

# Managing Critical Events in Children's Services

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A critical event within or around a child care service can cause enormous upheaval, stress and grief for carers, staff, children and their families. A critical event is any incident, emergency or disaster that takes place within the service, the local community or in more distant locations such as another state or country. Children can become aware of critical events throughout the world through the media, peers and family.

Critical events can include incidents such as fires, natural disasters, road accidents, outbreaks of disease, terrorist attacks or the death of a family member, carer, staff member or community identity. Critical events can also involve incidents where children witness inappropriate adult behaviour such as drunkenness or violence.

Child care services cannot always avoid or control critical events. However, they can strive to prevent loss of life, personal injury and property damage and to reduce the negative impact of a critical event by supporting those involved during and after the event. To manage critical events effectively it is essential to develop policies, procedures and plans for prevention and response. Developing an awareness of potential critical events that could affect the service, without alarming or distressing those involved, is also important.



## Who can help services to manage critical events?

### *Emergency services*

State and Territory emergency services are an essential support for preventing, preparing for and responding to critical events in children's services. Most emergency services have websites that provide information on preventing and managing incidents and emergencies. This information is important for developing and regularly reviewing policies, procedures and plans for managing critical events. It is important to keep the details of relevant emergency services clearly displayed on or near telephones throughout the service for immediate assistance in the event of a critical incident.

### *Counsellors and other professionals*

Carers, staff and managers should remember that they are not trained psychologists or counsellors. It is important to refer children, families, carers and staff to other professionals for support following a critical event when required. Local community health and support agencies and family doctors can be useful in providing immediate and long term assistance and counselling after a critical event.

### *Health and safety authorities*

Relevant health and safety authorities are important sources of information to use when developing policies, procedures and plans for managing critical events. For example, the Fire Protection Association of Australia's website provides fire prevention and response information, including a brochure that can be downloaded entitled 'Fire Safety and Children'. The Health Insite website also provides a wide range of up-to-date information on child safety and links to other relevant authorities.

It is important for services to seek advice and to prepare for potential critical incidents that may occur due to their particular location or surrounding environment. For example, services that exist in bushfire or flood prone areas, or that are situated near potentially dangerous sites such as nuclear facilities, petrol stations or major roads can seek specific advice from relevant authorities to help them to prepare for possible emergency situations. It is important that all services remain aware of their immediate environment as they may sometimes find themselves temporarily located on a potentially dangerous site, for

instance, when building or road construction works are occurring in the service's vicinity.

## Preventing critical events

### *Health and safety policies and procedures*

The provision of safe and healthy environments is essential for preventing critical events that may cause injury or illness. There are many health and safety policies and procedures that services should keep to support their daily practices that will contribute to the prevention of critical events. These include policies on: using and storing dangerous products, infection control, supervision and food safety. Services should keep up to date with health and safety requirements and need to regularly review policies to ensure they are consistent with recommendations from relevant authorities.

### *Risk management*

Critical events in services can be prevented by effectively monitoring and managing potential risks to health and safety. All areas of service operations that relate to health and safety should be regularly reviewed for their potential risk of harm to children and adults and, where necessary, action should be taken to reduce the risk.

The following four step risk management process is adapted from the Workcover Authority of NSW:

1. Think - Identify hazards and assess the risk they pose
2. Do - Implement risk controls
3. Talk - Consult with each other about health and safety matters
4. Review - Monitor health and safety measures

## Preparing for a critical event

Preparing effectively for critical events can prevent loss of life and reduce personal injury and property damage. At the time of a critical event, carers and staff can experience powerful feelings that make it difficult to think clearly. Having clear, familiar and well practiced emergency procedures and plans will assist carers and staff to respond logically and appropriately in an emergency situation.

### *Emergency procedures*

Fire, accident and emergency evacuation procedures and drills that are reviewed and practiced regularly are crucial in keeping children, carers and staff safe. These procedures should be clearly displayed in areas throughout the service to regularly remind carers and staff of the correct steps to take during a critical event.

## Critical event management plans

Written critical event management plans are useful for detailing the immediate, follow up and ongoing actions that will be implemented. These plans should be clear and concise so that carers and staff can easily become familiar with the steps they should be taking during and after a critical event. The plan should cover all service stakeholders that may be affected.

### **Critical event management plans could include:**

#### *Immediate actions*

- Carrying out critical event/emergency plans
- Ensuring the immediate safety of those involved
- Administering first aid
- Reassuring children, families, carers and staff
- Seeking assistance from emergency services and management
- Accompanying children or others to hospital by ambulance when necessary

#### *Follow up actions*

- Arranging for or referring individuals to professional counselling
- Observing children's reactions and behaviour
- Allowing children to express thoughts and feelings
- Providing a stable and nurturing environment with familiar routines
- Supporting staff through team meetings and the use of relief staff
- Supporting carers through meetings, home visits and play sessions
- Providing professional support and special leave when needed
- Supporting families through meetings and written information

#### *Ongoing actions*

- Monitoring and supporting children, carers, staff and families
- Evaluating emergency and critical event management plans

(Adapted from Legg, 2001, p. 10-17)

## Responding to critical events

### Clarify responsibilities

When a critical event occurs, carers, staff and management can become caught up in chaotic and overwhelming circumstances. The responses of people involved in critical events, both during and after the event, can affect the bearing the incident has on the service and on individuals. When services are well prepared, with emergency procedures and critical event management plans in place, they are more likely to be able to limit the negative impact of the event.

