

CRITICAL INCIDENTS

in Early Learning and Care
and School Age Childcare
Services

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Critical Incidents in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Services

© 2023 Barnardos

ISBN: 978-1-906004-91-0

Published by

Barnardos
Christchurch Square
Dublin 8

CHY 6015 / RCN 20010027

Contents

Introduction..... 3

What is a Critical Incident? 3

The Potential Impact of a Critical Incident on a Child 4

The Importance of Relationships..... 5

Talking with Children about the Incident 7

Helping Children to Recover 10

The Importance of Play 11

Other Ways to Support Children 13

Partnering with Parents to Support Children 16

Wellbeing for the Adults in the Setting 17

During the Year Following the Incident 18

Useful Links 19



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth



Introduction

All Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) services are required to have a service level Critical Incident Plan that outlines how the service will prepare for and respond to critical incidents should one occur. For information on how to prepare for critical incidents see the companion guide [Critical Incidents in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Services: Planning and Responding](#).

As well as the practical considerations involved, it is essential that you think about how you will support the emotional wellbeing of both the children and the adults in your service. All of the children in your setting, from the youngest to the oldest, will need this support. When there has been a traumatic event in a community, for example, an accident, an attack or death, or an incident such as a fire or flood causing severe damage to the service buildings and facilities, everyone is impacted, even if they were not a first-hand witness to events. Children are reliant on their parents and other primary caregivers to protect them from harmful experiences but, sadly, we cannot always protect them when potentially traumatic serious incidents happen in or near their setting, or in their community. Thankfully, we can provide supports for children that can help to minimise the impact that such an incident could have on their wellbeing.

This resource provides information on the kinds of support that will help children in an Early Learning and Care setting or a School Age Childcare setting to cope better following a critical incident, which will have a positive impact on their wellbeing both now and in their future.

What is a Critical Incident?

What we mean by a critical incident is a sudden, unexpected and overwhelming event or incident that causes significant distress for children and the adults within an ELC or SAC setting, and prevents or seriously impacts on the regular operation of the setting.

While critical incidents in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare are rare, they can happen in any setting.

Examples of critical incidents that may affect an ELC or SAC setting include:

- Incidents on outings (e.g., a child going missing)
- Public health incidents (e.g., a significant infectious disease incident)
- Severe weather (e.g., extreme heat, flooding, storms or snow)
- Serious accident, injury or trauma to a child or member of staff (e.g., an attack or a transport accident)
- The death of a child in the setting or a child who attends the service (e.g., due to sudden infant death syndrome, an accident or a medical condition)
- Significant damage to property (e.g., fire, accidental damage)
- Criminal activity (e.g., child abduction, bomb threat, anti-social or threatening attack, intruder, cyber security attack)
- A disaster or public order incident in the local community
- Loss of water or utilities

Examples of incidents that have occurred in Ireland in recent years include a missing child, death of a child in a service, a road death of a child attending a service, death of parents, siblings or a staff member, death by suicide or murder, young children stabbed as they left school to go to the service, a shooting near a service and severe fire, flood or storm damage.

Critical events may also happen in the local community near a setting or involve children or staff members from the service.

The Potential Impact of a Critical Incident on a Child

The impact a critical incident has on children’s wellbeing will be different for every child. This will depend on a number of factors including their age and their level of understanding, as well as how close they have been to the incident and/or to somebody or place directly affected by it. Clearly an incident that happens in or near the setting, one that directly involves one or more of the children or adults in the setting, or an incident that involves a child themselves is likely to have the greatest impact. Some incidents are much more difficult for adults to explain to children, particularly when the adults themselves find them difficult to understand and to cope with.



Babies’ and young children’s level of understanding will be different to that of older children and their reactions to events or experiences, particularly to a critical incident, may be similar or be very different to those of older children. This may also be the case for a child who has an intellectual disability or impairment. When children are not able to put their feelings or their reactions to frightening or dangerous events into words or to express them fully or clearly, people often assume that their young age or lack of understanding will protect them from the impact of traumatic experiences. Many believe that babies and young children do not notice, fully experience or remember traumatic experiences or that they ‘bounce back’ easily¹ but traumatic events do affect babies and very young children, even though they may not understand what has happened². Often you will see the impact in children’s behaviour, as this can be their only way or their clearest way to communicate their distress. In some cases, children will be consciously trying to tell someone of their feelings or distress through their behaviour but often a child will not be consciously aware of what feelings are underlying their behaviour. This, in itself, may cause a child further distress.

