member of staff
- Major illness
- Outbreak of disease
- Criminal incidents – e.g. takeover of classroom, malicious damage, violent attack / intrusion by an armed intruder etc. – that will necessitate the Gardaí taking over the situation
- Major accidents/ Serious injury
- Assault on teacher or student
- Death of a student or member of staff by suicide
- Sexual / physical / psychological abuse
- Fire, flood and natural disasters
- Disappearance of a student from their home or the school
- Unauthorised removal of a student from their home or the school
- Hostage situation
- Major physical fight
- Traumatic accidental death
- School tour accident

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- Poisoning

Incident Responses

- Immediate Response
 - Contact the Principal/next available member of the Critical Incident Response Team.
 - Gather information - clarify accurate and factual information.
 - Record and verify details.
 - Alert the Critical Incident Management Team and convene a meeting. Specify the time and venue clearly.
 - Assess the needs of the situation – evacuation, supervision etc.
 - Notify the appropriate Emergency Services.
 - Inform the Chairperson of the Board of Management, staff, parent(s) /guardian(s), students, NEPS, external agencies, media as appropriate.
 - An agreed statement should be emailed to all staff before they begin to inform the students to prevent misinformation and misunderstandings.
 - Arrange supervision for students.
 - Create a calm, purposeful environment.
 - Inform students and explain to students why activity on social media sites e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc. should cease. Ensure that there is no sharing of images or videos.
 - Close friends and students with additional educational needs may need to be told separately.
 - Mobilise the senior students, Meitheal, Treoiri and Student Council to support the school authorities as appropriate.
 - Hold a staff meeting to agree a schedule for the day. Ask staff not to respond to media or engage in social media activity in relation to the incident.
 - Contact/visit the bereaved family within the first 24 hours.
 - Liaise with the family about funeral arrangements and clarify their wishes regarding the school's involvement.
 - Be aware of cultural differences, different religious traditions and rituals.
 - Prepare and agree a media statement and deal with the media.
 - Inform parent(s)/ guardian(s).
 - Hold an end of day staff briefing. Remind staff to not engage in social media activity in relation to the incident.
- Short Term Response
 - Maintain a calm atmosphere and clear leadership.
 - Assess the vulnerability and needs of different groups or individuals.
 - Offer information/support/practical help collectively or individually to parents.
 - Make a room available for students to gather. (LR1 / LR2, Meditation Room etc)

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- Identify vulnerable staff (possibly recently bereaved or close to those involved)
 - Organise staff support, providing opportunities for staff consultations.
 - Be available for students, staff, and parents.
 - Arrange de-briefing sessions for staff.
 - Liaise with relevant outside agencies.
 - Visit and consult with the family or families affected i.e. in relation to funeral arrangements.
 - Agree on attendance and participation at funeral service.
 - Make decisions about school closure.
 - Open a book of condolences.
 - As far as possible, keep the school open to maintain the school routine, exercising extreme care regarding authorised or unauthorised personnel on the school premises.
 - If part, or all, of the school is cordoned off for the purpose of criminal investigation, work creatively with other agencies to explore the possibility of continuing to bring classes together in other locations until the school is operational. If this is not possible, contact will be maintained with parent(s)/guardian(s) for updates.
 - If Gardai wish to interview students, their parent/guardian must be present.
- Medium Term Response
 - Continue to liaise with other agencies.
 - Continue to note and monitor information about teachers'/ parents' concerns.
 - Highlight opportunities through the curriculum or outside agencies for students to access support.
 - Monitor students for signs of continuing distress.
 - Plan for the return of bereaved or injured students.
 - Plan for giving book of condolences etc. to the family.
 - Organise talks, if appropriate, in relation to safety etc.
 - Be alert to behavioural changes/anxieties/fears in students related to the event.
 - Ensure that support is available for staff at a personal and professional level.
 - If needed, arrange referrals to external agencies for individuals/groups allowing weeks for normal bereavement process.
 - Long Term Response
 - Maintain on-going monitoring and review.
 - Watch for – hostility, hero worship, shock, grief, guilt, blame, numbness, copy-cat
 - Support individuals still affected.
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- On-going assessment of the needs of the school community as it copes with the impact of the incident.
- Deal with reminders of the event – impact of inquest, court proceedings etc.
- Continue to support staff on a personal and professional level.
- Continue with creative coping strategies via curriculum etc.
- Commemorate anniversaries appropriately; acknowledge significant dates e.g. anniversaries, birthdays etc.
- Inform new staff