Carers, staff and management should be familiar with their individual responsibilities during a critical event. It is useful to nominate individuals to take responsibility for ensuring critical event management and emergency plans are carried out correctly by creating positions such as fire wardens or occupational health and safety officers.

### Manage the media

Critical events in children's services can attract attention from the media such as newspapers, radio and television. It can be difficult for individuals who have been involved in a critical incident to communicate effectively with the media. However, by being prepared for media interest the service can help to prevent the generation of misinformation and speculation. It can also prevent the negative effects of public interest on people involved and on the service's reputation in the community.

Services may consider nominating a media contact person as the primary person to communicate with the media. This can help to ensure that consistent information is delivered and that issues are sensitively and accurately

addressed. The media contact person may occupy a leadership position in the service such as director, coordinator or management representative. Services can develop a media response plan and providing training may assist the media contact person to develop appropriate skills.

### How can critical events affect children and adults?

The effects of a critical event on individuals may be short term or they may take a long time to emerge and be resolved. The closer people are to a critical event the more likely it is to negatively affect them. Critical events affect individual carers, staff and children in different ways. Some may react immediately with shock, fear, anxiety, stress and signs of grief, while others may respond some time after the event.

Children can be affected by the way they see adults respond to a critical event as well as by what they see and hear in the environment and in the media. The child's age and development will affect their ability to understand what has happened and the way in which they express their feelings.

Children often express their feelings through actions rather than words. For example, very young children may develop feeding problems, sleep difficulties, regress in their behaviour or become angry or withdrawn. Older children may show their reaction to critical events through their behaviour for instance, not wanting to go to school, expressing fear of the dark, having nightmares, or developing physical symptoms such as headaches.

Each adult will also respond differently to critical events. The range of reactions includes those that are displayed during times of grief such as shock, denial, guilt, anger, and acceptance. However, long term anxiety, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are also possible adult responses to critical events.

### The impact of events outside the service

Events occurring outside the service can also affect children deeply. Children can become indirectly exposed to events such as terrorist attacks, wars, natural disasters and celebrity illnesses and deaths. Media coverage and information from adults and other children about incidents in the community and around the world can cause children to react in similar ways to events in which they are directly involved where they can become confused, upset and anxious.

#### Adults can support children during and after critical events by:

- Providing reassurance, support and understanding
- Protecting them from television and media coverage
- Keeping to normal routines
- Giving them many opportunities to play, draw and paint
- Listening to and observing their language and behaviour
- Allowing them to ask questions
- Answering questions honestly and appropriately
- Referring families to professional counselling and support when appropriate

Carers and staff can be faced with the difficult task of explaining war, violence and terrorism to children. These conversations are important in helping children to feel secure and to understand the world they live in. Protecting children from graphic television and media coverage of these events is important to prevent children from becoming overwhelmed, confused and distressed.

Adults at the service need to create an environment where children feel able to ask questions. They can also help children by listening and responding honestly and supportively. It is important, however, to respond to children's questions in ways that are appropriate to their level of understanding and that do not burden children with graphic descriptions or distressing details.

### Supporting children and adults after critical events

Supporting those involved during and after a critical event is crucial in limiting the negative effect that the event may have. Consideration needs to be given to the short and long term effects that an event may have on children, families, carers, staff and management. A plan for monitoring individual reactions and providing timely support is essential to helping individuals come to terms with the event.

Children can learn how to respond to crises and difficult situations in life by observing adults. When caring for children, carers and staff should try to keep their own feelings in check as children need to feel safe and be reassured that adults are in control of the situation. This can also affect the way in which children develop personal strength and resilience. Children need to be given opportunities to talk and express their feelings about the event, and be given reassurance and clear answers to their questions. ■

### Services can support adults during and after critical events by:

- Providing clear policies, procedures and responsibilities for dealing with critical events
- Providing carers, staff and families with factual written information about the event
- Arranging meetings for staff, carers and families to discuss the event
- Encouraging them to recognise how each other are feeling
- Encouraging them to support one another and to continue normal routines
- Employing relief staff to support staff when they need time-out
- Encouraging them not to try too hard to recover quickly
- Referring them to counsellors or professional help such as doctors, lawyers or accountants
- Providing them with compassionate leave when needed
- Anticipating problems and making plans for significant anniversaries or events that may cause distress

### Further reading

- Helping Children Cope with Trauma. (2005). *Jigsaw*, 35, 8-9
- Legg, C. (2001). *When Things Go Wrong: Managing Critical Incidents in Children's Services*. Watson, ACT: Early Childhood Australia
- Sutherland, K. (2004). *Overcoming Tragedy: Rebuilding the Roundhouse*. *Rattler*, 70, 19-21

### Useful websites:

- **Child and Youth Health, South Australia:** [www.cyh.com.au](http://www.cyh.com.au)
- **Fire Protection Association of Australia:** [www.fpa.com.au](http://www.fpa.com.au)
- **Health Insite:** [www.healthinsite.gov.au/topics/Child\\_Safety](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au/topics/Child_Safety)
- **National Occupational Health and Safety Commission:** [www.nohsc.gov.au/SmallBusiness](http://www.nohsc.gov.au/SmallBusiness)
- **Workcover Authority of NSW:** [www.workcover.nsw.gov.au](http://www.workcover.nsw.gov.au)