

# **The Nature and Incidence of Critical Events for Schools**

*Ian Liddle, Alison MacDonald and John Young*

## **Aim**

### **OHP1**

The aim of Section 2 is “to increase awareness of the typicality of critical incidents in the lives of school children and to highlight the need for preparation for large or small scale incidents”.

## **Looking at Definitions**

Once rapport with participants is established, the first task would be to arrive at a definition, either by eliciting key elements from participants or by providing a series of exemplars.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of the impact of large-scale traumatic events and disasters on individuals, families and whole communities. Traumatic events affect schools in a number of ways. There have been major incidents affecting a whole school system, as well as events, which affect the wider community of which the school is a part. Not all trauma is associated with major incidents. Fortunately such events are still relatively rare. However incidents that are unexpected, sudden and distressing are fairly common, and most schools can expect to have to deal with such events and their repercussions. These might include incidents such as/

- ❑ death of a pupil
- ❑ death of a teacher
- ❑ death of a parent
- ❑ serious accident/ injury
- ❑ fire
- ❑ disclosure of abuse
- ❑ physical damage to the school
- ❑ witnessing a serious incident / assault.

## **OHP2**

### **Participants' Experience of a Critical Event**

Task: Using the definitions arrived at in first session, participants take time to describe some of their own experiences, discuss them within a group, and report back.

## **OHP 3                      Task 1**

### **Other Evidence of Incidence**

#### **Looking at survey results**

Houghton (1996) surveyed Psychological Services in England and Wales to determine the extent of involvement in supporting schools with critical incidents. 91 psychologists were surveyed, 59 of whom had been involved in working with schools on this basis during the previous 3 years. This represented only serious incidents as staff were asked to comment on the most significant event experienced. Half of the reported cases involved the violent death of a child. The majority were in road traffic accidents but a substantial number (30%) were murders. In 28% other children also witnessed the death. The figures also included the sudden, unexpected deaths (including suicide) of

parents and teachers. In some instances the child had discovered the body. Other case involved children threatening to harm themselves, arson attacks on schools and children being subjected to abuse. These studies and similar surveys point up the frequency of sudden distressing events. Most, if not all schools, will experience having to cope with an event, which overwhelms the normal immediate coping strategies.

A survey of headteachers in Fife (Alexander, Jack and Oliver, 1998) found that traumatic events in schools were relatively frequent. Schools were asked to report any incidents which had occurred during the previous year. Of the 87% return rate, 40% reported one or more traumatic event in the last 12 months. There were reports of 116 incidents. The number of schools reporting incidents was 68. Some schools had dealt with a number of critical events within the specified time.

#### **OHP4**

The message arising from this investigation is that incidents are fairly *common* occurrences and even small events require a proportionate response.

Whatever the size of the incident, the distress caused to individuals can be intense and long lasting depending on a number of factors. Johnson (1992) and Capewell (1994) have identified four major aspects of a child's functioning that might be affected by trauma and loss:

- cognitive
- physical
- emotional
- behavioural

Best and Mead (1996) add:

- psychological
- spiritual
- practical

It is helpful to recognise the potential effects of trauma and loss on these seven aspects of adjustment before implementing support strategies within the school setting.

Children often express distress in less direct ways than adults. They can also act out their emotional difficulty in ways that do not immediately evoke a sympathetic response in those around them. It is important therefore that we are aware of the possible signs of distress which are not overt or obvious before a critical incident occurs. Research indicates that adults tend to underestimate the extent to which children think about and are affected by critical events (Dyregrov 1989). Until fairly recently it was thought that children did not suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This view was based on the fact that information was gathered from those adults who knew children rather than asking the children themselves what they were experiencing. There will be a more detailed examination of these issues in later sections, but it is important to highlight it here as part of the general scene setting highlighting implications of critical events for schools.

