

Mount Mercy College

Critical Incident Policy

Mount Mercy College aims to protect the wellbeing of its students, staff and whole school community, by providing a safe and nurturing environment at all times.

This policy is in line with the Céist Schools Charter, one of our core values is 'Creating Community', where "Our schools ... there is special care for those most in need".

Our school has taken a number of measures to create a supportive and caring ethos for our students and staff. These include a number of policies and procedures to be followed with a view to ensuring the physical and psychological safety of both staff and students during the normal course of the school day and in the event of a critical incident. These policies and procedures include Fire Drills, the Anti Bullying Policy, the Code of Behaviour, SPHE and the Pastoral Care system.

Definition of a Critical Incident

A critical incident is defined as being "any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school" (Source: Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools, NEPS 2008). A critical incident may involve students, staff members, the school or the local community.

Examples of a Critical Incident include:

- The death of a member of the school community, through sudden death, accident, suicide/ suspected suicide or other unexpected death
- A serious accident or tragedy in the school community
- An accident/ tragedy in the wider community
- An intrusion into the school
- Serious damage to the school through fire, flooding, vandalism etc.
- A physical attack on a staff member or student
- The disappearance of a member of the school community

Aim of Critical Incident Management Plan

The aim of the critical incident management plan as outlined in this document is:

- To help school management and staff to react quickly and effectively in the event of an incident,
- To enable personnel to maintain a sense of control and to ensure that appropriate support is offered to students and staff.
- This plan will help the school to return to normality as soon as possible and to limit the effects of the incident on staff and students.

Critical Incident Management Team

The critical incident management team is comprised of the following:

- Principal
- Deputy Principals
- Guidance Counsellors
- Learning Support Coordinator
- Year Heads
- Garda liaison

- Administration staff
- The team may co-opt other members of staff to assist them if deemed necessary.

The Principal will act as Team Leader or in their absence the Deputy Principals. In the absence of both the Principal and the Deputy Principals the designated person left in charge will assume the role of Team Leader :

Role of the Team Leader

- Alerts team members to the crisis and convenes a meeting of the team.
- Coordinates and delegates tasks to other team members
- Liaises with the Board of Management, and outside agencies (NEPS, An Garda Síochána etc)
- In the case of bereavement, liaises with the bereaved family.

Other areas of responsibility which may be delegated by the Team Leader to other members of the team include:

- Contacting emergency support services
- Briefing and advising the staff and noting their feelings and concerns
- Organising the supervision of students in the school
- Keeping staff updated on information/ developments/ progress.
- Meeting students to brief them on the situation.
- Taking care of vulnerable students and staff members
- Liaising with external agencies for support or referrals
- Liaising with school organisations such as the Parents' Association and Student Council
- Meeting with individual parents or groups of parents
- Visiting bereaved families or families closely associated with the incident.
- Preparing a press release and liaising with the media
- Preparation of an "Incident Room"

Record Keeping

All team members will keep written records of phone calls, letters, emails, meeting, interventions etc.

School Secretaries will have a key role in receiving and logging telephone calls, sending letters, photocopying materials, etc.

Confidentiality

The school is conscious of its responsibility to protect the privacy and good name of people involved in any incident and will be sensitive to the consequences of any public statements.

- Careful use of appropriate language is essential.
 - the word 'suicide' will not be used unless the family involved consents to its use ... use phrases 'tragic death' or 'sudden death' instead
 - the word 'murder' should not be used ... instead use 'violent death'.
- The Team Leader will be the only person to make a public comment in relation to the incident.

Short, Medium and Long Term Priorities

The following is a list of the priorities in the short, medium and long term when a critical incident occurs:

Short term (immediate):

Immediate contact with staff and students

- Ensure the safety of students and staff

- Assembly of critical incident management team and planning the appropriate strategies to deal with the incident.
- Dissemination of information to students, parents, staff and BOM
- Provide the necessary and appropriate support for students and staff.
- Involvement of outside agencies (NEPS, Gardaí etc)
- Visit parents/ families involved.
- Cancellation of school events

Medium Term

- Provide the necessary and appropriate support for affected students, their families and staff.
- Provision of appropriate materials for use by teachers in class
- Organisation of appropriate events e.g. school prayer service
- Access to the counselling services provided by school Guidance Counsellor, NEPS, private counsellors
- Inform BOM, Parents' Association and Student Council of any relevant developments.
- Ensure continuity and restoration of normal school routine as soon as possible.

Long Term

- Provision of long-term support/ counselling for students and staff
- Review the lessons learned from the management of the incident and document them.
- Arrange for appropriate memorials.
- Teach the students about coping skills needed at a time of trauma.

CLASSROOM SESSION FOLLOWING NEWS OF A CRITICAL INCIDENT (for students immediately effected by the incident)

The Class Teacher would usually be the person to inform students of events and to lead the classroom session. If the class teacher feels uncomfortable with this role another staff member may undertake or share the role. The aim of the session is to break the news and to give students an opportunity to discuss what has happened and to express their thoughts and feelings in a secure environment. Depending on the timing of the incident students may already be aware of it when they arrive at school.

