

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Support and Advice for Educational Settings

General guidance for supporting pupils following a critical
incident or traumatic event

Support and Advice from GHLL

Helping children and young people respond to what they have heard

- There is no single "correct" reaction to a potentially distressing event. Children and young people may experience anxiety, fear, curiosity or other strong emotions, while some may show little obvious reaction. The UK Trauma Council describes critical incidents as potentially traumatic events that can affect a significant part of an educational community and provides evidence-informed resources to support compassionate responses.
- The key message for schools is **not to assume that every child has been traumatised**, but to remain observant, provide reassurance and respond proportionately to individual need.
- The Education Psychology Service will share an advice note covering typical child reactions, responding to questions, managing anxiety and supporting staff who may themselves have been affected.
- GHLL has also brought together the following resources to help schools provide appropriate medium- and longer-term support.

Five principles for conversations with pupils

When children or young people raise the incident, staff may find the following approach helpful:

1. **Start where the child or young person is.**
Find out what they already know and what they are actually worried about before providing additional information.
2. **Listen and acknowledge feelings.**
Allow pupils to express worry, confusion, sadness or other emotions without assuming how they should feel.
3. **Use factual, age-appropriate information.**

Stick to information confirmed by trusted sources. It is entirely appropriate to tell pupils that we do not yet know all the answers.

4. **Separate fact from speculation and rumour.**

Encourage pupils to consider where information has come from before accepting or sharing it.

5. **Focus on safety, support and the people helping.**

Remind children that the police, emergency services, schools and other agencies are working together to support the community.

This is consistent with PSHE Association guidance, which recommends developmentally appropriate conversations, acknowledging emotions, distinguishing fact from speculation and rumour, and ensuring pastoral and safeguarding support is available for pupils who may be vulnerable.

Responding to misinformation and social media

Children and young people may encounter information, images, commentary or speculation online before adults have an opportunity to speak with them.

Schools can use this as an opportunity to reinforce media literacy by encouraging pupils to ask:

- **Who** created or shared this information?
- **What** are they claiming?
- **Where** has the information come from?
- **Why** might it have been presented in this way?
- Is it a **confirmed fact, speculation or rumour**?

The PSHE Association particularly recommends helping pupils distinguish between these categories and critically assess information they encounter online.

Schools should also remain alert to any discriminatory language, stereotyping or attribution of blame towards particular communities or groups. All pupils should continue to feel safe, respected and valued within their school community.

Local mental health and wellbeing support

GHLL provides a directory of local mental health services and sources of support for children, young people and families. This includes On Your Mind Gloucestershire, school nursing and other local services. [\[ghll.org.uk\]](http://ghll.org.uk)

[GHLL: Local Mental Health Services and Links](#)

Gloucestershire Educational Psychologists [Traumatic events | Gloucestershire County Council](#)

Gloucestershire EPS provides psychological advice and support through a consultation model for schools, families, and children. We work with schools and settings to support children and young people's learning, development, and emotional well-being.

Young Minds Matter

Schools working with **Young Minds Matter/Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs)** should also remember this as an existing route for mental health and wellbeing support.

[GHLL: Young Minds Matter](#)

Schools should continue to use their established pastoral and safeguarding procedures where an individual child's presentation or circumstances cause concern.

Responding to critical or potentially traumatic events

The UK Trauma Council provides a particularly useful collection of resources for educational settings, designed to support a comprehensive and compassionate response following critical incidents. [\[uktraumacouncil.org\]](http://uktraumacouncil.org)

- [UK Trauma Council: Supporting Children and Young People After Potentially Traumatic Events](#)
- [UK Trauma Council: Critical Incident Guidance](#)
- [UK Trauma Council: Critical Incident Poster](#)
- [UK Trauma Council: Critical Incidents in Educational Communities](#)

Helping pupils manage anxiety and worry

Anna Freud's anxiety resources include materials for school staff, parents and carers and are designed to help young people understand and manage anxious feelings.