## **OHP 5**

Traumatic events do not respect school boundaries. Capewell (1993) points out that traumatic incidents may:

- emotionally or physically hurt children and/or staff.
- disrupt school functioning
- leave an aftermath which can affect children's behaviour and school performance and can continue affecting a person through adult life.

Evidence shows that in the aftermath of disaster:

- 40%-70% experience distress in the first month
- 24%-40% experience distress after the first year
- 15-20% experience chronic anxiety which remains at a high level longer than 2 years.

Terr (1985) found post traumatic phenomena at four years in all the children studied following a kidnapping on a school bus. In a study of 28 Swedish children involved in a bus accident, Winje and Ulrik (1998) report that half of the children were noted to have reduced school performance, concentration and attentional problems after one year. These decreased significantly by three years. Vogel and Verriberg (1993) looked at a

number of disasters affecting children, including shootings, crashes, hurricanes and earthquakes. They found declines in school performance over two years in the most affected children.

Schools are in a strong position to help militate against the worst effects of traumatic events on children and young people. Next to the family, the school is a primary caregiver for children.

Whether a school is directly affected by an incident or is part of the wider community in which an incident takes place, there is likely to be an impact on the school system itself. Schools can be precipitated into chaos by such events and the normal coping and support strategies and lines of communication can be disrupted. This secondary trauma can make it even more difficult for a usually smooth running system to deal with an unusually challenging and distressing occurrence. All recent research points to the need for education departments and schools to have a policy and action plan in place to meet with traumatic events. However, in reality this is often not the case. Evidence suggests that only schools, which have already been affected by a critical event, are more likely to have a plan in place. The report of the Disasters Working Party (1991) suggests that, despite a growing consensus on the need to plan for a caring response, common reasons for not planning are given as:

- ❑ lack of funding
- ❑ more important priorities
- ❑ lack of knowledge
- ❑ 'it won't happen here'
- ❑ people will cope naturally.

By their very nature critical incidents catch us unaware, stretch and sometimes overwhelm normal coping strategies and throw systems into confusion. The potential for longer term effects and the risk of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in certain situations is well documented. It is important that schools prepare as far as possible for these eventualities in order to minimise their impact.

## **Why is Readiness for Critical Events Important?**

### **OHP 6**

This table on OHP6 helps to make the case that readiness can prevent chaos, factionalism and media interference, and help minimise longer term impact. Institutions that are unprepared for events find themselves reacting in an unplanned, chaotic way when the inevitable happens. Even well managed schools will not be able to swing into action because of the overwhelming nature of the event. Normal channels of communication do not necessarily work, no-one is in a position to tackle the situation in a co-ordinated way, and the sequence of events quickly becomes distorted. Decisions are made on the basis of insufficient information and the result is confusion for staff, pupils and parents.

Using the overhead, move from short-term impacts through the first few days of an incident to the medium and long term consequences.

At this point the purpose of the exercise is to raise awareness about what can go wrong in crisis situations, not to offer detailed solutions or plans. This will be covered in more detail in the other sections.

Another way to depict this is shown in the next overhead.

### **OHP 7**

If the elements of care leadership, listening ethos and openness are in place, and the school has developed its contingency planning mechanisms, the impact of any critical incident can be absorbed and this can lead to assimilation, further learning and growth of the institution. Alternatively, if these elements are not in place, the school response is likely to be fragmented and chaotic, making it impossible for the experience to be properly assimilated.

# Nature and Incidence of Critical Events for Schools

## References

**Alexander, E, Jack, M and Oliver, L (1998)** The Contribution of a Psychological Service in Planning and Responding to Traumatic Incidents in Schools. Educational Psychology in Scotland, 1998.

**Best, C and Mead, C (1996)** Trauma in School in Applying Psychology with Young People Wolfendale et al (Eds) Fulton

**Capewell, E (1993)** Critical Incident Management in Schools: Head Teachers' Briefing. Croner, 28, 4-5 and 29, 5-7.

**Capewell, E (1994)** Responding to Children in Trauma: a Systems Approach for Schools. Bereavement Care, 13, 2-7.

**Dyregrov, A (1989)** Caring for helpers in disaster situations: psychological debriefing. Disaster Management, 2, 25-30.