1 Dym Bartlett, J. (2021). Trauma-Informed Practices in Early Childhood Education. *Zero to Three*, 41(3).
2 National Child Traumatic Stress Network Available at <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/early-childhood-trauma>

The age range of children in a School Age Childcare setting can be wide and the impact may be more obvious in the older children in the group, most of whom will likely understand more clearly what has happened and be able to say how frightened and/or upset they are by it. Some older children may talk about their feelings or show their distress in their behaviour while others may be quieter and more withdrawn. Some may be more able than others to seek comfort or to do things on their own that they find comforting. A child's reaction, the impact an incident has, and their ability to cope will all depend on their temperament, their background and their previous life experiences.

Many children do not show their distress so it is best to assume that those children too may be feeling distressed following such an event, even if they seem to be fine.

The Importance of Relationships

Relationships are key to children's ability to cope with any difficulties they might face.

Children are reliant on the people they trust, and to whom they have an emotional attachment, to turn to as a safe haven to help them feel secure and safe. This is especially true for babies and young children who particularly need the support of a known and trusted parent or caregiver to help them regulate their strong emotions. Very young children or children with disabilities may experience overwhelming stress when faced with adverse events due to their inability to communicate clearly what they are feeling or what they need.

Establishing Key Person relationships for babies and young children in your setting will be of significant benefit for their psychological and emotional wellbeing generally, and particularly beneficial for providing the extra support needed following a critical incident. Relationships are extremely important for older children too, especially when they are feeling frightened or stressed.

Children will be at different stages of learning how to recognise and name their own and others' feelings. Young children who cannot express, or cannot express clearly in words, how they are feeling can sometimes show through their behaviour that they are distressed. Following a critical incident, children of all ages need adults around them who understand how adverse experiences can affect a child's behaviour and their ability to express their feelings and concerns, as well as how best to support their needs. Those who know a child well, particularly a baby or young child, and are attuned to their usual way of being, their temperament and their behaviour, are best placed to recognise signs that they may be distressed, especially if it is not obvious.

In some cases, children may be new to the setting and there may not have been time to get to know them well. This makes it even more important to observe children carefully and to ask their parents about their temperament, what kinds of behaviour are usual or unusual for them, and what they are seeing and hearing at home.

Changes in behaviour can be a sign that a child is experiencing distress or trauma.

You might observe³:

- Separation anxiety or clinginess (e.g., for a child who was settled well in the setting it may again become difficult to soothe them and help them to say goodbye in the mornings)
- Regression in their stage of development (e.g., a four year old using baby talk or a nine year old having bedwetting/toileting accidents)
- Re-creating the traumatic event (e.g., repeatedly talking about, playing out, or drawing pictures of the event)
- Difficulty at naptime or bedtime (e.g., avoiding sleep, waking up, or nightmares)
- Increased complaints of aches (e.g., headaches, stomach aches) or overreacting to minor bumps and bruises
- Changes in behaviour (e.g., poor appetite, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal)
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, bright lighting, sudden movements, or loud sounds (e.g., bells, slamming doors, or sirens)
- Increased signs of distress (unusually whiny, irritable, moody)
- Anxiety, fear and worry about safety
- Worry about recurrence of the frightening or traumatic event
- New fears (e.g., fear of the dark, animals, or imagined monsters)
- Statements and questions about injuries or death and dying
- Some children may react with less clear behavioural indications of distress and you may not recognise the connection between their behaviour and the event⁴. Following a critical incident, it is important to observe the children carefully, both in the immediate hours and days that follow, and over the following months. Be alert and tuned in, and ensure that you support all of the children in your setting to feel safe and comforted, not just those whose signs of distress are easier to see.



For more on Key Person relationships see Barnardos guide
[The Key Person Approach: Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years](#)

³ Adapted from https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/child_trauma_toolkit_educators.pdf

⁴ Supporting Young Children after Crisis Events | NAEYC

Talking with Children about the Incident

Telling children about an incident

How you approach talking with the children following an incident will depend, among other things, on the time and the place in which it happens.