Step 1: Giving the facts and dispelling rumours

Tell the students in a calm, low key and factual voice what has happened, who was involved, when it happened and the plan for the day.

Step 2: Sharing Stories

Take some time for discussion. Students may wish to tell their story of the event. As a result, they will feel less alone because of their common shared experiences. Assisting them to verbalise their experiences helps their recovery. For those students who find it difficult to verbalise their experiences, or for students with learning difficulties, it may be helpful to allow them to express their feelings and recount their experiences in other ways. Writing stories or using art can be particularly helpful, especially for younger students.

Step 3: Normalising the reactions.

Tell the students that they will all react differently to what has happened and that there is no right or wrong way. List some possible feelings and reactions (fear, guilt, regret, anger, tearfulness, loneliness, anxiety, mood swings, shock, confusion, disbelief). Explain that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. Let the students know that the reactions or symptoms will go away in time. Tell them that if the symptoms haven't gone after a few weeks, they should let you or their parents/ guardians know. They may need to talk to someone about how they are feeling.

Step 4: Empowerment

Help the students to identify strategies that they might use to manage their reactions. For example, talking to family and friends, getting enough sleep and exercise may all help. If appropriate, students can share strategies that worked for them in other stressful situations or brainstorm ideas as to what might help. Overall, it is important to help the students regain a sense of control.

Step 5: Closure

End the session by focusing on the future. Depending on the nature of the incident, help the class decide what they would like to do about various issues, e.g. the person's empty chair, writing cards or letter, attending the funeral. Reiterate the message that their reactions are normal responses to abnormal circumstances.

SUGGESTED BEST PRACTICE FOR TEACHERS IN DEALING WITH CRITICAL INCIDENT

- Depending on the circumstances, some classes and individuals will be more affected than other classes and individuals - it is important to recognise this! Therefore, maybe your particular class will be less or more upset than other groups.
- The critical incident team will try and identify and deal with the most affected students as early as possible.
- The very upset students may not be in school or if they are they will be looked after/accommodated by the appropriate staff.
- When you enter the class it will be important to acknowledge what has happened. It is vital that you do not speculate about what has happened or may happen. Keep to the facts as you know them and do not state something which somebody may have to explain away in a different way later. If you are asked something and you do not know then it is acceptable to say that you do not know. If you do know something but it is inappropriate to divulge it then state that you cannot discuss it or that it would be unhelpful to talk about it.
- Allowing students to say what happened and how they feel may benefit them and may be all they need to cope with the situation. To be listened to is very powerful and does not need any detailed comment or explanation from the teacher listening. In order to facilitate this the following four questions are useful to ask individuals;

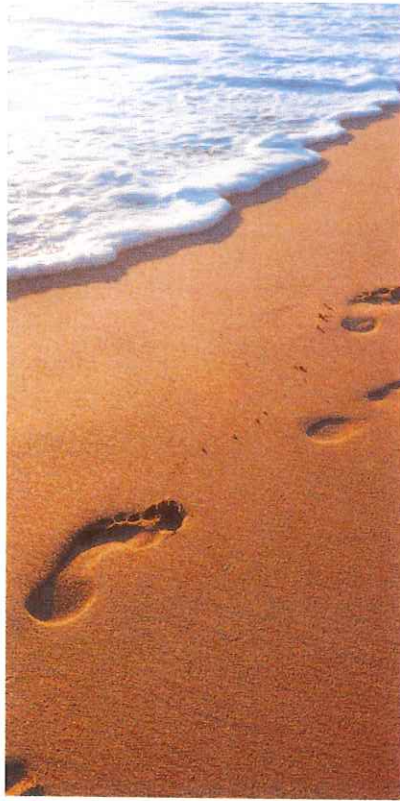
Did you know the person/people involved?

How did you hear of the incident?

How did you feel when you heard?

How do you feel now?

- It may be helpful for you to disclose something about how you are feeling e.g. That you may be shocked or upset or confused or sad HOWEVER you must bear in mind that your primary concern will be the students in the class. Therefore, if you think you could become very upset or show other signs of distress you need to bracket those feelings as the students will not know how to deal with them.
- Do allow time for students to ask you questions - they may be as confused and shocked about things as you are. Allow them time to talk amongst themselves but try to monitor the conversation(s) as best as possible to avoid hysteria or collusion amongst class members. Collusion in this instance would mean that just because one or two members of the class may be upset and crying that other members think they ought to be equally as upset and crying.
- If students wish to be excused from class try and explain to them that it would be better for them if they remained in class until somebody was available to come to talk to them as you would be worried if they were out on the corridor on their own.
- You may wish, depending on the circumstances, to offer a prayer with the class. Students may be more willing than you think to engage in this as it gives them a sense of being able to do something. Have a few moments of silence and then ask them to join in with you in praying the Our Father or some other suitable prayer such as the Prayer of St. Francis.
- Depending on the circumstances you may spend the class dealing with the students but also be aware that this may not be at all necessary and that they might be quite happy or willing or desire to return to 'normal' class. You might say something to the effect that having spoken about the incident that we will now try to do some work and that this may be difficult for some of them. You might also say that your moving on to do some work does not mean you are forgetting about the incident or that you are being insensitive but that this may be the most appropriate thing for the class group to do at this time. Again, if people are particularly upset then restate that at the earliest opportunity you will convey this to staff members and they will be attended to as soon as practically possible.
- After the initial classes in the day, it may not be necessary to go through the above again with later classes as the chances are that they will already have spoken about it with another teacher. You can check this out with them and in so doing it will be an acknowledgement of the situation.
- Remember that in situations of critical incident there is no 'plan' therefore all anybody can do is to do their best. Be gentle with yourself in how you deal with it because nobody will deal with it perfectly!