**Houghton, K (1996)** Critical Incidents Involving Schoolchildren—Research Update: The Response from School Psychological Services. Education and Child Psychology, 1996, 59-75

**Johnson, K (1992)** School Crisis Management: A Team Training Guide. Alameda, California. Hunter House.

**Mitchell, J T and Everly, G S (1993)** Critical Incident Stress Debriefing – an Operations Manual for the Prevention of Traumatic Stress among Emergency Services and Disaster Workers. Ellicot, Chevron 1993.

**Report of the Home Office Disasters Working Party (1991)** Disasters: Planning for a Caring Response. London. HMSO 1991.

**Terr, L (1985)** Children Traumatized in Small Groups. in Eth,S. and Pynoos,R. (Eds) Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Children. American Psychiatric Press, Washington D.C. pp 47-50.

**Vogel, M and Venberg, E (1993)** Children's Psychological Responses to Disasters. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 22, 4, 464-484.

**Winge, D and Ulrik, A (1998)** Long Term Outcome of Trauma in Children. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 39, 5, 635-642.

## **OHP20**

**AIM: To increase awareness of the typicality of critical incidents in the lives of school children and to highlight the need for preparation for large or small scale incidents.**

*WHAT IS A CRITICAL INCIDENT?*

**‘A CRITICAL INCIDENT IS ANY EVENT WHICH HAS A STRESSFUL IMPACT SUFFICIENT ENOUGH TO OVERWHELM THE USUALLY EFFECTIVE COPING SKILLS OF EITHER AN INDIVIDUAL OR A GROUP.**

**CRITICAL INCIDENTS ARE TYPICALLY SUDDEN, POWERFUL EVENTS WHICH ARE OUTSIDE THE RANGE OF ORDINARY HUMAN EXPERIENCES. BECAUSE THEY ARE SO SUDDEN AND UNUSUAL, THEY CAN HAVE A STRONG EMOTIONAL EFFECT EVEN ON WELL TRAINED, EXPERIENCED PEOPLE’**

*MITCHELL AND EVERLY (1993)*

*IN A SCHOOL CONTEXT,*

**‘A SUDDEN, UNEXPECTED EVENT THAT IS DISTRESSING TO PUPILS AND/OR STAFF..... IT MAY INVOLVE VIOLENCE AGAINST MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL, A SERIOUS ACCIDENT OR THE SUDDEN DEATH OF A CHILD OR TEACHER....., OR IT COULD BE THAT THE SCHOOL IS SUBJECTED TO MAJOR VANDALISM SUCH AS AN ARSON ATTACK’**

*HOUGHTON (1996)*

**Please describe in just a few words any such events which have affected your school over the last two years. Using the two definitions of critical incidents just described, carry out the following tasks:**

**1. Individual task (5 minutes)**

**At the end of each description, please mark D if this was a particularly difficult situation to deal with. Also, please mark O if the school has been affected in an ongoing way by the event.**

**2. Group task (15 minutes)**

**In groups of three, each take a turn to tell the others about one of the above incidents.**

**For the incident you told about, answer the questions in the box below**

- 1. Was the school prepared for such an eventuality?**
- 2. Was help sought by the school from any source?**
- 3. What might have been helpful to the school?**

**SURVEY RESULTS - REPORTED INCIDENCE OF  
TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS IN SCHOOLS**

Fife study:

116 reports of incidents in a period of 1 year

Nature of incidents:

