

Southampton Psychology Service - Critical Incident Response

Support to Schools and other Educational Settings

What is a Critical Incident?

A critical incident is any event which involves the experience of significant distress to a level which has the potential to overwhelm individuals or communities. They are usually sudden, unexpected, and stressful to the extent that exceeds normal coping capacity. Events can be wide ranging but may include the sudden death of a child or colleague, or a traumatic incident within a school or community. As an Educational Psychology service we provide initial psychological support in the event of a critical incident.

Whilst no two incidents are the same, responses to critical incidents tend to follow a recognised pattern and with time, most children and adults will come to terms with what has happened and recover without the need for professional support or counselling. Help and support is best given by trusted, familiar adults as and when it is needed.

This document outlines the Critical Incident Support provided by Southampton Psychology Service. A checklist of actions for school staff to consider when responding to a critical incident is also provided at the end of the document.

A Graduated Response

In the event of a critical incident, Southampton Psychology Service will offer support to the school's leadership team in order to appropriately manage the event. The approach taken is founded on helping schools manage the immediate aftermath of an event, including advice and support around communication, practical arrangements and managing emotions. The focus will be on supporting the school to promote a sense of safety, calm, self and community efficacy, connectedness and hope. We offer a graduated response as follows:

Level 1: in the event of a death of a parent of a pupil and/or family member of staff (or other traumatic incident outside of school) which may impact some of the community:

We aim to support schools to feel prepared to respond. We will offer a phone conversation (with follow up if necessary) with a focus on thinking together about how best to approach the unique circumstances and the practical implications.

Level 2: in the event of a death of a pupil/staff member (or other traumatic incident within the school):

We aim to offer a higher level of support, if required, drawing upon a model known as **Psychological First Aid** (further details provided on page 4).

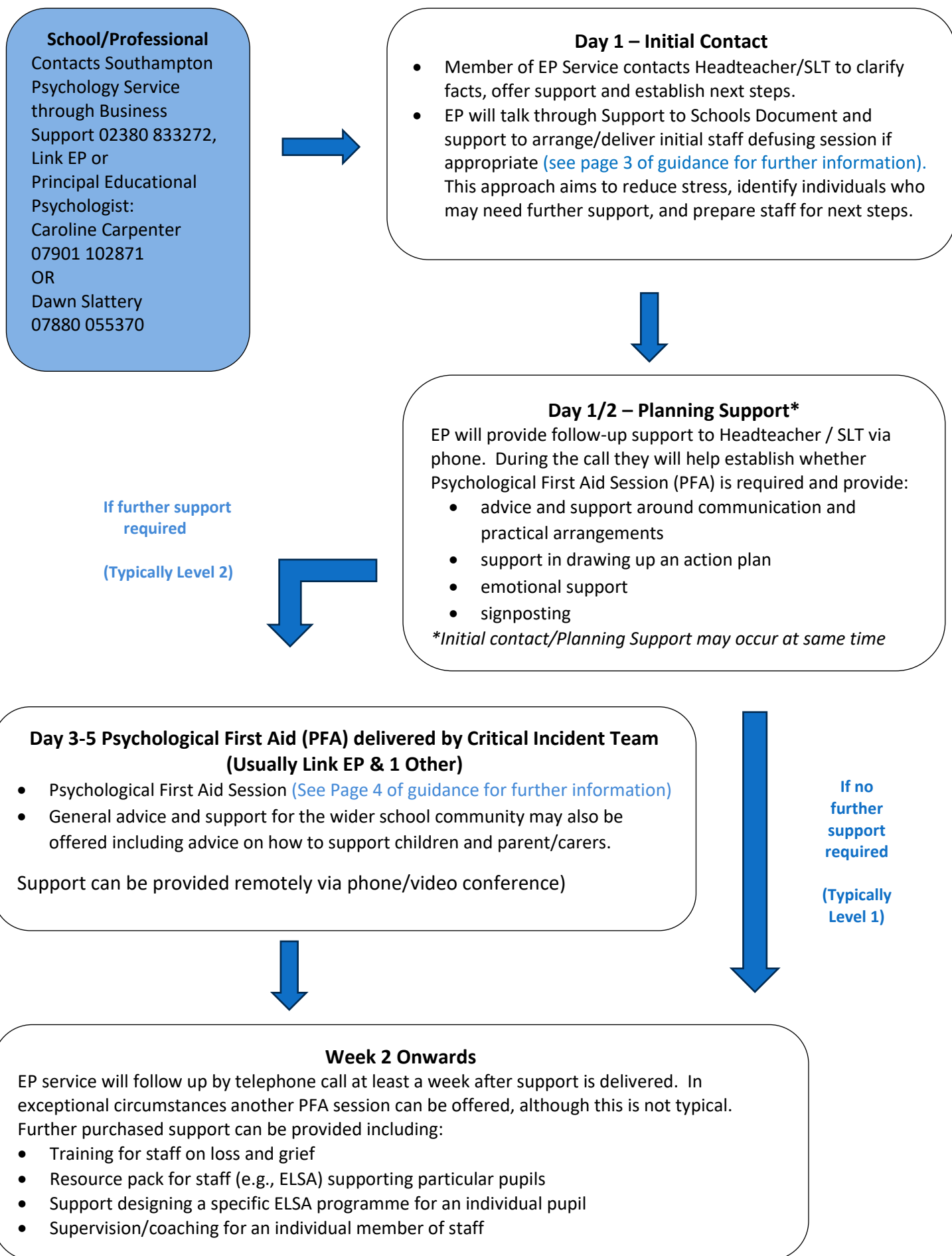
Please see flowchart on page 2 detailing how to access support from our service.

