

**2010**



Coláiste Abbáin

P. O' Connor

# **[ CRISIS RESPONSE POLICY ]**

This document contains Coláiste Abbáin's Crisis Response Policy.

# **COLAISTE ABBAIN**

## **CRISIS RESPONSE POLICY**

### **RANGE OF CRISES**

The life of the school is affected by many and various traumas:

Family bereavements  
Suicide of a student, teacher, parent  
Death of staff member or student  
School fire or explosion  
Severe physical violence in the school  
Traumatic accident on a school trip  
Etc.

### **TRAUMA RESPONSE PLAN**

It is crucial that the school has the correct information regarding the crisis. It is therefore important that the School Response Team (SRT) gather to establish the facts-this may involve contacting others such as Garda, hospitals, parents, etc. Class cover should be arranged to facilitate this meeting. The School Response team will be nominated at the May Staff meeting each year.

### **THE SCHOOL RESPONSE TEAM**

**The School Response Team (SRT) is composed of the following members of Staff:**

Mr. Lillis  
Mr. O'Brien  
Mr. Crean  
Ms. Tuohy  
Ms. Sutton  
Ms. Kehoe  
Ms. Wall

### **THE PASTORAL CARE TEAM**

Fr. Nolan  
Mr. Crean  
Ms. Wall

## **AN OUTLINE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE**

This group will agree to an immediate plan of action, which may involve informing students and staff

- Contacting parents
- Visiting the home of the affected student-Principal, SRT, Class Teacher
- Organising a school assembly
- Involving the Pastoral Team, Chaplaincy, etc.
- Alerting outside agencies such as counsellors, Samaritans, etc.
- Agreeing a common statement with regard to the crisis
- Assigning tasks within the group

### **Information**

It is vital that all those needing information receive it as soon as it is practicable. It is helpful if a common statement is agreed by the SRT team when informing students and others. Such a statement will reduce the spread of rumour. The Principal will attempt to alert and inform staff in the first instance. If at all possible the students will be told at the same time in no larger than normal class size.

### **The statement should seek to:**

- Be communicated in a sensitive manner
- Give the facts as they are known
- Highlight the support that will be available
- Indicate the actions that are planned

In the case of a suspected suicide, great care will be taken not to use the term 'suicide' until it has been categorically established that the death was a result of suicide.

In the case where a traumatic accident has occurred on a school trip, a similar statement is needed to assist those who will be telephoning relatives. A group of people (e.g. SRT) will be involved so that all concerned are informed in or around the same time.

When contacting parents, some considerations will apply. The SRT will endeavour to

- Offer any practical help needed-transport, phone numbers, contact names, etc.
- Enquire if the parent/relative is alone or has someone to offer

- support
- Carefully review with the parent/relative that the information given has been fully understood
- Alert all other extended family members involved, giving them support where practical.

## **LIAISING WITH THE PRESS**

If there are to be enquiries from the press, it is important that the school will have catered for this possibility in advance by nominating one person only to act as liaison (Principal and/or Deputy Principal).

In preparing a press statement thought should be given to the following:

- Priority to be given to the sensitivities and needs of those affected directly by the crisis
- The non-release of names, addresses and telephone numbers
- Reliance on facts and the avoidance of speculation
- Consideration of likely questions and a response to same
- Agreement with the press re a time for briefings if this is necessary in an ongoing situation
- Nomination of a location for press briefings
- The press statement will be simple and brief In the case of a sudden death, for example, it will express the shock/distress/sorrow of the entire school community. This statement will be adhered to-and not elaborated on-in all communications with the media and should be familiar to every member of the school staff

### **Others to be informed**

When possible, the Principal will inform the CEO and decide whether an emergency meeting is necessary.

In the event of a sudden death of a member of the school community, the school may close.

Whether the school will remain open or will close will depend on the judgement of the principal and school management following consultation with the school staff If the decision is to close the school, it will be done only after having informed the students of the crisis and of the routine which will be followed over the following days. Parents will be formally notified of the school closure.

### **Short-term action**

The action that is needed in the short-term will be very dependent on the nature of the crisis. Actions will come under the following headings: Students, Staff, and Parents.

## **Students**

The SRT will inform the student body at the earliest possible opportunity. The SRT will be prepared to spend a reasonable amount of time with the students to allow them to react to the news of the crisis. It would be useful if the Class Teacher or another appropriate person (e.g. counsellor, chaplain, etc.) were to remain with the class after the announcement has been made.