<b>NATURE OF INCIDENT</b>	<b>NUMBER OF REPORTS</b>
DEATH OF A PUPIL	17
DEATH OF A STAFF MEMBER	7
DEATH OF A MEMBER OF WIDER COMMUNITY	38
DEATH - NATIONAL INCIDENT	7
(TOTAL)	69
NON-FATAL ILLNESS/ACCIDENT	21
PUPILS INVOLVED IN PERSONAL SAFETY ISSUES	9
THREAT TO SAFETY/WELLBEING OF SCHOOL COMMUNITY	14
PHYSICAL DAMAGE TO SCHOOL	3
<b><u>TOTAL NUMBER OF INCIDENTS REPORTED</u></b>	<b>116</b>

**ASPECTS OF  
ADJUSTMENT**

**OHP 2D**

**ASSOCIATED SIGNS**

**Cognitive**

**Confusion over the event, difficulty in ordering or sequencing in time, indecisiveness, poor concentration, loss of memory, impaired reasoning decline in intellectual and academic functioning.**

**Psychological**

**Obsessive behaviours, loss of attention skills, personality change, increased dreams/nightmares, fear of recurrence of the event, over-concern for others.**

**Emotional**

**The need to be looked after (dressing, feeding etc), depression, anxiety, anger, guilt.**

**Spiritual**

**Discovery or rediscovery of faith, loss of faith.**

**Behavioural**

**Any sudden change in behaviour including clinging, reappearance of younger habits, obsessive and repetitive talking, decline in self discipline and responsibility to others, abuse if drugs or alcohol, opting out of school.**

**Physical**

**Headaches, shock, shivering, constriction of throat, disturbed sleep, tiredness, loss of appetite, loss of physical control, avoidance of others including school refusal.**

