

Coronavirus Critical Incident response: Guidance for school staff

The Education community in Croydon is facing an unprecedented time in public life. All indications are that significant numbers of people within our community will die and others will experience long term emotional impact related to the pandemic. A critical incident framework is crucial to enable settings to plan ahead and have an effective response for different levels of intervention as the effects of the pandemic evolve.

It is probably helpful to consider that there are three types of critical incident that will impact on the school community:

1. The death of parent of a pupil on roll and/or a family member of a member of staff which may impact some of the school community.
2. The death of a pupil on roll and/or a staff member, impacting on the whole school community.
3. Multiple deaths in the wider local community creating a climate of fear and panic.

The impact of any of these incidents needs to be considered in the particularly challenging circumstance when most pupils are at home and most staff working remotely, with many staff self-isolating with suspected cases of the virus or because they are at increased risk. Whilst huge efforts are being made to stay in regular contact with staff, pupils and their families, school communities are likely to feel less connected.

Whilst no two incidents are the same, and will not be in these extraordinary times, responses to critical incidents follow a recognised pattern and with time, most children and adults will come to terms with what has happened and recover without the need for professional counselling. Help and support is best given by trusted, familiar adults, as and when it is needed. What is needed at this time is confident messaging, acknowledging the loss and its impact on the school community, without causing unnecessary panic.

Grief is a normal process and those who are grieving may need to be reassured that whatever emotions they are feeling, it is perfectly normal, and there is no one process of grieving for all. It is usually only when feelings remain overwhelming over a period of weeks that the need for more support should be considered. In the current situation it is important not to look too far ahead.

Family members of the person who has died may have particularly strong emotions around feelings of guilt as well as feelings of loss. They may have been socially isolated from the person who has died, and not had recent or usual levels of contact. The key focus with families is to listen to their concerns and worries, exploring the impact on the various members of their family. Relatively small-sounding or illogical issues may be overwhelming. Are any family members feeling in any way responsible? Are they dwelling on what they might have done differently, for example to protect the person who has died from infection? Should they be doing anything differently now to protect other members of the family? These responses will be 'normal'. Those staff in direct contact with bereaved families will need support around them to debrief and process their own feelings. In particular, Head teachers will be holding and containing levels of anxiety from across different parts of the school community, and will need to think about where they obtain their own emotional support.

The Croydon Educational Psychology Service (EPS) is experienced in the management of critical incidents and is available to support any school community in Croydon experiencing these sad events. Our typical response will be:

- An initial telephone consultation by the school's Link Psychologist or a senior member of the team to discuss ways of supporting the school community. This could lead to a video conference with more members of the team to coordinate a response and follow up as required in the subsequent days.
- The provision of guidance and support for distribution to the school community.

This response will be in the immediate aftermath of the incident, once the Service is informed and can continue in the following days. What happens will depend on the individual needs of the school community, however it will generally include advice on the following:

- Clarifying the facts – what is known, what are perceived or potential narratives in the community, including social media?
- What is the family's views on what can be shared / what they want to be shared?
- How to communicate the information to staff – to whom and when.
- Share information with school staff to talk about typical responses to critical incidents and how to manage them.
- How to communicate the information to pupils and their parents.
- Reducing anxiety and de-escalating panic responses – families, pupils and staff.
- Support for staff and pupils both within school and externally regarding their own wellbeing.
- Identification of and planning for vulnerable pupils who may be affected (class groups, friendship groups, anxious pupils).
- Managing social media and the press, formal communications/website messages.
- Practical support for families, funerals and memorials.

All members of the EPS are available for consultation using the usual Octavo emails. In the first instance contact anne.moore@octavopartnership.org or your link EP.

The team will be developing guidance regarding a Coronavirus specific bereavement policy and will be reviewing sources of support. In the first instance the following link to the Good Grief Trust provides a wealth of advice:

<https://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/need-know-info/coronavirus-bereavement-advice/>