- Continue to work with outside agencies, if appropriate.
- Review the response to the incident and amend the plan accordingly.
- Care for principal and CIMT

The Critical Incident Management Team

At a time of crisis there are many tasks to be carried out. By identifying key roles in advance of an incident there is a clear statement of who will do what, when and how. It is important that no one is overburdened and that important elements in the response are not forgotten.

The Critical Incident Management Team may include:

School Personnel	Name	Duties
Principal - Team Leader	Maura Murphy	Overall Management of the Incident
Deputy Principals	Brian Thompson Cyril Mulligan	Assisting the Principal
Guidance Counsellors	Mary McEntee Caitriona Phelan Caroline Brennan	Meeting with students, liaising with NEPS, other agencies as relevant
Chaplain	Fr David Vard	Available to students and staff Meeting with the family School liaison for funeral plans
Public Relations Coordinator	Niamh Hyland	Dealing with the media
First Aid Responder	Elaine Deegan	Applying First Aid before Paramedics arrive if required
Office Staff	Catherine Whelan Mary Murphy	Contacting parents, agencies as required
Sodexo Facility Manager	Robert Czapski	Building and campus
Year Heads	Geoff Brennan Adrian White Sean O'Laoire Paul Cahillane Olive Byrne Emma Lynch	Student care and organisation

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Some staff members may be co-opted on to the team, as deemed appropriate, in response to the incident, being mindful that personal circumstance or experience may preclude any of the above at any time.

The **key roles** which need to be covered are as follows:

- Team Leader
- Garda Liaison
- Staff Liaison
- Parent / Guardian Liaison
- Community Liaison
- Media Liaison
- Administrator

In the event of the Principal being absent from the school premises, she/he will be informed immediately of any critical incident. In her/his absence, the Team Leader role will devolve to the Deputy Principals.

Central Liaison Office for dealing with Critical Incidents

The Meeting Room, RF01, will become the central office for meetings etc. following the occurrence of any critical incident. Additional rooms may be assigned for different groups as required.

Critical Incident Emergency Kit –

- Ensure that contact details for the following emergency services are available to all staff: (*Appendix 1*)
 - Emergency services
 - Medical services (local GP's, hospitals, HSE personnel, etc)
 - Students' parents/guardians
 - Staff and their next of kin
 - CAMHS
 - NEPS
 - Members of the Board of Management
 - Department of Education & Skills
- First Aid Kit – in the Main Office
- Sample templates of letters to parents (re. tragedy, involvement of outside agencies) *Appendix 2*
- Sample templates for press releases *Appendix 3*
- Critical Incident Management Team names and numbers – available in the Main Office
- Evacuation plan – on the inside of all classroom doors
- Advice leaflets

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This list is not exhaustive.

Updating of Critical Incident Management Plan

An audit of existing procedures and resources will take place on an annual basis:

- Existing emergency procedures
- Administrative systems
- Curriculum strategies
- Experience of past critical incidents
- Potential risks e.g. emergency information for school trips
- Existing material resources
- Existing staff resources (e.g. staff trained in CPR, First Aid, Defibrillator, etc.)
- Links with support services and other external agencies
- Personal skills and capabilities
- Maintenance/supply of emergency equipment (defibrillators etc.)
- Staff changes and contact details
- Ensure adequate staff training

This list is not exhaustive.

While each school's response to a critical incident is dependent on the individual school context, many of the actions herein are based on best practice as detailed in the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) document, *Responding to Critical Incidents, NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools* (DES, 2016).