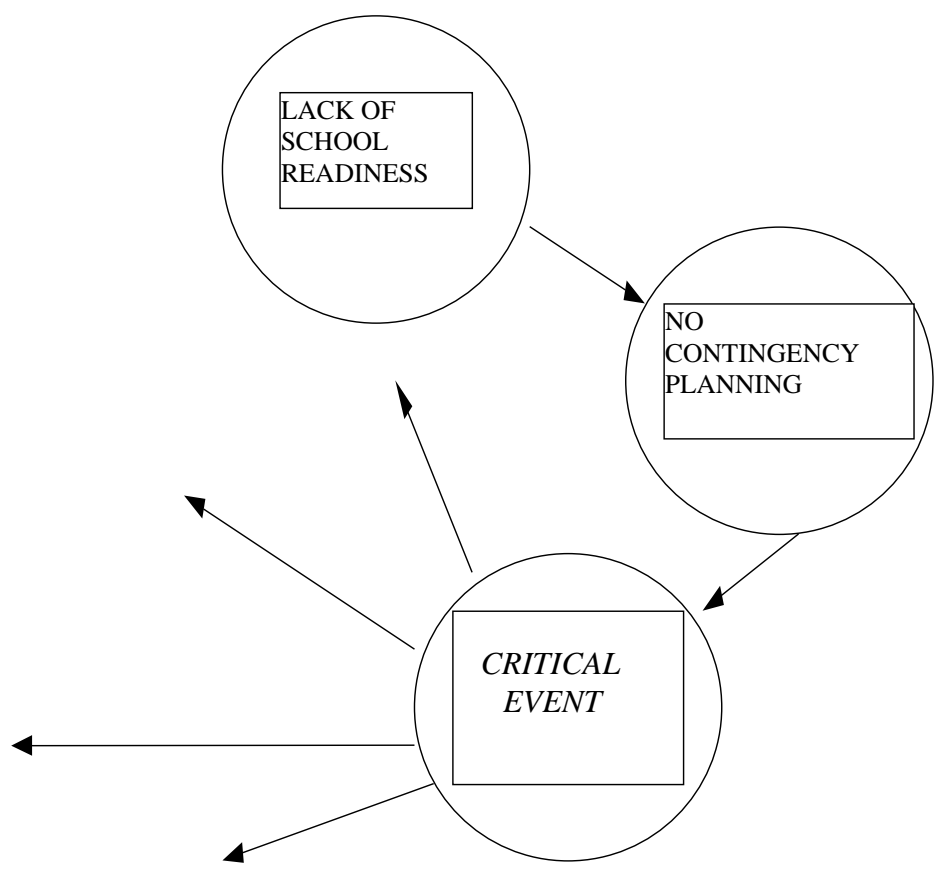
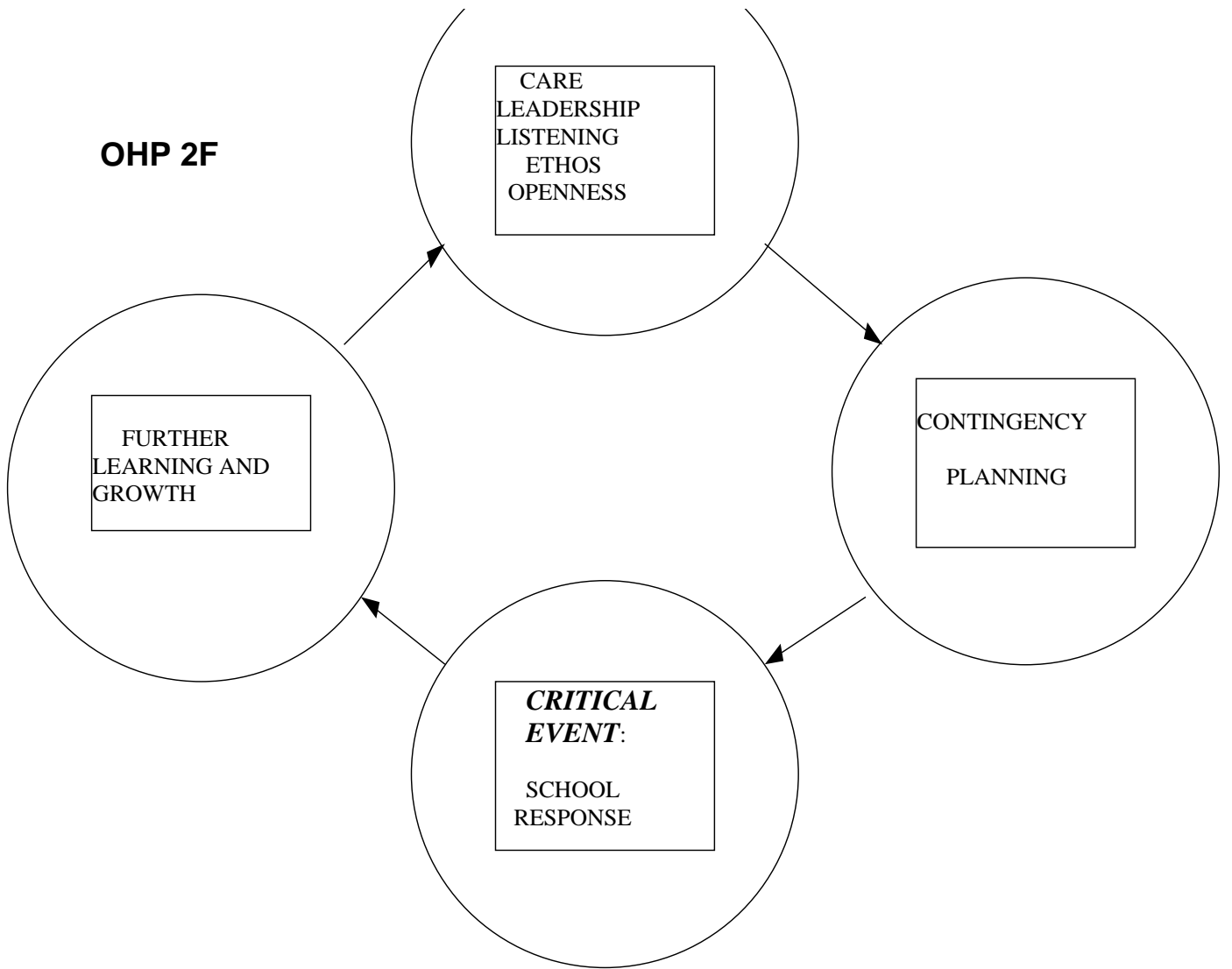
**Practical**