[\[annafreud.org\]](http://annafreud.org)

- [Anna Freud: Let's Talk About Anxiety animation and teacher toolkit](#)
- [Anna Freud: Seven Ways to Support Children and Young People Who Are Worried](#)
- [Anna Freud: Trauma information and guidance](#)

Self-care resources

- [Anna Freud: My Self-Care Plan for Primary-Aged Children](#)
- [Anna Freud: My Self-Care Plan for Secondary and FE](#)

Talking about distressing news

GHLL hosts PSHE Association guidance specifically addressing how schools can respond when pupils arrive at school worried or confused about distressing events. It covers managing emotions, age-appropriate conversations, misinformation, media literacy, support for vulnerable pupils and communication with parents and carers. [\[ghll.org.uk\]](http://ghll.org.uk)

- [PSHE Association/GHLL: Talking to Pupils About Distressing Events](#)
- [PSHE Association: Belonging and Community](#)
- [PSHE Association: Under the Influence](#)
- [PSHE Association: NewsWise News Literacy Project](#)
- [BBC Bitesize: Tips to Help Children Discuss and Understand Upsetting News](#)
- [NSPCC: Talking About Difficult Topics](#)
- [Save the Children: Talking About Distressing Current Events with Children](#)

Support for staff

Staff may also have been directly or indirectly affected by the incident. Schools should therefore consider staff wellbeing alongside support for pupils, including opportunities for colleagues who have been managing difficult conversations to speak with one another and access appropriate support. The PSHE Association specifically highlights the importance of giving staff leading these discussions opportunities to talk about issues raised and to receive support themselves. [\[ghll.org.uk\]](http://ghll.org.uk)

- [Anna Freud: Ten Ways to Support Staff Wellbeing](#)
- [Charlie Waller: Supporting Students' Mental Health Videos](#)

Moving forward

For most pupils, maintaining **familiar routines, trusted relationships and a calm school environment** will be an important part of the response. Schools do not necessarily need to initiate whole-class discussions about the incident where pupils are unaware or unaffected. Where questions do arise, responses should be proportionate to pupils' age, understanding, experiences and level of concern.

The emphasis should remain on **listening, factual reassurance, emotional safety, trusted information and access to additional support where it is needed.**

GHLL will continue to support schools by bringing together relevant resources that can be used as part of pastoral support, PSHE education and the wider whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing. If you need further advice, please do not hesitate to get in touch at ghll@gloucestershire.gov.uk

General Guidance for supporting pupils following a Critical Incident or Traumatic Event

Research indicates that the management of critical incidents is a crucial factor in influencing the recovery of those involved. A carefully considered framework can help to avoid additional pressures that might add to an already fragile situation.

Research also suggests that structure and routine are reassuring following a critical incident. Pupils who have been involved in the incident should return to school as soon as possible following the event. Although initially amendments may need to be made to the curriculum, the general pattern of the day should be as normal as possible. In the first few days following the incident teachers may be advised to avoid teaching new material. Familiar and undemanding tasks may be appropriate. In the **short term** it may be necessary to remove or reduce other sources of pressure such as homework.

The pupils will need to be told the facts of the incident and have a chance to talk. Any bad news should be delivered quickly, e.g. "I have some important news to tell you about" Research indicates that facts should be given simultaneously to small groups or individuals. This makes it easier to address the possible range of reactions that pupils and staff may experience. Whole school assembly should, where possible, be reserved for religious services, acts of remembrance etc. Over the coming days, keep children up to date with what is happening. After the first few days, talking time should not generally interrupt the lessons, though exceptions may need to be made.

Each one of us has a different way of coping with trauma. Where interventions are offered different cultures and beliefs should be taken into account and respected. It is also important that the wishes of pupils and parents/carers are considered. No pupil should be compelled to attend any sessions offered

Normal Reactions to Traumatic Experiences

People of every age usually have some degree of stress in their lives such as pressure to complete work on time or the ordeal of a nerve-wracking interview for a college place or job. Learning to cope with those stressful demands is a normal part of personal development. But some frightening incidents are so unexpected, intense and distressing that they fall outside the range of usual human experience and are described as “traumatic”.

