Critical Incident Response Guide

Keep the person in view

This guide begins where the emergency plan leaves off. A critical incident can involve a death, serious injury or another event that profoundly affects a school community. The difficult human decisions often come afterwards: what do we say, who has control over the story, how do adults remain present, and what will people need once the immediate response has ended? The examples around funerals and remembrance apply when somebody has died.

Use their name, and tell us who they were

Once the death has been confirmed, the appropriate people have been informed and the family has agreed what can be shared, use the name the person was known by. Familiar language matters. A child or colleague should not disappear behind phrases such as "the deceased" or "a tragic loss" when the people listening knew them as someone real.

Find the details that people who knew them would recognise: what made them laugh, the interests they pursued, the people they protected, their humour, talents and habits. Ask a small number of people who knew them well, then check accuracy and permission with the family. A polished description can be strangely hurtful when it bears little resemblance to the person their friends remember. There is room for an ordinary, complicated human being in a school statement.

Give the family genuine control, without giving them another job

Agree one known, trusted school contact, with a deputy. Rather than asking the family repeatedly what the school should do, arrive with a few thoughtful options: whether and when to share the name; which details and photographs may be used; who should be informed first; and how cards, messages or requests from the media should be handled. Make clear that a choice made today can be changed later.

Schools can hold messages until the family is ready, offer to pass them on together or keep them in a private school collection. Ask about preferred forms of contact and avoid a stream of well-meaning calls. Where a family wants no public tribute, their wishes need to shape the school response even when pupils and staff are deeply affected.

Telling the news without making people perform grief

When a death is confirmed, the family has been informed and it is appropriate to speak to children, use clear words such as "[Name] has died". Phrases like "gone to sleep" or "we have lost them" can leave younger children frightened or confused. Tell people in familiar, manageable settings where possible. Do not turn the conversation into a requirement to talk, cry, write a tribute or answer questions about how they feel. Some will go quiet, some will ask practical questions and others may behave as though nothing has happened. Give them a trusted adult and another chance to talk later.

I can do messy

How an adult stays emotionally available when there is nothing they can fix.

A school may organise the practical response carefully while people still feel profoundly alone. When a child says something painful, frightening or difficult to answer, adults may retreat, fill the silence or rush to reassure. Often that is because the adult is struggling with the vulnerability of the moment. The young person can be left feeling that their grief is too much, or that they need to make it easier for somebody else.

Connection does not require comprehension

In Navigate's trauma work, Charlotte tells the story of her dad's heart attack. People kindly reassured her that the surgery was routine: Bob from the golf club had been through it, Bill from work had recovered, and the surgeons did this every day. She knew people were trying to help. What she heard was that she was worrying too much. Her dad had nearly died and she was terrified. What she needed was someone able to acknowledge how awful that was, without a comparison or a promise that everything would be fine.

That same impulse appears after a death. We tell young people that their friend would want them to be happy, that they need to be strong, that they will feel better in time. Sometimes people do find comfort in those ideas; offered uninvited, they can make grief feel like something that needs correcting. A distressed person should not have to produce a more acceptable version of their feelings to keep an adult nearby.

Being able to stay is a skill, not a perfect sentence

Let a silence remain. Listen when somebody comes back to the same worry. Allow contradictory feelings: love and anger; relief and guilt; wanting to remember someone and wanting a day without being reminded. An adult can say, "I'm so sorry this is happening," or "I wish I had an answer." A shared ordinary task, a walk, or sitting nearby may be less exposing than another face-to-face conversation. Do not demand disclosure or make repeated retelling the price of support.

There may be a vulnerability hangover tomorrow

After a difficult conversation, a young person may feel exposed. They might avoid the adult, laugh with friends, become defensive or simply want the usual greeting at the door. Respect the shield that returns. Avoid the sympathetic face across the corridor and an unexpected "How are you feeling now?" in front of others. You can say quietly, "Thanks for talking with me yesterday. We can carry on with today; I'm here if you need me."

Adults need somewhere to put their own feelings

Staff may have known the person for years, or the incident may touch their own history. It is fine for a young person to see genuine sadness; they should not have to manage an adult's distress or reassure the person supporting them. Leaders should arrange relief, cover and trusted peer or professional support so adults can step away when needed. If an adult becomes overwhelmed, a calm handover to another trusted person protects everyone's dignity. Being dependable must not depend on being unaffected.

When a private loss becomes public

Communication can preserve dignity, or leave people feeling their story has been taken from them.

Agree the account before it is repeated

People will look for an explanation. A school may be unable to answer questions about the circumstances, particularly where there is an investigation or the family has not chosen to share them. Adults can acknowledge uncertainty without inventing certainty. Keep school messages accurate, consistent and clear about what is private. Make sure staff know which questions they can answer and whom to refer others to.

When speaking with pupils, say what can be verified, use straightforward language and allow questions to return later. Some will have seen posts before adults have had the chance to speak to them. Ask what they have heard or watched and help them distinguish a confirmed fact from a rumour. Avoid asking young people to account publicly for what they saw or felt.

