# Responding to a Critical Incident

The UK Trauma council has provided us with evidence-based research about what makes the right support at the right time count.

There are 5 principles after a critical incident to support your educational community.

1. Calmness
2. Feeling safe
3. A sense of things being in control
4. Connectedness
5. Hopefulness

A free poster can be downloaded here.

[230609--CI-Poster\_A3.indd (uktraumacouncil.link)](https://uktraumacouncil.link/documents/Critical+Incidents/UKTC_CI-poster.pdf)

**Checklist of things to consider in the event of a Critical Incident**

**Immediate response: (within hours)**

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| 1. | Is everybody safe? Call 999 if needed and administer first aid. |  |
| 2. | Gain accurate information of the situation. |  |
| 2. | Does the school need additional support from the LA?   * Look at the resources available on [Infolink](file:///C:/Users/paula.pashley/OneDrive%20-%20Essex%20County%20Council/Documents/Paula/powerpoints/play%20therapy%20introduction.pptx) * If you need more support, you can complete the [Notification Form](https://schools.essex.gov.uk/admin/Critical_Incidents/Documents/TEMPLATE%20-%20Incident%20Notification%20Form%20Feb%202023.docx)  and select 'yes' to support. * Please send completed forms to [schoolscommunication@essex.gov.uk](mailto:schoolscommunication@essex.gov.uk) * The Schools Communication Team review the form and coordinate the support between services (including the Essex Educational Psychology Service). The requested services will then make contact with you, within 24 hours. * To discuss available support, call the Schools Communication Team on **0333 013 9880**. This line monitored Monday to Friday 8am to 4pm. If you call and there is no answer, please send an email to the above address. |  |
| 5. | Inform the school governors and senior staff and arrange a meeting to discuss next steps with key people (Critical Incident Management Team - CITM). |  |
| 6. | In the event of a child death, or that of a staff member, check the information is accurate and liaise closely with the family/families involved (and thereafter throughout) to ascertain their wishes. Ensure you have permission to share further information. |  |
| 7. | If you have one, refer to your School/Critical Incident Management Plan (S/CIMP) and Bereavement Policy. You may already call this a School Emergency Management Plan – critical incidents should be part of this. |  |
| 8. | Inform the Essex media team as required: **03330 132800 / 07717 867525** (out of hours) |  |
| 9. | Designate a room and phoneline in school specifically for the critical incident. Ensure key people/agencies have phone number. |  |
| 10. | Start a log of who has called and what has happened. |  |
| 11. | Identify particularly vulnerable pupils and staff; use the **Circles of Vulnerability** information below as a guide. |  |
| 12. | Brief staff and pupils (see notes on sharing information). |  |
| 13. | Inform parents of the event (see notes on sharing information). |  |

**Key messages from young people who have “been there”**

Whilst developing their guidance and resources the UK trauma council were fortunate to benefit from consultation with several young people who had experienced critical incidents (including those who from the Grenfell Tower)

There were some key messages that came up repeatedly during the discussions:

* School and college response must be flexible, and should prioritise mental health and recovery over academic performance. (Of course in reality these two are not exclusive, in fact you cannot expect a student to perform academically unless they have been helped to recover sufficiently from the critical incident first).
* Communication between the responding adults is crucial (e.g. if a therapist says the pupil can bring a friend to the therapy in school, but the teacher then says they can’t, that makes them annoyed with both the therapist and the teacher: one pupil can’t use the therapy and their friend can’t make use of the lesson).
* Understand that recovery takes time, not just a couple of weeks.
* Avoid triggers and avoid forcing them to talk about it.
* Sometimes traumatic reactions are hidden and may not be obvious.
* Every young person is different, every event is different, so what they need is different. Give them more choice and more control.

**Guidance for Sharing information**

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| **Briefing staff and pupils** (this can be planned following advice from the EP service if involved). Some information on how best to do this is included within the Sharing Sad News section on the Infolink. Be aware of the sensitivities around sharing information too early - this should always be done (where possible) with permission of the family involved. This will obviously need to be balanced with any potential risk in not sharing relevant information and you should seek advice on this if necessary. |
| **Inform parents of the event** (this can be planned following advice from the EP service if involved); by letter may be best and some sample templates can be found within the Sharing Sad News section on [Infolink](file:///C:/Users/paula.pashley/OneDrive%20-%20Essex%20County%20Council/Documents/Paula/powerpoints/play%20therapy%20introduction.pptx) Direct phone calls to parents of the most vulnerable pupils and those most closely involved would be advisable. |

**A framework for sharing information**

Clearly the content and exact nature of the information giving will depend on a range of factors including the event, the impact, the context, the age and developmental stage of the children and young people, and other factors. However, the framework below should provide a helpful guide, incorporating the key principles: safe, calm, connected, in control and hopeful.

**Preparing to share information**

Take a moment to prepare what you are going to say and how best to deliver it to your educational community. Seek support from a trusted colleague for moral support or maybe to share the role of information giving. It may also be helpful to prepare children and young people, giving a clear and explicit message about the purpose of the meeting and what will be covered. This may be especially important for those who are autistic.