Every individual has his or her own unique personality and life history and when confronted by a trauma will experience a very personal reaction. This may be a very different reaction to another person who may have lived through the same ordeal. Despite these different reactions there are some definite types of responses. Children, and young people, who have experienced trauma can be affected in the same way as adults.

These notes are intended to outline some of the normal range of reactions that can be expected. One person affected may show just one or two of the responses listed which last for quite a long time whilst another may experience many of these reactions intensely for a shorter period. Some people may not experience any reactions at all. With the support they receive from their family and friends, most people will get over the stress associated with trauma. Only a small minority might develop post-traumatic stress disorder and require individual counselling or therapy.

Some common responses after a trauma are:

- *Re-experiencing the event:* memories of the event can be triggered by sights, sounds, smells and tastes. Sometimes these memories can come unexpectedly “out of the blue”, often at inconvenient times e.g. at work times, out shopping or before going to sleep.
- *Avoiding:* Some may want to avoid people or environments associated with the incident. For example, traffic accident victims may be fearful for a while of getting into similar vehicles or passing the accident site.

- *Increased sensitivity and tension:* Noise or light can seem unusually unpleasant, the person may be “jumpy” and get startled very easily, they may be more worried than usual about their own and other peoples’ safety.
- *Not expressing emotions:* Being over-brave, reluctant to say how they feel or to talk about the incident.
- *Not being able to concentrate or make decisions:* Skills previously learned such as spelling can temporarily be lost.
- *Going over and over the incident:* This can test the patience of those closest to them and the person may feel isolated as if “no-one understands” when their listeners understandably become bored.
- *Changes in temperament:* People may act out of character from time to time.
- *Not being able to relax or switch off:* Restlessness, disturbed sleep patterns, dreams and nightmares of situations where there is no control over what is happening.
- *Depression, disillusionment, personal isolation:* Feeling that nothing is worth it or has any meaning – a negative reassessment of their lives “my life is rubbish”, “I haven’t got any friends”. Previous hobbies and interests can lose their magic
- *Anger or guilt:* Some may become irritable and aggressive in manner or they may feel irrationally guilty for not preventing the incident or for being less seriously hurt than others.

These are some of the things that people do experience after a trauma. Others experience none of these, and there is a wide range of reactions which can all be considered **normal responses** to an **abnormal event**.

How you can help your pupils in the days following a traumatic event:

Do:

- Answer questions, giving the facts in a matter-of-fact way.
- Allow them to talk about the incident when they want to
- Help them to develop a narrative of what happened
- Allow them to be upset and reassure them that this is normal
- Give them lots of reassurance, attention and comfort
- As memory may be affected by trauma, careful repetition of facts may be necessary
- Discuss further safety measures if appropriate
- Re-establish basic routines, but allow some temporary relaxation of expectations at home and at school (making clear that this is temporary)
- Encourage them to carry on normal sporting and social activities
- Introduce the idea of post-traumatic growth: strengths and qualities that have been developed because of the incident; kindnesses observed etc.
- Be aware of additional stress factors for individuals, which might provoke further vulnerability.
- For pupils that you are concerned about, be aware of impending anniversaries, birthdays etc which might cause distress.
- A useful concept is the idea that life cannot return to what was seen as normal, but a new normal will develop.

Avoid:

- Placing additional stress on the child for a while e.g. avoid teaching new materials, amend homework, curriculum etc. Subjects which require higher order thinking, such as Maths, can be particularly stressful.
- Referring to actions or people as being heroic. This can lead the “hero” to develop an unrealistic picture of themselves which they cannot live up to. It can also leave others feeling that they have failed or been inadequate by not behaving “heroically”.
- The support given, both at school and at home, will generally help to ensure that any reactions to the event are temporary. Although the event will never be forgotten,

most children will recover without serious long-term effects.

- However, if the stress reactions continue for more than a few weeks, without starting to get better further support should be sought by school or parents.
- This can include support from the families General Practitioner, the school nurse and/or the Educational Psychology Service
- Community resources are also valuable avenues of support, including dioceses (where relevant) as well as local supporting groups and organisations.
- Within school, the governing body is available to support leadership and staff wellbeing. The Occupational Health team, with GCC, can also provide support and guidance