Decide the media boundaries before somebody else does

Where there is intense press interest, the school should decide whether there will be any media access, where it will happen and when it will end. One possible arrangement is a 15-minute photography opportunity before learners arrive, from an agreed position, with one prepared statement and an email route or set time for questions. No pupil or family should find themselves having to negotiate with a reporter at the gate. A school has no obligation to offer a photograph or interview.

Brief reception, site staff and colleagues on these boundaries. Plan for cameras near entrances, approaches to children, photos of flowers or memorials and questions at collection time. If a family wants their words heard, offer to help them consider a written statement or a carefully agreed opportunity to speak. Explain that interviews and online posts can be edited, quoted selectively and recirculated later. The decision remains theirs.

Be careful what becomes a public memory

An image of a child crying at an assembly can follow them long after the school has returned to routine. Agree permissions before photos, tributes or messages are published. Support young people to understand how quickly private messages and photographs move beyond the people for whom they were intended. Where harmful rumours circulate, preserve evidence and address safeguarding concerns through the appropriate routes rather than arguing publicly.

Thinking practically about a funeral

The transitions before and after a funeral often need as much thought as the ceremony itself.

The family leads the funeral. First establish whether school involvement is wanted and what kind: attendance by individual pupils with their families, a supervised group, staff representation or an alternative remembrance. Check what the venue and officiant are planning. Young people should have a genuine choice, made with parents or carers, and no implication that attendance proves how much they cared.

Before leaving	Who has been invited and given permission? Who is accompanying each learner? Are there friendship tensions, unsafe pairings or young people who need a particularly familiar adult? Who can supervise if a member of staff becomes distressed?
Arrival and waiting	Where will people meet, enter, queue and sit? Might cameras or members of the public be nearby? Identify toilets, a quieter place, a way to step outside and who will accompany a learner there. Avoid unplanned periods without supervision.
During the ceremony	Check whether there will be a coffin, music, prayers, a eulogy, readings or an opportunity to approach the coffin. Know the seating plan and the nearest discreet exit. Agree in advance whether a young person is expected to speak, carry something or take another role.
The final part	Will there be a burial, a committal, a crematorium curtain, flowers placed on a grave or a gathering afterwards? Do not assume every young person or adult knows what these moments look like. Agree which parts the school group is attending.
Leaving and getting home	Who leaves with whom? Is there a gathering or a journey where young people could be distressed and unsupervised? Agree transport, a named handover, a route home and who will check in later. The risk does not end when the ceremony ends.

Prepare young people for what they will actually see

Walk through the event in the order it will happen. Explain the place, the people, the coffin if there will be one, and the relevant cultural or religious practices. Some people may cry, laugh at a memory, stay quiet or leave the room. Explain how a young person can do the same without drawing attention. Give them the name of the adult who will accompany them if they need to step out.

The service ending is not the end of the day

Some young people will want to stay together afterwards and others will need space. Neither response tells us how much they cared. Arrange for a familiar adult at the exit, a safe journey home and a way to check in later without demanding an emotional account of the day. For some, the following morning is when the absence becomes most difficult to manage.

Remember what happens afterwards

The person is still missing when the visitors, media and formal arrangements have gone.

Plan for the first ordinary reminders

The empty place in a classroom, a name called by a supply teacher, an online assignment still addressed to [Name], a locker, photograph, team list or expected seat on a trip can catch people unprepared. Decide carefully what needs to change and who should speak to the learners most closely connected to each decision. Sudden erasure can feel brutal; leaving every reminder untouched indefinitely can also be difficult. Review these decisions with the family and people affected instead of letting administration decide by accident.

Make remembering possible without making it compulsory

Flowers, letters, books of memory, assemblies and online tributes can carry enormous meaning. They also create questions: who can contribute, who will hold or receive the messages, whether they may be photographed, how long they remain, and what happens when a temporary space closes. Agree this with the family before announcing something the school may struggle to sustain. A young person who would rather remember privately deserves that choice without explanation.

Prepare for birthdays, anniversaries, results days, leavers events and the first time a place is revisited. Families may feel the absence differently from one year to the next. A sensitive check-in ahead of a date is more useful than an unexpected announcement made in front of everyone.

Look beyond the people most visibly grieving

Close friends and witnesses may be easy to identify. Others can be missed: a pupil absent when the news was shared; someone who had fallen out with [Name]; a sibling in another class; an adult who managed the response while concealing their own grief. A public tragedy can leave someone feeling strangely alone, especially when others seem to be reacting differently. People may need privacy the next day after being visibly upset in front of others. Offer familiar contact, bounded choices and spaces they can use without being watched or asked to retell their story.

BEFORE THE NEXT SCHOOL DAY: FIVE DECISIONS WORTH OWNING

- Who is checking the registers, classrooms and digital systems for unexpected reminders?
- Who will meet learners who were absent or whose connection to [Name] is less visible?
- What will pupils be told about memorials, personal belongings and participation?
- Who will contact the family after the funeral, when the immediate attention has eased?
- Who is checking on the adults who carried the response, and on important future dates?