Relevant sections of this document are referenced throughout this policy and contain excellent guidance for a wide variety of incidents. In the event of a critical incident in this school it will inform many of our decisions and actions.

The Role of NEPS Psychologists in Critical Incidents

In the event of a critical incident, NEPS psychologists provide:

- Immediate short-term support, information and advice by phone or in school
- Assistance to staff in planning how to respond to a critical incident.
- Screening to identify students and staff in most need of support.

Advice to Teachers Supporting Students

- Tell students what you know about the incident (stick to the facts).
- Remember that the family will not wish all information to be shared.
- Trauma reactions are normal. Student distress will be closely monitored and where appropriate, parents will be contacted.
- Models of dealing with crisis e.g. opportunity to discuss incident.
- Teachers know the pre-trauma behaviour of their pupils.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know".

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- Develop strategies for increasing social support between students in your class e.g. pair work, group work.
- Continue to communicate in the months after the crisis.
- Make sensitive arrangements for the return to school of students.
- Consider the “vacant seat” / locker / etc.
- Alter class register to avoid further distress.
- Be alert to the possibility of unhelpful grief responses.
- Be alert to discussing rumours and allowing idle talk to develop
- Assure them that life goes on.

Vulnerable Students

In an incidence of death or other emotional trauma, the school community will endeavour to be particularly mindful of the following:

- Close friends or relatives of deceased
- Students who have been bereaved in the past, especially bereaved by suicide
- Students who have experienced a recent loss, e.g. death, divorce, separation, migration
- Students experiencing serious difficulties within their homes, e.g. mental illness, child protection issues.
- Students with a history of substance abuse
- Non-communicative students who have trouble talking about their feelings – including students with ASD or those with less fluent English and less able students.
- Students with a history of mental health difficulties including students with a history of suicide attempts/self-harm.

Confidentiality and good Name Considerations

Management and Staff have a responsibility to protect the privacy and good name of the people involved in any incident and will be sensitive to the consequences of any public statements. The members of the school staff will bear this in mind, and will seek to ensure that students do so also. Care is needed in the use of the term ‘suicide’- do not use it until it is established and be sensitive to the wishes of the family. The use of ‘tragic death’ or ‘sudden death’ may be used instead. Likewise, the word ‘murder’ should not be used until it is legally established that a murder was committed. The term ‘violent death’ may be used instead.

This Policy was reviewed and approved by the Board of Management

Anne Ahern
Chairperson

Date: April 2023

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Board of Management

Appendix 1: Emergency Contact List

Services	Contact Numbers
Garda	057 8674100
Hospital	057 8621364
Fire Brigade	057 8664000
Local GP's	Cedar Clinic 057 8621110 Dr Gerald White 0578622101 Annebrook Medical Centre 057 8620371 Dr Honan 057 8662929
HSE	057 8621135
Child and Family Centre (Tusla)	057 8692567
Child and Family Mental Health Service (CAMHS)	057 8696152
NEPS Psychologist	NEPS Office – 076 1108921 Helen Fitzgerald – 087 6113010
Department of Education	090 6483600
State Exams Commission	090 6442700
Chaplain – Parish Office Fr Vard	057 8621142 085 7618834
Employee Assistance Service	1800 411 057.
Barnardos	01 4530355
The Samaritans	1850 609 090
Pieta House	24/7 Crisis Helpline 1800 247 247 Roscrea 081 8111126
Childline	1800 666 666
Parentline	1890 927277
Aware	01 6766166 / 1890 303 302
Teac Tom Stradbally	057 8641391
Rainbows	01 4734175
SOSAD Laois	24/7 Helpline 1800 901 909
Teacher Unions	ASTI – 01 6040160 TUI – 1850 453 545

Appendix 2

Source: *Responding to Critical Incidents-NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools (DES)*

- **Sample Letter to Parents/Guardians – Sudden death/Accident**

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This letter can be used as a template for schools when they are informing parents of a tragedy, offering some advice and outlining what the school's response involves (brief details of the incident and, in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost). Where text/social media are used for communicating with parents this content will help with drafting.