**Inability to cope with regular, established routines usually associated with other aspects.**

**(Best and Mead  
1996)**

PRE-EVENT	UNPLANNED RESPONSE	PLANNED RESPONSE
<p>-----</p> <p><b>EVENT OCCURS</b></p> <p><b>INITIAL STAGES</b></p> <p><b>SHORT TERM</b></p> <p><b>MEDIUM TO LONG TERM</b></p>	<p>'IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE'</p> <p>'WE HAVE OTHER PRIORITIES'</p> <p>-----</p> <p>PANIC CHAOS DENIAL</p> <p>LACK OF COORDINATION</p> <p>INADEQUATE INFORMATION OBTAINED</p> <p>LACK OF DECISION MAKING UNDER/OVER RESPONSE</p> <p>CONFUSION OVER INFORMATION TO STAFF, PUPILS, PARENTS</p> <p>APPROPRIATE AGENCIES NOT INVOLVED</p> <p>PROBLEMS OF 'OWNERSHIP' AND COORDINATION OF SITUATION, 'FACTIONS' EMERGE</p> <p>MEDIA OUT OF CONTROL - RUMOUR, MISINFORMATION, PRESSURE</p> <p>DEBRIEFING INCOMPLETE AND INACCURATELY TARGETTED DIFFICULTIES IN MONITORING AND SUPPORT</p> <p>LEARNING AND TEACHING AFFECTED</p> <p>TRAUMA PERPETUATED</p> <p>SITUATION UNNECESSARILY 'PATHOLOGISED'</p> <p>GREATER INCIDENCE OF PTSD</p>	<p>CONTINGENCY PLANNING</p> <p>- CRISIS MAN. GROUP - CONTACT LISTS - SIMULATION - OWNERSHIP</p> <p>CARE LEADERSHIP - LISTENING ETHOS - CURRICULAR APPROACHES</p> <p>-----</p> <p>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF INCIDENT AND ITS IMPACT</p> <p>CONTINGENCY PLAN OPERATED</p> <p>OBTAIN OPTIMAL INFORMATION</p> <p>DECIDE ON SCALE OF INCIDENT AND SCALE OF RESPONSE</p> <p>STAFF AND PUPILS INFORMED</p> <p>PARENTS EFFECTIVELY CONTACTED</p> <p>APPROPRIATE AGENCIES CONTACTED</p> <p><u>SCHOOL</u> COORDINATES RESPONSE AND RETAINS OWNERSHIP</p> <p>MEDIA APPROPRIATELY CHANNELLED</p> <p>DEBRIEFING</p> <p>- ALL STAFF SUPPORTED</p> <p>- ALL PUPILS SUPPORTED</p> <p>VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS IDENTIFIED</p> <p>LONGER TERM SUPPORTS BUILT IN</p> <p>TRAUMA IMPACT MINIMISED</p>

**OHP 2F**



## Section 2 Tasks

Using the two definitions of critical incidents just described, carry out the following tasks:

### 1. Individual task (5 minutes)

Please describe in just a few words any such events, which have affected your school over the last two years.

At the end of each description, please mark **D** if this was a particularly difficult situation to deal with.

Also, please mark **O** if the school has been affected in an ongoing way by the event.

### 2. Group task (15 minutes)

In groups of three, each take a turn to tell the others about one of the above incidents.

For the incident you told about, answer the questions in the box below

1. Was the school prepared for such an eventuality?
  
2. Was help sought by the school from any source?
  
3. What might have been helpful to the school?