It may be the case that the children become aware of the incident through their own direct experience of it and so they will know at least something about what has happened without needing to be told by you or their family.

If the incident occurs while the children are at home, for example, the death of someone in the setting, then it will generally be best for parents to tell their children what has happened. Parents may look to you for advice and guidance on this.

It may happen that children are in the setting when news breaks about an incident that they were not directly involved in, but that will affect them. It is important, if at all possible, that the children are told about such an incident by an adult who is close to them before they hear it from somewhere else. For children of school age who are old enough to access social media this can be difficult to achieve. You will need to contact parents to ask them to come in as soon as possible and, if they cannot get to the setting soon enough, ask their permission to tell their child what has happened. If a child has already heard something then you should try to find out what information they have to check if it is true or accurate. You will also need to be sure that any information you give them is true and accurate. If you are not sure of the facts, tell the children that you do not know everything yet but will try to find out.



Encourage children to talk about how they are feeling

Sometimes adults, with the best of intentions, will avoid talking with young children who do not appear distressed about serious events, fearing it will upset them. Not talking about what has occurred can make the event more frightening for children as they may feel that it is too bad to talk about. Keep in mind that that it is not the talking about the incident that is likely to be what is upsetting for the children but the fact that the incident has happened and the impact it has had. Listen to and observe the children to see how they are dealing with what has happened.

Children may feel they cannot upset you by asking questions or talking about how they are feeling if it seems to them that you do not want to talk about the event. It is important to let them know it is ok to ask questions and it is ok to feel upset, or to cry if they feel like crying.

It is good for children to see and to know that it is ok to show that they are upset and that talking about it or crying can help them to feel better.

Look for clues from the younger children about what they know, what they think about the incident or events, and what they need from the adults around them. Some of their fears may be due to not understanding what has happened or what they have already been told about it. Some of their fears may be very understandable and shared by the adults around them and they should be acknowledged and accepted as very real. Some children, whatever their age, may want to be held or hugged while others may not. Take cues from children's responses.

Keep your tone of voice matter of fact and calmly talk with the children about what has happened. Be honest but give the information in a way that is age appropriate and also appropriate for their temperament. Children's emotional development can vary, so judge how much information you give each child according to their capacity to manage it⁵. Children need to know the truth in the form of a brief, clear version of events. They do not need all of the unnecessary details and certainly do not need any graphic details.

Highlight any positives that you can think of. For example, point out the help and support that people in the emergency services provided and how friendly and nice they were, how the Gardaí came so quickly to make sure everyone was safe. This helps children to feel safe and protected.

Children do not always show their distress but this does not necessarily mean that they are not upset or worried. Make sure that the children know it is ok to feel scared, sad or worried and that you have similar feelings.

What you might say

For a young child you might say something like,

I know you've heard that a big accident happened in [name of place]. It is scary I know. I'm a bit scared. I want you to tell me if you're feeling scared or worried so that you will feel safe here with me. I sometimes take deep breaths like this [demonstrate] when I feel scared. Your [Mam/Dad/main carer] will want to know too if you feel scared, so you can get a cuddle whenever you want one to help you to feel better and maybe read a story or do something nice together. You could show your [Mam/Dad/main carer] how to do deep breaths too.

For a child who is old enough to understand more, you need to make sure that they know that you will listen, that you understand and empathise with them, and that they can come to you at any time while they are in the setting if they have any questions or concerns or just need some reassuring company. It may take some time for a child to feel able to talk about what has happened and you may need to remind them again at a later stage of your ongoing availability to listen and talk with them.

⁵ Dr. Colman Noctor (Child and Adolescent Psychoanalytical Psychotherapist)