Footprints in the Sand

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed
he was walking along the beach with the LORD.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.

For each scene he noticed two sets of
footprints in the sand: one belonging
to him, and the other to the LORD.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him,
he looked back at the footprints in the sand.

He noticed that many times along the path of
his life there was only one set of footprints.
He also noticed that it happened at the very
lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he
questioned the LORD about it:

"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow
you, you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most
troublesome times in my life,
there is only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why when
I needed you most you would leave me."

The LORD replied:

"My son, my precious child,
I love you and I would never leave you.
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you."

Mary Stevenson

FIRST AID ASSISTANCE

First Aid -

- First responders, with the assistance of the appropriate emergency services.

LOCATION OF NEAREST AED (defibrillator) UNITS

- Next to Principal's office
- Outside Sports Hall, near pitch.
- ? Take defibrillator to all outside matches ?

EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

Eircode : T12 AD60

Gardaí	Togher - 021 4947120 Bishopstown — 021 4624500 Anglesea Street – 021 452 2000
Ambulance	112 or 999 Specialist Cardiac Unit/ Anaphylaxis Unit, when appropriate.
Fire Brigade	999
Hospital	Cork University Hospital – 021 492 2000 CUH A&E Department – 021 492 0200
Bishopstown Parish	021 4344452 School Chaplain, Church of the Holy Spirit, Dennehy's Cross. Priest on duty
NEPS	076 110 8466 01 889 2700
ISPCC Childline	1800 66 66 66

Aware	1890 30 33 02
Pieta House	021 434 1400
Samaritans	1850 60 90 90

KEYROLES ASSIGNED BY TEAM LEADER

NAME OF TEAM MEMBER	TASK
Principal	
Deputy Principal	
Guidance Counsellor	
SEN coordinator	
ASD Lead Teacher	
Year Head	

SHORT TERM ACTIONS AND ROLES ASSIGNED (FIRST 24 HOURS)

Task	Name
Gather accurate information	
Contact appropriate agencies	
Convene a meeting of key staff	
Arrange supervision of students	
Hold staff meeting	
Organise timetable for the day	
Inform parents	
Inform students	
Make contact with the bereaved family	
Respond to media queries	

MEDIUM TERM ACTIONS AND ROLES ASSIGNED (24 – 72 HOURS)

Task	Name
Review the events of the first 24 hours	
Arrange support for individuals/ groups/ parents/ students/ staff	
Plan the re-integration of staff and students	
Plan visits to the injured	
Liaise with family regarding funeral arrangements	
Attendance and participation at funeral service	
School closure	

BEYOND 72 HOURS

Task	Name
Monitor students for continuing signs of stress	
Evaluate response to incident and amend critical incident plan accordingly	
Formalise plan for the future	
Decide on appropriate manner to deal with anniversary of incident	

SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS/ GUARDIANS

Date

Dear Parents/ Guardians and Students,

The school has experienced the sudden death/ serious injury to one of our students/ staff members. We are deeply saddened by this death/ injury.

Insert brief details of the incident if appropriate and some positive remembrances of person(s) lost.

We have support structures in place to help your child cope with this tragedy. Insert details of same.

It is possible that you child may have some feelings that s/ he may like to discuss with you. You can help your child by taking time to listen and encourage him/ her to express his/ her feelings. It is important to give truthful information that is age appropriate.

If you would like any advice or support you may contact the following people at school. Insert details.

Yours sincerely,

SAMPLE LETTER REQUESTING CONSENT FOR INVOLVEMENT OF OUTSIDE PROFESSIONALS

Date

Dear Parents/ Guardians,

Following the recent tragedy/ death of xxx we have arranged specialist support for students in the school who need particular help. XXXX is available to help us with this work. The support will usually consist of talking to students either in small groups or on a one-to-one basis and offering reassurance and advice as appropriate.

Your child has been identified as one of the students who would benefit from meeting with XXXX. If you would like your child to receive this support please sign the attached permission slip and return it to the school by.... Insert date. If you would like any further information or would like to speak directly with XXXX please contact the school.

Yours sincerely,

Name of Student: _____ Class: _____

I/ we consent to our child meeting with XXXX. I/ we understand that my child may meet XXXX in an individual or group session depending on the arrangement considered most appropriate.

Signed: _____

Signed by: Blana Mc Intosh

Chairperson of the BOM

Date: 13-11-2023