

Responding to Critical Incidents during School Closures and Public Health Restrictions arising from COVID-19

Information Booklet for Schools



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Síceolaíochta Oideachais
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

Purpose of this booklet

NEPS publication '*Responding to Critical Incidents - NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools*' outlines best practice in guiding school communities to respond to a critical incident in a way that promotes resilient outcomes. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, the actions typically taken by schools in responding to critical incidents require adaptation.



RESPONDING TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS

NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools



The purpose of this booklet is to outline how schools might adapt their response to critical incidents (both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 related), particularly those short-term and medium-term actions outlined in Sections 4 and 5 of '*Responding to Critical Incidents-NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials*

for Schools' (pages 20-29). This booklet should be read in conjunction with these main guidelines. Various sections and resources (R) from these guidelines are referenced throughout this booklet.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Public Health measures in place at this time are challenging students, staff and families, in particular those who may be already vulnerable. Therefore, it is even more important at this time to attend to preventative factors that may mitigate against distress and promote wellbeing. In this regard, we direct schools and parents to the [NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during COVID-19](#) for suggestions on maintaining student, teacher and parent wellbeing.

It is also recommended that schools review their Critical Incident Management Plan to ensure that they are ready to respond effectively to critical incidents occurring at this time.

NEPS wants to acknowledge the unprecedented challenges that the school closures and public health restrictions arising from COVID-19 brings for the whole school community, and especially for school leaders. Responding to a critical incident during this time brings additional concern. To support you to support your school communities, school leaders are encouraged to pay particular attention to their own self-care in the first instance;- suggestions available on [Teacher Wellbeing and Self Care during the Covid-19 school closure](#)

NEPS is available to provide telephone/online support to you and your community in the event of a critical incident.

Day 1: Action Plan for Critical Incident Management Team. (See Section 4 of main guidelines *)

Short Term Actions

a) Convene

- Establish accurate facts.
- Refer to the school's Critical incident Management Policy and to [Responding to Critical Incidents-NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools](#) document.
- Convene Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) meeting virtually.
- Conduct an initial assessment of the incident, decide what level of response is required (guidelines pgs. 20–21) and agree an Action Plan.
- Contact appropriate agencies, e.g. Board of Management etc. (R21).
- Decide who needs to be contacted directly:- staff/students/parents/others and by what means:- phone/email/text/letter/website notice. See R2/3 for sample notices.
- Identify vulnerable students (see risk factors pg. 25) and consider how to connect with them:- phone call to parents and/or speaking to students directly.
- Consider how to communicate with the bereaved family whilst physical distancing measures are in place:- phone calls, writing a card or letter.

b) Notify staff and parents

- Agree and test available technologies as a means of communication,
- Agree a telephone tree for contacting staff and advise staff of the initial Action Plan.
- Notify parents using agreed means.
- Remember to respect family privacy and avoid references to the cause of death.
- Bear in mind that it is not usual practice for a school to inform the school community of the death of a parent.
- Manage social media as per guidelines (R22). Draft a media statement if necessary (R4).
- Distribute resource page 7 of this document as appropriate, '*For parents sharing sad news with their child*'.

c) Connecting with staff

- Agree a telephone tree for contacting staff.
- Make separate contact with staff who may be vulnerable.
- Remind staff of the availability of the *Inspire Service* (ph. 1800 411057).
- Agree a time for a follow-up staff meeting for updates and reflection on shared experiences.
- Draw teachers attention to [Teacher Wellbeing and Self Care during the Covid-19 school closure](#)
- Share with staff any resources being forwarded to parents.

* Section 4: [Responding to Critical Incidents-NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools](#)

Short Term Actions (cont.)

d) Connecting with students

- In accordance with school policy, some staff may decide to link directly with students via telephone, video link or email. Post Primary staff should refer to DES document on '[Continuity of Guidance Counselling-Guidelines for schools providing online support for students](#)'.
- Remind students that maintaining communication is important for wellbeing, and encourage them to keep in touch with close family and friends, whilst observing HSE guidelines. Remind students and staff that others are available to provide support.
- Reassure students of their resilience and ability to cope. Encourage them to think of times and ways that they have coped in the past and to identify attributes that have helped them during difficult times.

e) Bereavement rituals: Funeral restrictions and alternative goodbyes

- Designated CIMT member(s) should liaise with the bereaved family regarding the funeral service and, when appropriate, a memorial service. Remind students that they are not alone in their grief and that everyone shares the loss of not being able to participate in our usual rituals and togetherness; i.e. visiting the family, attending funerals, etc.
- Reassure students that the bereaved family understands the need to comply with current Public Health restrictions and that a commemorative service may take place at a later date.
- Invite students to think of alternative ways to express sympathy, e.g. sending a card to family (see [Winston's Wish](#) for alternative goodbyes). Remind students to be considerate and sensitive when posting messages on any social media platforms. RIP.ie has a message condolence facility.
- School leaders may consider facilitating a school platform for compiling messages of condolences/well wishes to share with family, monitored for sensitivity by school personnel.
- Encourage students to participate individually, but collectively, in any bereavement ritual being organised, e.g. a streamed funeral service, lighting a candle at a particular time during the ceremony, playing music, etc.