In addressing the classes, the SRT will tell the students of the crisis and advise that it is an event with which everyone – students and teachers – will find it difficult to cope. S/he will also explain the routine for the day and the following days and the arrangements which will be available for the students to access counselling, chaplaincy and other support services.

Efforts will be made within the school to sustain an atmosphere where it is acceptable to talk about the experience. It is recognised that this may cause difficulties for some teachers; however, all staff who are available and willing and others such as counsellors, chaplains, etc. will be asked to lend a helping hand. This will entail sensitivity on the part of the Principal and other members of staff to facilitate time for such sharing. Care will be taken to balance the need to continue with the normal routine and the accessibility of support personnel for students.

The most essential quality needed by students is that of listening. The school will put in place a support system for students in this regard. Such a system will involve those members of staff who are willing and able to offer support, together with outside professionals where required, time and resources to carry out their role, a method of supporting each other and a review of their effectiveness.

The school will encourage contact with home in the initial stages of a crisis. Parents need to be able to contact the school if they have information that will help the school in any way in caring for their child.

## **Bereavement**

In the event of the crisis being a bereavement, the involvement of students in the funeral or other services needs to be discussed. This requires invitation, planning and review. The families involved need to be consulted, the students invited to take part, time given to prepare for this participation and, finally, a debriefing of those concerned. While it would be appropriate for the deceased student's/teacher's classmates to attend the church services and burial, it may be inappropriate for large numbers of the school population to be present. The presence of large numbers of young people at such highly charged events could prove to be inappropriate as well as being upsetting for individual students, parents and relatives of the deceased.

**At all times the rights of the deceased family to privacy must be respected.**

The students may wish to organise a religious service or other commemoration within the confines of the school. They will be consulted as to the nature of such an event. Such an event may be of great benefit to staff and parents.  
*(For further planning re bereavement, see Bereavement Policy)*

Attention will be given to the possible signs of distress being exhibited by students. In noticing possible signs, it is important to say that these are not necessarily indicative of stress in relation to a trauma. Rather they are merely prompts to staff as they watch out for the students in their care. Such signs will be related to uncharacteristic behaviour. It is important for staff to check out signs with others before drawing conclusions.

Students need to be asked for their permission with regard to discussion of their personal reactions to a crisis. The principal, Deputy Principal, Class Teachers, Counselors and Chaplains are key people in addressing the needs of individual students.

Freedom to be upset is important for anyone responding to a trauma. The school needs to be aware, on an ongoing basis, how it creates and maintains a safe atmosphere for this to occur.

Students not directly involved with the trauma should also be monitored as they too may be affected. Allowing students to express their sympathy can be a catalyst for such students (e.g. writing a card, attending a service, etc.).

Constant reminders will need to be given in relation to the supports that are available within the school. Students react in different ways and at different times in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

The school needs to focus on the friends of the affected student, as they can be the best source of support. Often the affected student may not wish to speak to an adult and may rely heavily on friends. These close friends may need support as they attempt to find ways to be of help.

## **Staff**

Many staff, following a trauma, may need to air their feelings and reactions. It may be helpful to consider a number of options, such as:

Staff meeting, inviting in professional help, a staff prayer service, a simple confidential questionnaire to determine the needs of the staff

Care needs to be taken of those staff directly involved with the trauma that they receive support, are not overworked and have time to de-brief

Staff who feel, for whatever reason that they are unable to become involved in the school's direct response to the trauma will be able to opt out.

Those staff having any concerns about students or others in relation to the trauma should have access to personnel to assist them.

The counsellor, chaplain and other members of the SRT will be the key resource in the short and medium term response. They need to be facilitated, resources and supported in their task. It is vital that they meet regularly with the Principal in reviewing progress. It will be this group who will liaise with and support the other members of staff

The Principal will also need to ensure that he is receiving support. The weight of responsibility surrounding a crisis may be enormous. The Principal needs to take care of his own well-being and should seek whatever support is appropriate within and outside the school community.

## **Parents**

The school will have some role to play in supporting parents concerned with a trauma. This will vary depending on the nature of the crisis and the resources available to the school.

The school will nominate contact people for parents to liaise with, particularly in regard to monitoring the progress of their children. The contact people will be nominated at the May Staff meeting each year.

Parents will be put in contact with each other if deemed necessary and/or helpful by the school authorities.

Discussion will occur with involved parents and/or the parents' association as to what action(s) could be taken to support those concerned.

Parents may be invited to attend a school liturgy/information evening following a tragedy.

## **Medium-Term Action**

The following are a selection of the possibilities worthy of consideration, as it is recognised that action will be very much dependent on the nature of the trauma.

