

# Recognise the potential impact of critical incidents

**A critical incident is an event outside the range of normal experience – one which is sudden and unexpected, makes us lose control, involves the perception of a threat to life, and can include elements of physical or emotional loss.**

## **What is a critical incident?**

Often such events overwhelm a person's coping capacity. The safety and wellbeing of children and young people, educators, and the learning community depends on managing critical incidents well.

**Critical incidents may occur within your early learning service or school, or outside it.**

They may include the death, suicide, or terminal illness of a child or young person, staff member, family or associated community member; accident or serious injury; natural disasters; fire or vandalism at the learning environment; and many other situations.

Experiencing a critical incident doesn't necessarily mean a child or young person will experience a mental health issue or condition.

How someone responds to a critical incident will vary according to their cognitive abilities, developmental stage, levels of resilience, understanding of the situation, level of support, presence of risk and protective factors, previous exposure to other critical events or adversities, and the personal meaning attributed to the experience. Some events may have little impact on one person but cause severe distress in another.

**A coordinated and planned response is important.**

Critical incident response is a team effort. Having a critical incident management plan in place helps your service or school to respond appropriately. The more confidently adults manage the critical incident, the less the probable impact on children and young people.

## **Reactions to a critical incident**

**Understanding how critical incidents can affect mental health and wellbeing will help you to best support the children and young people in your care.**

Some individuals may not be able to explain or fully understand a change in how they're feeling or behaving. You have a key role in working with others in the learning community to support children and young people through a critical

incident and in identifying and assisting individuals that might be at risk, or who experience a mental health issue or condition following a critical incident.

The first efforts of responding to the incident should be dealing the safety of the community during the incident (for example, keeping people safe from a flood). Once that's past, then you will be able to move onto the response phase.

**Children and young people are much more vulnerable to the impact of critical incidents than adults.**

This is because young brains and bodies are still developing, and because children are dependent on adults for their care and safety. When a child or young person is impacted by a critical incident, it affects the whole person. Reactions include a range of cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioural responses that last from weeks to months afterwards. Certain reactions are quite common and a normal part of the stress response or grief.

## Impacts over time

Understanding the range of normal responses to critical incidents, including physiological changes, can help you support children and young people to cope with their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. These include:

- **behavioural responses** (for example, irritability, aggression, regression, difficulty enjoying activities, children repeatedly recreating parts of the critical incident events in their play)
- **physical responses** (such as change in appetite, sleep difficulties, headaches, stomach aches, restlessness)
- **emotional responses** (such as outbursts of anger, frustration or distress, anxiety, sadness, helplessness)
- **changes in thinking and cognition** (such as difficulty concentrating, difficulty remembering the incident, preoccupation with the incident).

**The impact isn't always obvious or immediate – sometimes a child or young person will seem to be recovering well but may then have a delayed response.**

Things like sights, sounds, smells and movements that remind them of the incident can trigger a

stress response again, even though the actual event happened a long time ago. Use the BETLS observation tool to record your observations, taking note of their pervasiveness, frequency, persistence and severity.

Every person recovers from the impact of challenging experiences in their own way and in their own time. Factors that might influence the length of time required for recovery might include how long the threat was present, coping skills, prior stressful or traumatic life experiences, strong primary attachment relationships, socioeconomic disadvantage, timely and appropriate support, and life stressors.

A proactive and informed learning community is more likely to respond effectively to a critical incident. You can be informed of the potential impact of critical incidents, gather and document information, monitor reactions that suggest a child or young person needs additional support, share information (consider confidentiality), offer support (including through your wellbeing team or local health services), and consider the impact on families, yourself and colleagues.

**A clear and considered critical incident management plan provides the overarching framework for preventing, preparing for, responding to and recovering from a critical incident.**

Understanding and recognising the impact of critical incidents is a vital first step in this process. With this understanding, educators can plan a response to create an environment that promotes recovery. In doing so, you can provide children with opportunities to express how they're feeling, navigate the tricky moments, settle back into a routine that's predictable and supportive, and, ultimately, promote a mentally healthy community.