Offer reassurance and support

- It is natural to want to reassure children by telling them not to worry but in doing so, you may be inadvertently dismissing their very real worries or fears. Let children know that whatever they are feeling is normal and understandable.
- If someone a child knows has died, say that they have died. Using terms like 'passed away', 'lost' or 'gone to heaven' when speaking of a death only leads to confusion for some children.
- If someone a child knows is injured, provide as much information as you can about how they are, using age appropriate and clear language. Their imagination may conjure up an even worse situation than is the reality if you do not tell them the truth.
- Support children to know what they can do to help themselves feel better by telling them what you do when you are worried or afraid and give them ideas and opportunities for calming, self-regulating activities such as playing, drawing, painting, cuddling their soft toys or reading a story.
- Sitting with the children as they do these activities can provide comfort as well as an opportunity to listen and observe their communications, including their body language. Provide space for older children to sit with their friends and comfort each other.
- Children, especially babies and toddlers, may just want to see that everything they know continues as it did before. Keep to the normal, familiar routines of the day, with familiar people and in familiar places as much as possible as this consistency is comforting and reassuring for children.
- If, following an incident such as a fire, flood or storm, you have had to move to new or temporary premises, try to include some of the children's most familiar furnishings, and their most loved toys, books and materials if at all possible.
- Provide open-ended resources. The more open-ended their toys are, the more opportunities children will have to play out and talk through their fears and concerns. Include open-ended art, drama (including small world drama) and construction materials, and allow children freedom to draw, paint or create whatever they want and to choose their own colours or their own type of play. Observe and listen as they play or talk about what they are creating.



Helping Children to Recover

The U.K. Trauma Council⁶ provides guidance on creating the best environment for recovery in cases of potentially traumatic critical incidents in educational communities such as crèches, preschools and schools. This guidance outlines five evidence-based principles that they recommend should underpin a response to critical incidents.

Following a critical incident, they say that the best environment for recovery is one where children feel:

1. **Safe** – Children may need help relearning that the world is a safe place, and that others are compassionate, reliable and trustworthy. As well as establishing actual safety, the community will benefit from a feeling of safety both at home and in their educational setting.
2. **Calm** – Traumatic events can trigger a fight-or-flight response⁷, making it more difficult to calm down. Helping children and staff relax their bodies and better regulate their emotions can go a long way in helping them feel more at ease.
3. **Connected** – We are more resilient against traumatic events when we feel connected to and supported by the people around us. Prioritising connection and social support will help everyone feel more able to cope.
4. **In Control** – Beliefs about the control and influence we have over the world around us can often be shaken after a critical incident. You can help your community feel more in control by involving them in decisions that affect them.
5. **Hopeful** – Feeling hopeful about the future is an important part of recovery. While acknowledging and validating the distress of the present, together you can hold on to the hope of a more positive future.



These are useful principles to bear in mind both in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident and during the following weeks, months or even longer.

⁶ The U.K. Trauma Council is a body of childhood trauma experts supported by the Anna Freud National Centre for children and Families

⁷ Fight, flight or freeze are known as survival responses and are natural bodily reactions to potential threats. For more on this see Barnardos book *Trauma and Young Children: Building Trauma Awareness in Early Learning and Care* (2022) p. 20

The Importance of Play

Providing space, time and good resources for play is one of the best ways to support children's emotional wellbeing at any time. The International Play Association⁸ makes it clear that playing can protect children from some of the negative impacts a critical incident could have. Playing helps children manage their emotions and maintain a sense that everything is and can be ok.

- Playing is a natural and active process that can help children to
 - > stay emotionally healthy
 - > relax and forget about worries
 - > make sense of any new experiences and changes in their world
 - > cope with feelings that are difficult or frightening
- Playing is strongly linked to creativity – it involves imagination and problem solving.
- Playing may involve children acting and repeating events – this is one way for them to understand what is happening and can be helpful.
- Acting their feelings helps children come to terms with them and feel more in control.
- Playing allows children to express anger and frustration safely without harming other people, or without getting harmed themselves.
- Playing allows children to develop their own strengths and ability to cope.

Child-led play

It is important that any play provided to help children recover from an adverse experience is child-led play rather than adult-directed activities. This applies to young children as well as older children. For play to promote emotional wellbeing, children need to be offered genuine choice, open-ended materials and opportunities to control the ways in which they play with them and choose where they want to play. Children also need enough time and space to become absorbed in their activities without interruption.

Dramatic play

Children will naturally play out their thoughts and feelings when given the materials, resources, spaces and opportunities to do so. Provide materials and resources for dramatic play and role play to allow children to choose this type of play to play alone or with others. Small world play with dolls houses and other similar structures, miniature furniture and small world people, allows children to naturally play out all kinds of scenarios and, through these, to express their thoughts, feelings and concerns in a way that feels safe.