We also have a bank of resources and references relating to many topic areas including:

- Talking to children about death
- Grief and loss
- Supporting emotional wellbeing

Resources can be accessed for free here: [Critical Incident Resources for Schools](#)

Southampton Psychology Service Critical Incident Response for schools



Critical Incident Defusing - Guidance for Schools

Following a traumatic incident within school, those involved in the incident will benefit from an initial defusing session on the day of the incident. In most circumstances this should be delivered in school by somebody who knows those involved. An EP can talk you through the process and offer support if required.

What is a defusing session?

- It is a short informal session with the staff directly involved/impacted on. It should be a natural part of dealing with an event that is unusually difficult.

When should a defusing session take place?

- A defusing session should take place on the day of the event before people go home.

Who should run the session?

- This should be someone who was not directly involved in the incident. A member of SMT would be good (an EP may provide support here, depending on arrangements made).

Aims

- Reduce stress and tension
- Accelerate a return to normal functioning
- Identify individuals who may need more support

Defusing session components

- Ask them how they are doing
- Allow them to talk about the event if they wish (to tell the story of what happened)
- Let them talk about their reactions
- Try to support with any strong emotions that are expressed, which are usually triggered by irrational thinking. Use paraphrasing (repeat back what you have heard them say), clarifying questions and reality testing (addressing thinking errors) if appropriate. For example, an individual may feel guilty because they believe they did not respond well enough during the incident
 1. *First, acknowledge their feeling of guilt by paraphrasing (“so I think you are saying that you feel guilty because you think that you didn’t do enough...”)*
 2. *Then normalise this feeling (“it is understandable that you feel like this”)*
 3. *Finally, test the reality of their thoughts by asking questions about what they did and what else they could have done (“what evidence is there that this was your fault? Suppose you had a similar situation and the same set of circumstances, what would you do?”). It may also be helpful to ask the rest of the group how that person did and for them to hear that others perceive that they did well.*
- Inform them about some typical reactions they may find themselves experiencing, for example:
 - Shock, confusion, numbness
 - Anxiety, anger, fear
 - ‘Emotional chaos’ – fluctuating between feeling ok and feeling emotionally distressed
 - Inability to concentrate
 - Guilt (about not having done enough, or making a mistake)
 - Disbelief
 - Physical reactions (for example: sleep disturbance, headaches, loss of appetite, rapid heartbeat)
- Ensure they know where to obtain on-going support – this may include SMT in school as well as other colleagues and family/friends
- Discuss with them whether they think a further opportunity to discuss the whole incident would be beneficial – this would be a Psychological First Aid Session (usually delivered 3-4 days after the event and run by two Educational Psychologists)
- Discuss practical arrangements e.g., getting home safely, plans for next day etc and plan for any support/help if needed

Psychological First Aid - Guidance for Schools

What is Psychological First Aid (PFA)?

