

# Responding collaboratively to critical incidents

**When a learning community is affected by a critical incident, a whole-community response is required. Communities that have a critical incident management plan in place will be able to provide the best support to children and young people, staff and families.**

## **Critical incident management plan**

A critical incident management contains all the information required to respond effectively, such as the contact numbers of an emergency response team, actions to take, task allocation and more. It aims to minimise the adverse effects of a critical incident on the learning community and restore normal routines as soon as possible. The regular review of emergency and critical incident management plans is important to the effectiveness of your learning community's response.

## **A responsive learning community**

Fostering a responsive learning environment provides ongoing support to those who need it, while also ensuring children and young people have opportunities to process what's happened in a safe and supportive environment.

You play a critical role by focusing holistically on the child or young person, creating an inclusive learning environment, reinforcing appropriate behaviour, encouraging positive learning, working closely with families and having regular conversations with colleagues.

Through learning experiences, you model and provide children with opportunities to express their feelings, fears and reactions. After a critical incident, you can create a feeling of security and model healthy ways of coping and leadership. Your role is to act as a mediator, educator and facilitator to support recovery – continue to teach and support children as you normally would, while playing your role in the learning community's additional proactive steps to deal with the critical incident and promote recovery.

## **Supportive curriculum decisions**

After a critical incident, it's important to promote engagement in learning, while also offering children and young people opportunities to express how they feel.

Work in ways that are more flexible, relaxed and slower paced with less focus on outcomes and more focus on processes. It can help to pay attention to how you explain tasks, when and how you provide feedback, and the type of activities you set. Children and young people need to feel safe and be given opportunities to comprehend and make sense of their experiences. In the aftermath of a critical incident, you can support their mental health through your teaching approach and use of everyday opportunities and interactions to promote resilience and recovery.

## Responding to a suicide or the impact of suicide

**As with any critical incident, a learning community's response to a suicide is a deliberate process aimed at ensuring the immediate and ongoing safety, care and support of children and young people, families and the wider community.**

There are some important differences, however – including the goal of reducing the risk of suicide contagion. For more information, see Be You's Suicide Response Kit. Be You Consultants are available to help schools who are affected by a suicide attempt or suicide.

Death by suicide of a learning community member, or a person connected to the community, can be a very upsetting and traumatic event for children and young people, families, educators and the wider community. The death often happens unexpectedly and leaves people with many questions. You and your colleagues will have a range of responses, including shock, confusion, grief and concern for your students and one another.

Your leadership team will manage your early learning service or school's response to the critical incident, but as trusted members of a support network, you play a critical role in responding sensitively to children, young people and families.

## Monitor and support

While many children and young people recover well and aren't affected in an ongoing way after a critical incident, others may require assistance. One of your responsibilities is to ensure you identify, support and monitor children and young people affected.

Additional support may be needed for the child or young person if you notice changes in the way they behave, appear, play or communicate. These changes may also interfere with learning, home life, friendships or daily routines. When encouraging families to seek help, it's important to understand why they might be reluctant and to put strategies in place to address their concerns or provide further information to help them understand their options.

## Educator wellbeing

Remember that both you and your colleagues may be impacted, too. It's important to look after your wellbeing and access support if required. Reducing and managing stress, maintaining positive social interactions and asking for help when you need to are helpful practices. Being comfortable asking for and giving support helps reduce the fear of stigma for help-seeking, and it's important for building a supportive culture in your learning community.

## A word on being prepared

Experiencing a critical incident often highlights the helpful processes that early learning services and schools have in place to respond; however, it can also identify areas for improvement. After a critical incident, it's important for the learning community to review the incident, its impact and the response to determine what improvements may be required to support the learning community in the future. Leadership and wellbeing staff, with input from other educators, are responsible for the critical incident review.



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