⁸ IPA is an international non-governmental organisation founded in 1961 whose purpose is to protect, preserve and promote the child's right to play as a fundamental human right – Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Outdoor play

All types of play can be indoors or outdoors, and are often better outdoors where children can move more freely or expansively and be more noisy or boisterous. Play opportunities such as digging in sand or mud, running and jumping, swinging, climbing and other activities that involve movement such as pulling, pushing, carrying and squeezing have a positive impact on the mind as well as the body. Children who need to act out their frustrations or fears more physically may need you to show them ways to do this safely, without hurting themselves or others, such as hitting a punch bag or kicking a ball against a wall.

Usually children are happiest outdoors in natural environments and have an instinctive love of nature, as well as the freedom of movement and physical activities that can help them to feel more calm and relaxed. Children's choice of playing indoors or outdoors may, however, be influenced by their experience or knowledge of the particular critical incident that has occurred. For instance, if they experienced a recent severe flooding incident a child may become anxious about going outdoors if it begins to rain or if they see large puddles outside. If children experienced an incident outside the setting involving a child being injured they may, understandably, be fearful of going outside. On the other hand, if children recently experienced being locked in to a room (for their safety) they may feel much more relaxed playing outdoors.

Children need to have their fears and concerns understood and acknowledged, and to be allowed choices about where they want to play until they feel reassured enough that they are safe and protected in the setting, both indoors and outdoors.

Other Ways to Support Children

Additional quiet spaces

Early Learning and Care environments and School Age Childcare settings are generally very stimulating places to be and are designed to promote children's learning and development. Quiet spaces are often quite small and just used on any given day for when a child might feel the need for a break from all the usual stimulation.

You may need to consider ways to provide for extra soft, comforting and quiet space for a time, while keeping the overall space familiar, until the children begin to recover from any frightening experiences. In the space include some objects and materials that support emotional regulation such as cushions, blankets, soft seating, soft toys, picture books, family photographs, bubbles, playdough, sensory materials, elements of nature, nature pictures, feelings posters, mirrors, fidget toys or puppets.⁹

Comfort items

Young children, and some older children too, will need to have easy access to their comfort items from home such as their 'blankies', their dummies or a special toy or other item they might be attached to. These can be kept in each child's bag or cubby and children who can walk need to be able to go to where they are and get them without needing permission or help from anyone. Babies and younger children need their Key Person to be tuned in and responsive enough to see when they might need theirs.



Potential triggers

Following a critical incident, it is important to consider additional sensory triggers in the immediate environment that might cause children to feel frightened, for example, loud noises like the fire alarm (during a fire drill), a door slamming or the raised voices of adults.

You will also need to think about children's feelings of safety and security when positioning activities in the room. Ensure that children will be able to easily see and hear what is going on around them as they engage in the activities.

All members of the staff team need to be conscious of the potential impact of their behaviours on how the children might feel.

⁹ For more on Materials, Resources and Activities that promote regulation see Barnardos book *Trauma and Young Children: Building Trauma Awareness in Early Learning and Care* (2022) pp 74-78

Choice and control

Children need to be able to be in control of their level of engagement in planned activities and given choices about whether to join a group to play or to play quietly on their own. When a child is feeling stressed they will not be able to focus on activities or listen well to what adults are saying and might need a break away. If they are not ready to engage in the regular group activities, they will need a soft, quiet and comfortable space in the room or when outside, where they can go to feel safe and calm.

Books and storytelling

Some children may like to read quietly or sit comfortably with an adult while they tell a story, either alone or with a small group in a quiet area of the room or even in a quiet area outside. Carefully consider the choice of books and stories you make available. Always read a book or story yourself before reading it to the children or putting it into the book area, to check for any potential negative impact of the storyline or characters.



Music and the Arts

Music and artistic or creative activities can be calming.

Children may find that listening to soft music at times or playing musical instruments, singing and dancing helps them to feel happy and relaxed. Children may even follow this experience by singing or humming to themselves. Be conscious of the choice of music and any particular associations it might have for a child.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness can help both adults and children get through a stressful time. Mindfulness is not complicated, it is simply being fully present in the moment and noticing what is happening right now. This also means experiencing all emotions, not just the pleasant ones. Children's feelings of anger, frustration, or fear are very real to them. Let them know that all feelings are ok. For example, 'You're sad because of what happened yesterday. I feel sad too. It's ok to feel sad.' Remind children that feelings come and then they go.