Dear Parent/Guardian,

The school has experienced (the sudden death, accidental injury, etc.) of Name of student(s). We are deeply saddened by the deaths/events. Our thoughts are with (family name).

We have support structures in place to help your child cope with this tragedy (elaborate). It is possible that your child may have some feelings and questions s/he may like to discuss with you. It is important to give factual information that is age appropriate. You can help your child by taking time to listen and by encouraging him/her to express feelings. All children are different and will express their feelings in different ways. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty concentrating or be fearful, anxious, or irritable. They may become withdrawn, cry, complain of physical aches and pains, have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares. Some may not want to eat. These are generally short term reaction. Over the course of the coming days, please keep an eye on your child and allow him/her to express their feelings without criticism.

Although classes will continue as usual, I anticipate that the next few days will be difficult for everyone.

(Optional)

An information night for parents is planned for (date, time and place). At that time, further information about how to help children in grief will be given.

We have enclosed some information which you may find useful in helping your child through this difficult time.

Young people frequently turn to social media to see what others are saying, or to find out more. At these times it is important that you monitor their use and engage with them about what they read. We urge you to emphasise and reinforce the need to be extremely sensitive and careful about what they post.

If you would like advice, you may contact the following people at the school (details).

Principal's signature

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- **Sample Letter to Parents/Guardians - Violent Death**

This letter can be used as a template for schools when they are informing parents of a violent death, offering some advice and outlining what the schools response involves. (Give accurate information about the incident, but avoid using the word murder as this will not be established until the court case is completed).

Dear Parent/ Guardian,

I need to inform you about a very sad event that has happened.

A child/young person from the neighbourhood, the sister/ brother of (name of student), a student here at school, was killed as a result of (a violent attack, violent incident in the street etc.) earlier this week. We are all profoundly saddened by his death.

We have shared this information and had discussions with all of our students so that they know what has happened. School staff members have been available for students on an on-going basis today. Other support personnel (including psychologists etc., according to actual arrangements) are available to advise staff in their support of students.

The death of any young person is tragic, but a violent death is even more difficult. It is hard to have to teach our children about the violence in our world and to accept that sometimes we do not have the power to prevent it.

This death may cause a variety of reactions in your child. Some children/young people may be afraid for their own life and for the lives of those they love. Take time to listen to their fears and reassure them that what has happened is rare.

We have enclosed some additional information that may be useful during this time.

The media are in the vicinity of the school and may approach you or your children. You need not respond to their questions if you are approached. We will not allow the media to interview your child at school and our general advice is that you should not let your children be interviewed. They are not mature enough to judge what to say and may say something they will regret later.

In these times, young people tend to turn to social media to see what others are saying, or to find out more. While social media can be of great consolation, we would urge you to reinforce the need to be extremely sensitive about what your son/daughter might post to others.

Our thoughts are with (family name) and with each of you.

Sincerely,

Principal's signature

Appendix 3

• **Sample Announcement to The Media**

Source: *Responding to Critical Incidents-NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools (DES)*

This can be used as a template by schools to be emailed, posted on the school social media site, or given to the media. It may help to decrease the number of media calls and callers to the school.

In some instances it is not appropriate to provide names or information that might identify individuals.

This announcement will need to be changed based upon confidentiality issues, the wishes of the victim's family and the nature of the incident.

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My name is (Name) and I am the principal of (Name) School. We learned this morning of the death of (one of our students or Name of student). This is a terrible tragedy for family(ies), our school and our community. We are deeply saddened by these events. Our sympathy and thoughts are with (Name) family and friends.

Name of student/students was a (5th year boy) and will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

We have been in contact with his/her parents and they have requested that we all understand their need for privacy at this difficult time.

Offers of support have been pouring in and are greatly appreciated. Our school has implemented our Critical Incident Management Plan.

Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and (insert other information if relevant) have been with us all day supporting and advising teachers in their efforts to assist our students at this time.