**Setting out the facts**

Provide simple factual information about the incident. This should include what happened, who was involved, and when and where it happened. Being truthful about the event will also mean being honest about what is not known. Provide this information in small chunks, as when children and young people are distressed, they may not be able to take in a lot of information at once.

**Acknowledging and normalising emotional responses**

Explaining that when events like this happen, it is usual to feel all kinds of feelings and that there is no right or wrong way to feel may help to normalise the range of emotional reactions to the event.

**Signposting to help and support**

Being clear about what is available to staff, children and young people in terms of support will be important. It can be helpful to communicate the idea that one important source of supportwill be each other. Let people know that it’s OK to talk and to ask someone if they want to talk. There will be some people who do not wish to talk about the incident or their feelings right now, and that is OK too.

**Emphasising positive action**

Share information about services that are helping those in your educational community. For example, “The army have been called in to help with preventing further floods” or “The police have brought in additional officers to increase the number of patrols”.

**Empowering peers to support each other**

Explain how the children and young people can help to look out for one another You might explain that there will be opportunities to talk to each other as this can be important. You may encourage them to looking out for each other and let the adults know if you are worried about anyone. For example, “We all have important roles right now, to be good friends and look out for each other.”

**Fostering resilience, strength, and hope**

Noticing and communicating specific and authentic strengths that the educational community has displayed in the immediate time after the event can help people to feel effective and may support feelings of hope.

**Planning further communication**

Let the children and young people know what will happen next in relation to further communication. For example, how and when you will communicate with their carers. Tell them about follow up meetings or conversations you will be having so that they know you will revisit the information and keep them updated. These may be in face-to-face meetings for children and young people or ‘briefings’, emails, or short videos available on the school website for staff and families.

**Example**

Below you will find an example of how you might break the news about a young person who died following a stabbing outside the school gates. It is not an exact script but provides ideas for how this framework might be used to structure the delivery of difficult news.

**1. Preparation**

“We are stopping our lesson right now because I have some difficult news to tell you. It’s going to take a few minutes and you can ask me any questions at the end.

**2. Setting out the facts**

“Some of you might have seen or heard that there was an incident this morning just outside the school gates. Jacob in year 10 was stabbed. I am really very sad to tell you that Jacob has died.”

**3. Acknowledging and normalising**

“I’ll give you a moment to take that in. We all respond differently when we hear something distressing that’s okay. It is normal to feel shocked and upset and it’s also normal to feel numb and not really know what you are feeling. These feelings may affect your body too and leave you feeling really unsettled for a while.”

**4. Signposting to help and support**

“We want to make sure you are well supported so we have set up the student support office and the counselling room for anyone that needs some time to think or talk. If you want to sit with a friend during your lessons today, we will help that to happen. We will also be sending an email home later with other ideas for support for you.”

**5. Emphasising positive action**

“The police have arrested someone. I can’t tell you their name as the police haven’t released that information. They have cordoned off the area outside the school where Jacob was stabbed. That means you won’t use the front gate for the next few days. There will also be extra police officers around the area outside school to help everyone feel safer.”

**6. Empowering peer support**

“This is such an incredibly sad time. I know that many of you were especially good friends with Jacob and his family. I hope you will be able to support and look out for each other – that includes supporting those in your class here, but also others in different classes and year groups. Let us know if you are worried about anyone and how they are coping.”

**7. Fostering resilience, strength and hope**

“Right now, I feel very upset but I am hopeful that by sticking together we can find a way to cope. We will be asking you for ideas about how we can remember Jacob.”

**8. Planning further communication**

“An email will be sent out to your parents and carers letting them know what has happened. I will keep you updated with any news as soon as I can, and I will definitely talk with you again tomorrow.”

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| Supporting pupils and staff |
| Please see the Information and resources for helping to cope with bereavement and loss section on [Infolink](file:///C:/Users/paula.pashley/OneDrive%20-%20Essex%20County%20Council/Documents/Paula/powerpoints/play%20therapy%20introduction.pptx) |
| If the incident requires EPs to provide support for vulnerable staff or pupils, arrange for the EP and senior management team (or team identified in the S/CIMP) to discuss what needs to happen next and create a support plan. This is most helpful when done with other agencies together to co-ordinate any support for the school. |
| The aim of EP support is to enable staff to be able to support their students and families of their school community. School staff will be the most relevant people to support students in times of distress. School staff should be available for the upcoming days, weeks and months and so can continue to share the key messages (as advised by the EP during emotional support conversations). Relevant resources can be found in the Information and resources for helping to cope with bereavement and loss section on [Infolink](file:///C:/Users/paula.pashley/OneDrive%20-%20Essex%20County%20Council/Documents/Paula/powerpoints/play%20therapy%20introduction.pptx) |
| Allow time for ‘check-in’ meetings to share information and updates as events unfold and the situation moves forward. This enables key staff to be supported, for action plans to be adjusted accordingly and to identify what is going well and any issues that have arisen. |
| Set a general plan with key staff for what will happen in first week and the next, (with regard to informing and supporting staff, students, parents) – in liaison with the EPs supporting your school if this is the case. |
| Memorials and remembrance – agree with staff, pupils and the family/families how you will do this as a school, (e.g., a space for writing messages, drawing pictures, sharing memories). |