Numerous studies now show that a daily mindfulness practice of just 30 minutes can have a profound impact on our emotional wellbeing and our ability to cope with stress and challenges. Simple mindfulness techniques can help young children to begin to learn to regulate their emotions.

Mindful breathing

Mindful breathing is a basic part of practising mindfulness. Noticing our breath is a way of bringing us to the present moment and sometimes helps us to find some calm and stillness. Younger children may find it difficult to understand how to pay attention to their breath. You can explain that their breath is what they use when they blow bubbles. Ask children to choose a soft toy and lie on their back with their 'breathing buddy' on their stomach. Ask them to watch the cuddly toy move up and down as they breathe in and out.

Mind jar

One very effective tool that is often used for explaining a busy mind or a mind full of mixed emotions, and how to calm a busy mind, is the mind jar. Making a mind jar can help children see how big emotions can be stirred up and how they can settle their thoughts and find some peace by being quiet and focusing on their breathing.

Fill a jar with a tight fitting lid almost to the top with water. Add a spoonful of coloured glitter glue and secure the lid. Ask a child to shake the jar and make the glitter swirl around. Ask the children to imagine the glitter is like their thoughts when they are feeling sad, upset, cross, frustrated or stressed. Explain how, when everything is swirling around, it is hard to see things clearly. Reassure children that it is normal to feel this way at times and that it happens to everyone. Place the jar on a flat surface and ask the children to watch what happens when everything is still. The glitter starts to settle and the water becomes clear, just like their thoughts will settle and their mind will be clearer when they are calm.

Sensory experiences

An important part of mindfulness is reconnecting with the sensations our bodies feel. For this, you can use sensory experiences such as play dough, sand and water, playing outside in natural environments, gardening or cookery. Take the children for walks outside and, as you walk, ask them what they see and hear. Bring attention to the calming sounds and sights of nature – the birds, the colours of flowers, the feel of the trees, or the sound of the wind. Even noticing the way their feet feel on the ground brings attention inward and away from distracting thoughts of other situations.



It is important not to rush or interrupt the children. Allow plenty of time to look, hear, touch, smell and taste and enough space and time to be mindfully present and enjoy the experiences.

These are just some examples of ways to support young children following a critical incident and you may have other ideas based on knowing the particular needs and interests of the children in the service. Whatever ways you choose, the key to supporting children in the best way is to do it through their existing trusted, caring relationships.

Partnering with Parents to Support Children

In the days following an incident, it is particularly important for children's sense of safety and security to see their parents, the educators and other staff members looking calm, confident and friendly when they connect with each other as they arrive at the setting at the beginning and end of the day. This does not mean appearing to be happy about what has happened.

Babies and young children are very perceptive and will very likely be aware of any changes in the tone of voice and behaviour of the adults around them and use these as their guide to how safe and secure they can feel. Older children will often watch adults and listen carefully to adult conversations to find out information, especially if they think there is something they are not being told.

When you talk about a serious incident with parents, do so away from the children and not in a secretive way that the children can see, as this is likely to lead to the children becoming anxious about what you are not telling them.

Parents know their children best so listen carefully to their concerns and their ideas. Discuss and agree with parents the approach that will best suit each child – depending on their stage of development, their temperament and the degree of their closeness to the incident – so that there is consistency for the child between home and the setting. Let parents know what you are doing to help their child and everyone in the setting to feel safe, calm, connected, in control and hopeful.

If you gather from talking with parents that they are not discussing the incident with their child at home, you might suggest to them that it is important to give children true and accurate information. Remind them that the information should be appropriate for their age and temperament, and to listen to their concerns and answer their questions as discussing what has happened may help to alleviate their fears.



It might be helpful to recommend to parents to monitor and limit or even prevent children's access to news and social media. While children need to know what happened, they do not need to see any graphic images on TV or other media. Constant news about a critical incident can be overwhelming for any child and this is particularly true for sensitive children whose temperament makes them 'natural worriers'. Images can become impressed on their minds and replayed over and over again, causing further distress.

There may be a case, or cases, where a child has been more directly affected by an incident, and/or does not seem to be recovering well and is still showing signs of distress when you and their parents would have expected that they would be showing signs of recovery. You will need to discuss with their parents how you should both keep a close eye on the child, plan together for further support, both in the setting and at home, and access advice from a qualified professional such as a play therapist or counsellor.