Day 2 and beyond: Action Plan for Critical Incident Management Team

(See Sections 5 &6 of main guidelines *)

Medium Term and Follow Up Actions

f) Review

- Convene a further Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) meeting virtually to review what has been done and to identify new tasks needed.
- Update staff virtually on any new information.

g) Continue to provide support

- Continue to link in with students, especially more vulnerable students.
- Remind students that others are available to provide support, e.g. teachers, guidance counsellors, close family, friends and/or online supports.
- Advise students to use practical approaches to manage anxiety. Share [DES resources and advice](#) for young people during COVID-19:- using breathing techniques, [relaxation techniques](#), [coping statements](#), practising yoga, doing exercise, etc.
- Support students to create action plans and to break down problems into small, realistic and manageable steps.
- Encourage students to try to spot any unhelpful thoughts and to ‘reframe’ them to more helpful thoughts (e.g. - ‘That car was unsafe, but not all cars are unsafe’).
- Encourage them to identify positive, self-soothing strategies with prompts such as ‘What will help?’ or ‘What can I do now?’ For further resources, see www.yourmentalhealth.ie.
- Advise parents and students against making big life changes or hasty decisions at this challenging time.
- Advise parents to make a referral to their GP should their child show signs of severe emotional distress (R14).

h) Follow Up Actions: (See Guidelines Section 6, Pg. 30)

- Discuss and review the status of any student referrals made to outside agencies.
- Prepare for how your school might support all students and staff when schools reopen, in particular those who have been bereaved.
- Evaluate your school’s response to the critical incident and amend your Critical Incident Management Policy, as appropriate.

Resources

Below is a sample of online resources to support young people who have experienced loss and grief. These resources are intended to complement NEPS' existing publication '[Responding to Critical Incidents-NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools](#)'.

a) Coronavirus and Bereavement

[The Irish Hospice Foundation](#) have developed practical and easily accessible materials for the Irish context, and include resources and supports available from organisations such as the HSE, DES and websites such as RIP.ie. There are also topic specific resources addressing issues such as '[Planning a funeral in exceptional times](#)', '[Grieving in exceptional times](#)' and '[Helping children grieve during COVID-19 restrictions](#)'

[Winston's Wish](#) is a British childhood bereavement charity with a very comprehensive website. Their COVID-19 page has useful resources, such as '[How to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible](#)', '[Telling a child someone has died from coronavirus](#)' and '[Managing grief in isolation](#)'

b) General Bereavement

[Rainbows](#) is a free, voluntary service that supports children and young people with separation and bereavement. Support programmes for children and young people at both primary and post-primary level are available for students three months (minimum) after the experience of a loss. Further information and resources are available at their website.

[Barnardos](#) provide wide-ranging services to families, including support around bereavement. There is a downloadable e-book and links to various services available on their website.

[The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network](#) is a member organisation where families, professionals and schools can obtain information, guidance and support from various professionals. In addition to resources and supports, courses are available for professionals to develop their skillset in supporting bereavement.

c) Suicide and Bereavement

The [National Office for Suicide Prevention \(NOSP\)](#) is the body responsible for co-ordination and implementation of the national strategy for suicide prevention. As well as general information and resources, the site includes details on regional contacts for Suicide Resource Officers/Samaritans etc., details of various training programmes, and how professionals can access 'Urgent Help' at times of crisis.

[Headspace](#) is an Australian organisation for youth mental health. Their website has very practical materials for supporting those who have lost a loved one through suicide.

d) SEN and Bereavement

[Mencap](#) have materials for explain loss and death to people with learning disabilities and includes literature for specific aspects such as '[What can I do to feel better](#)' and '[Going to a funeral](#)'

Resources: For parents sharing sad news with their child

The following NEPS resources may be helpful for parents:

[*Children's Understanding and Reaction to Death \(R6\)*](#)

[*Stages of Grief \(R7\)*](#)

[*How to cope when something terrible happens \(R8\)*](#)

[*Reactions to a Critical Incident*](#)

[*Ways To Help Your Child Through This Difficult Time \(R12\)*](#).

Other Recommended Resources

[**Barnardos**](#) provide a wide-ranging service to families including support around bereavement. Downloadable e-books both parents and children are available on their website as well as links to various services. Barnardos also provide a [children's bereavement helpline service](#), for members of the public seeking information and support in relation to bereavement. Telephone **01 473 2110** (from 10am to 12pm, Monday to Thursday)

[**The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network**](#) is a member organisation where families, professionals and schools can obtain information, guidance and support from various professionals. In addition to resources and supports, courses are available for professionals to develop their skillset in supporting bereavement.

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Supports for younger people

Childline (ISPCC) is Ireland's 24-hour national listening service for young people up to the age of 18. Freephone **1800 666 666** (any time, day or night).

Text **50101** (from 10am to 4pm every day). Chat online at www.childline.ie (from 10am to 4pm every day).

The YourMentalHealth.ie website has information on all mental health supports and services available nationally & locally from the HSE and its funded partners. You can also call the freephone *YourMentalHealth Information Line* to find supports and services: **1800 111 888** (any time, day or night).

NEPS respond to critical incidents on request from affected schools.

School authorities seeking support should contact their [local NEPS office](#) during working hours, Monday – Friday.