**Identifying those that might need more help**

At all stages of your response, you will also want to specifically identify any children, young people or staff who may need more support. This will likely include those:

* most impacted by this critical incident, those who witnessed it or are close to those who were injured or have died
* whose routine has been most disrupted
* with previous experience of trauma or other similar events (including those who are care experienced or those with experience of the asylum-seeking process)
* with SEND who might need additional support in understanding and processing what has happened and what it means for them
* who are isolated in their peer group, home environment or local community including those from minoritised groups, who have previously been bereaved
* with pre-existing mental health needs
* who are more quiet than normal and might not normally seek help even if they are struggling
* who have interpreted the event in such a way as to overestimate the ongoing risk to themselves.

Be flexible with this list and use your knowledge and experience about those who are identified as potentially vulnerable. Just because someone has experienced previous adversity does not automatically mean they will struggle. They may have also developed resilience, strategies and networks of support that help them cope. But we recommend that they are monitored more closely and that someone checks in with them regularly to see if additional support if needed.

**Circles of Vulnerability**

This is a helpful tool for screening vulnerability based on three dimensions\*

1. the **physical proximity** dimension
   1. direct exposure (most vulnerable)
   2. very near to the area
   3. within hearing distance
2. the **social/psychological** dimension
   1. immediate family (most vulnerable)
   2. close family or friend
   3. knows the person well
   4. knows the person or identifies with them
3. the **populations at risk** dimension
   1. recent similar incident or trauma (most vulnerable)
   2. significant loss in the past year
   3. current difficult personal circumstances
   4. tendency to experience low well being/mental health

\*not all dimensions will be relevant for all incidents/situations

Those with the greatest vulnerability across each dimension are potentially more vulnerable to being affected by an incident or situation i.e. those with mostly ‘a’

Individuals who are being affected in all three dimensions are most vulnerable and support for them should be a priority.

**Medium and Longer term**

There are no hard and fast rules and no simple tests to identify those that need help, but think about the following areas to help you assess the level of difficulty or distress they are experiencing:

• Severity

• Duration

• Frequency

• Direction and rate of change

• Impact

• Persistence

It is likely that your educational community will have in many ways adjusted to daily life in the months that follow a critical incident. However, there are still things you can do to promote an environment for recovery for the long term and to support those whose difficulties remain.

In the months that follow a critical incident you will be seeking to develop a new normal: one that doesn’t pretend the event didn’t happen but acknowledges how life in your community is continuing by adjusting and working together. This increased sense of certainty and predictability will contribute further towards the recovery of those impacted. As you head towards the first anniversary of the event and beyond, finding ways to remember what happened and honour those affected will be important.

**Medium and Longer term**

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| 1. | School routines will continue (as far as possible). This is to ensure the children feel secure and know there is stability in school. |  |
| 2. | Monitoring of individuals now and longer term - plan how you will do this, who will take responsibility in school and who else should be involved (e.g. EPs, Mental Health Support Team, SET CAMHS). Typically, we recommend a ‘watch and wait’ approach for pupils in the first instance, providing emotional support from key adults in school as needed. If pupils do not seem to be coping around 4 weeks later (allowing for normal grief patterns), they may require additional support from external services. |  |
| 3. | Where appropriate; make sensitive arrangements for the return to school which may include:  · the possibility of part time or flexible attendance  · preparing return into the class  · ensuring the curriculum is well thought through  · a catch-up package is planned  · organising visits by the staff and friends (in person or remotely) to give confidence and a clear message of a support network at school  · set up ‘time-out’ arrangements for any pupil if they feel upset or become overwhelmed. |  |
| 3. | Work with pupils and parents to consider how to offer support within school. Group and individual support should be made available if needed. Key members of staff to be identified for pupils/parents to contact. See [Infolink](file:///C:/Users/paula.pashley/OneDrive%20-%20Essex%20County%20Council/Documents/Paula/powerpoints/play%20therapy%20introduction.pptx) for resources. |  |
| 4. | Noting key dates for the future – plan how you will manage these once the event has passed (e.g. funeral, birthdays etc). Liaise with key staff, family and other professionals as appropriate. |  |
| 5. | Review and monitor the process and check in with staff, pupils and parents following the event and throughout. |  |

**Summary of the research**

This guidance is based on the UK Trauma Council and a foundational research paper by Hobfoll and colleagues: ‘Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence’ (2007)5. It brings together global experts on the study and treatment of trauma following disaster and mass violence and suggests five principles, informed by the evidence, to guide the response. Drawing on international, multicultural evidence, these principles are universally applicable. However, given the chaotic and varied nature of traumatic events, and the diverse cultural contexts in which they take place, they are designed to be applied flexibly, as best fits the local setting.

A reminder of the five principles:

1. Promoting a sense of safety

2. Promoting calming

3. Promoting a sense of self- and community efficacy

4. Promoting connectedness

5. Promoting hope