Some children and staff members may need additional ongoing support from outside agencies. Your local Childcare Committee will help with details of onward referral for support available locally.

Wellbeing for the Adults in the Setting

The highly physical and psychologically demanding nature of working with children means it is easy to become tired, stressed and overwhelmed at the best of times. Your ability to respond appropriately to children at all times requires presence, sensitivity and empathy, and it is important that provision is made for all members of the staff team to take breaks and to be able to reflect both alone and with team colleagues. When there is a critical incident, support for all members of the staff team becomes even more important.

Following a traumatic incident, not all of the adults who normally work in the setting may feel able to cope with being at work and supporting the children emotionally. This may be for personal reasons or due to the nature of the recent or previous traumatic experiences. It is not in anyone's interest to require someone to do what they are not ready to do following a critical incident. Nobody should be obliged to be at work if they feel overwhelmed or unable to cope. For those educators who feel able to be at work and to support the children and their colleagues, ongoing emotional support in the setting is essential in the days, weeks and months following a critical incident.

Those responsible for operating ELC and SAC settings have a duty of care to ensure that all of the adults who work in the setting are safe and protected from harm as far as possible. This includes psychological as well as physical harm.

Those who children rely on to help them to become emotionally regulated must first be regulated themselves. The expectation that early years educators or school age childcare practitioners can support children's emotional wellbeing if their own emotional needs are unmet is unrealistic. Educators, practitioners and the management of the setting need to consider ways to support wellbeing at an individual and setting level.

- **Recognise the signs of stress:** Stress can manifest itself in different ways such as increased anxiety, irritability, tiredness, feeling overwhelmed, having difficulty making decisions and feeling detached from others. It is important to reflect on your own vulnerabilities, and think about the situations that trigger a stress reaction in you. Beginning this process of self-awareness will help you to think about what you could do to build your coping skills.
- **Actively plan self-care practices:** Spend time thinking about what activities you find restorative. This will be different for different people and may include physical activities like yoga and walking, creative activities like art and music, being outdoors, reflective activities like mindfulness and writing, engaging in spiritual practices, spending time with supportive people and accessing professional supports such as therapy.
- **Create wellness environments:** Within a setting team, it is important that team members feel supported, as this will help to reduce stress. Create an environment where it is ok to talk about stress. Have regular team meetings and put self-care practices on the agenda so that everyone can contribute ideas. Think about ways the physical environment can promote wellness. Ensure there is regular effective supervision.

During the Year Following the Incident

In the months following a critical incident, it is important to be aware that holidays, Christmas, birthdays and the anniversary of the event can mark points of particular emotional vulnerability. Plan carefully for these times and consider the needs of each of the children based on the observations you have made and the interactions you have had with them in the intervening time.

By coming together and considering each individual's need to feel safe, calm, connected, in control and hopeful, things can get better and both children and adults can recover well following a critical incident.

Useful Links

To help with the practical aspects of dealing with critical incidents see
[Critical Incidents in Early Learning and Care and
School Age Childcare Services: Planning and Responding](#)

Bereavement supports

Barnardos – bereavement service

- > [Young Children Grieve Too: A Guide for Parents and Carers of Children Under 6 Who Have Been Bereaved](#)
- > [Mind the Gap: A Guide for Parents and Carers of Bereaved School Age Children and Young People](#)

[Irish Hospice Foundation](#)

[Irish Childhood Bereavement Network](#)

[Support after Traumatic Death in the Community](#)

Relationships in ELC and SAC

[Adult-Child Relationships in School Age Childcare](#)

[The Key Person Approach: Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years](#)

Mindfulness

[Creative Mindfulness](#)

[Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care](#)

Other useful resources

[Childhood Trauma and the Brain](#)

[Healthy Ireland – Minding Your Mood](#)

[Helping Children Cope after a Traumatic Event](#)

[Keep Your Cool Toolbox](#)

[National Educational Psychological Service \(NEPS\) – Critical Incidents](#)

[Staff Wellbeing in Early Learning and Care](#)

[National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative \(NCTSI\)](#)

[The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)

[Trauma and Young Children: Building Trauma Awareness in Early Learning and Care](#)

[Webinar: Self-care for teachers](#)