Psychological First Aid is an evidence-based approach to help people in the short, medium and longer term after major incidents, disasters and other traumatic incidents. It is intended to minimise the distress that typically occurs after traumatic incidents and to help people connect to support networks and develop ways of managing and coping. Most people will experience a wide range of reactions, some of which may interfere with their lives, and empathic support early on may help the recovery process.

Aims of PFA

The aim of Psychological First Aid is to reduce people's emotional distress, help them access the support they need, and encourage behaviours that will assist them to return to normal functioning. It is not about making people relate details of distressing experiences.

The main objectives are:

- Providing comfort and consolation
- Protecting people from further threat and distress
- Offering practical assistance and information to help people address their immediate needs and concerns
- Encouraging goal orientated and purposeful behaviour
- Enabling voluntary sharing of experiences
- Enabling people to review their decisions and actions
- Facilitating a sense of being in control
- Identifying people who need further support
- Providing information about typical reactions to trauma and some coping techniques
- Ensuring that they know how to contact sources of support

When and where will the PFA session take place?

The session will ideally take place 3-5 days after the incident. It will be delivered by two trained and experienced Educational Psychologists. It will be important that enough time is protected for the session which will usually last 60-90 minutes. It will need to take place in a private room suitable for the group size and interruptions should be avoided/kept to a minimum. All staff will need to be able to stay for the whole session.

PFA is a flexible and practical approach and it can be delivered virtually (via Zoom) if necessary. Sessions can also be organised for individuals as well as groups.

Who should attend the PFA session?

This will depend on the incident and who it has impacted on. There should be no more than 12 people in a group and attendance is voluntary. It may be more practical/beneficial to have two smaller groups. The EP will be able to discuss this with you when planning the session.

Checklist for Schools and Other Educational Settings

How to respond in the event of a critical incident

Every critical incident will be different but there are several principles to consider when responding that will help minimise the potential impact in the longer term. The following checklist is designed to provide guidance on the types of actions to be taken and should be read with consideration to five key principles of effective critical incident response (Hobfoll et al):

- A sense of safety – e.g. re-establishing familiar routines, managing information effectively (dealing with rumours)
- Calming – normalising responses and managing stress
- A sense of self and community efficacy – helping children regain some control over events
- Connectedness – enhancing social support through assemblies/group work
- Hope – encouraging a focus on the future and positive goals

	Actions	Who?	Done?	Notes
Immediate (at the time)	Call the emergency services			
	Respond to the school's emergency plan			
	Contact the Emergency Planning Team 02380 833675 emergency.planning@southampton.gov.uk			
Short Term (Hours/ Days)	Obtain factual information			
	Establish a critical incident team who will respond to the incident and share information			
	Seek support - see Critical Incident Response Process Flow Chart on page 2			
	Create action plan, delegating actions to members of the CI team. The action plan should consider: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Communication</i> – who needs to know? How and when will information be shared? 2. <i>Organise defusing session at end of the day of the event (see Critical Incident Defusing, guidance for schools page 3)</i> 3. <i>Support</i> – who needs support (identifying at risk members of staff/pupils)? When will they need support? Who should provide the support? What support will you need and how will it be provided? (see Psychological First Aid guidance for schools, page 4). <p><i>*In the event of an unexpected child death a member of school staff will be required to attend a Rapid Response meeting. This can be an emotionally demanding meeting so ensure that support is available.</i></p>			

	<p>Share information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Contact families involved ○ Inform staff ○ Inform pupils as appropriate (preferably in small groups) ○ Make arrangements for informing other parents <p>See Southampton Psychology Service Shared Google Drive for: Critical Incident Resources for Schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● guidance on sharing news with children and young people ● templates of letter to send out to parents/carers ● resources to support (useful books and websites) 			
	Stick to normal routines as much as possible			
Medium Term (Days/ Weeks)	Provide opportunities for staff/pupils to talk if needed (Psychological First Aid sessions)			
	Provide debriefing meeting for staff/pupils involved			
	Managing staff – protect from over-working			
	Check procedures for monitoring staff and pupils			
	Keep families informed (what support has been provided, how parents can have access to help, who to contact if they are worried about child)			
	Adjust to normal routines			
Long Term (Weeks/ Months/ Years)	Plan a memorial in conversation with families involved			
	Monitoring of staff pupils with follow up support as appropriate			
	Pre-empting and planning for any events that may need handling sensitively (e.g. anniversaries).			
	Evaluate response to incident.			