The teachers have been helping students to deal with the tragic event.

The school has been open to parents to support them and to offer them advice and guidance.

We would ask you to respect our privacy at this time.

Thank you.

Appendix 4

AGENDA FOR MEETING WITH CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM/KEY STAFF

- ✓ Share the details of the event.
- ✓ Agree on the facts. These will need to be relayed in a clear, appropriate and consistent manner by all staff to the students.
- ✓ Discuss what agencies have been contacted and whether there are additional ones that should be informed.
- ✓ During major incidents phone lines may become jammed. Agree on which phone line is kept open for outgoing emergency calls.
- ✓ When several external agencies are involved in a response, co-ordination will be needed, and procedures will need to be agreed.
- ✓ Plan procedures for the day.
- ✓ Discuss issues relating to school routine, including school closure. Remember it is important to maintain a normal routine when at all possible. It is recommended that the school timetable runs as normal. This will provide a sense of safety and structure which is comforting for many students. Teachers should give students the opportunity to talk about what happened and temporarily shelve all academic activities if necessary.
- ✓ You may wish to consult students about what to do if there is an event scheduled, such as a trip, concert or match. This should reduce the likelihood of students being angry later as a result of any school action or in-action.
- ✓ Discuss how to break the news to relatives and close friends and who should do this. Discuss how to break the news to the rest of the students. Class groups are often best, rather than large assemblies.
- ✓ Discuss how to identify vulnerable students.
- ✓ If there are students of various nationalities and religions in the school, this needs to be taken into consideration in organising prayer services, attendance at the funeral etc. Parents of different religious or national groups need to be consulted.
- ✓ Plan a whole staff briefing (including ancillary staff). This may need to be done in two groups depending on the arrangements for the supervision of students.
- ✓ Agree the text of a letter to be sent to parents.
- ✓ Discuss how to deal with the media. Prepare a media statement, if appropriate. This can be faxed or emailed to media representatives who contact the school. It may also be used if an interview is requested. Ask staff not to respond to media or engage in social media activity in relation to the incident.
- ✓ Delegate responsibilities to the appropriate critical incident team member or key personnel.
- ✓ Discuss which room(s) will be available to external agencies.
- ✓ Decide whether the Meditation Room should be made available for students. This is a place the students can go if they are having difficulty remaining composed in the classroom.
 - It should have tissues, cushions, drawing and writing materials and appropriate information leaflets. It is generally recommended that this is available for the week following the incident and that its use is then reviewed.
 - Students should sign out of their regular class and sign into the Meditation Room for a certain time. The room should be supervised to ensure student

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safety. A very distressed student may need individual support. This might be offered by the guidance counsellor, chaplain, or other staff member.

- A similar room could be set up for staff.
- ✓ Discuss the issue of consent for students who may need to be seen by the psychologist and arrange for the consent form to be photocopied and sent to parents.
- ✓ Where a request is made that a student be seen by a psychologist prior to having signed the consent form, telephone the parent or carer to obtain verbal consent. If it is not possible to make immediate contact, the principal, in consultation with the psychologist, should then make the decision in the best interest of the student. This should take precedence over procedural matters. If a student is seen without consent, parents should be contacted as soon as possible by the school.
- ✓ A record should be kept of all students seen by school staff and agencies external to the schools. One person should be appointed to collate the lists regularly.
- ✓ Each team member should keep records of all phone calls made during the incident management, as well as records of meetings, visits etc.
- ✓ Agree the next meeting time for the Critical Incident Management Team.
- ✓ Agree a time for follow up staff meeting at the end of the day. This gives an opportunity for the principal to update staff on any developments. It also allows time for preparation for the following day. Lastly, it gives staff a chance to share their experience and to wind down after the day.

Note:

In the case of a major accident, meetings may be held in a location away from the school involving key personnel from school and other agencies. Care should be taken that staff with appropriate experience and authority remain in place in the school to facilitate an effective response. The principal might consider delegating someone to go to such meetings as, if they decide to go themselves, they may not be available for critical decisions in their own school.