Students returning to school after a major accident or bereavement cannot be easily categorised in terms of their needs. The SRT will be a useful resource in seeking to support each student appropriately. Care will be taken to monitor their relationships with peers and teachers; falling behind in academic and other work; involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Consideration of a special day of reflection/retreat would benefit the class affected by the trauma.

The Rainbows Programme may be offered to students. Such groups will be a resource to the school in responding to the medium and long-term needs of young people and adults in the school community who have been most affected by the trauma.

The SRT and Pastoral care team will benefit all in the school by constantly reviewing the needs of the students, staff and parents in relation to issues of trauma, accessing necessary services.

When a subsequent crisis occurs in the school setting, care must be taken to support those who were previously traumatised, as this subsequent trauma may trigger deep emotional reactions.

The school will hold an annual remembrance service for all those connected to the school communities who have died. Students, staff and parents will be encouraged to record the names of those they would like to be remembered.

The school might consider the dedication of a tree, special garden, piece of artwork, notice board to recall those who have died.

### **Long-Term Action**

In-service should be provided for staff to help them to explore death, dying grief and other traumatic events with students, where practical.

### **Review**

It is vital to review all procedures in the light of experience. It is most helpful to take time to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and procedures subsequent to their application. It is also a good idea to make contact with other schools and professionals to compare the effectiveness of their trauma response plan and assess courses of action both proposed and taken.

### **Conclusion**

It is hoped that the above plan will be of support in the event of a trauma occurring in our school community. It is important to note that these guidelines can never replace the most vital qualities needed in dealing with such personal issues as suicide, bereavement and loss – the sensitivity, care and compassion we offer to one another and our students on a daily basis.

Proposed by: Pastoral Care Team

Proposal date: 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2007

Review date: May, 2009

## **PRINCIPAL'S CHECKLIST/ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION**

The following is a checklist of things of things to consider on the morning of a trauma. They are not written in any particular order. It is important for the Principal to take time to plan what he must do and what is appropriate to say to all concerned.

- Take time to let the news sink in
- Call a meeting of the SRT, including Class Teacher of deceased student
- Put together as much factual information as possible
- Inform staff of what has happened
- Discuss school routine for the first day with the staff
- Identify particular students who may need to be told individually, e.g. close friends, relatives, etc.
- Inform students of the trauma and explain that this is something everyone will find difficult to cope with. Explain school routine for the day and support and back-up that will be available to students.
- Contact local Health Board Crisis Services
- Make contact with the family of the deceased/trauma victim  
Meet with key staff who can offer student support and decide on the format for this.
  
- Decide on any other arrangements which need to be made on the first day, e.g. prayers for the student and family
- Check in with staff in the staff room during the day and keep abreast of what is happening in the school
- Be aware of any teachers who may be particularly distressed, e.g. teachers who have been recently bereaved themselves
- Encourage staff to come to you during the day to let you know how things are going
- Find out details of the funeral and communicate this to staff and students
- Make contact with the bereaved family
- At the end of the first day review events with staff and make plans for the following day
- Make staff aware of students who are particularly vulnerable and what supports will be available to them
- If there is a likelihood of interest from the media discuss a strategy to deal with any such requests

## **SUICIDE — INDICATORS AND INTERVENTION MEASURES**

Suicide is a particularly traumatic event in the life of any school. A study conducted in Ottawa, Canada, revealed a number of behaviours which have been exhibited by those contemplating suicide. This list and suggested forms of intervention may be helpful.

## **OTTOWA POINTERS**

- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Withdrawal from social contact
- Difficulty in concentrating, problems with judgment and memory
- Dramatic fall-off in school performance
- Feelings of sadness, emptiness, hopelessness may be expressed in essays
- Increased overt displays of anger and rage, verbal or physical
- Excessive use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Promiscuous behaviour
- Uncharacteristic delinquent behaviour/thrill seeking
- Lack of supportive relationships with friends/family
- Previous suicidal threats, gestures, attempts
- Statements, verbal or written, revealing a wish to die or preoccupation with death
- Nihilistic comments ô life is meaningless, filled with misery
- Gestures to be noticed - self-mutilation, scratches
- Planning for death, making final arrangements, giving away treasured possessions

Suddenly becoming cheerful after long depression (relief when decision taken)

## **WHAT TO DO**

### **TAKE IT SERIOUSLY.**

Have a talk with the young person, keeping some principles in mind

- Remain in control ô don't panic, act slowly
- Encourage expression of feelings and accept them (give time)
- Avoid judgmental comments or empty reassurance
- Avoid promises you can't keep (e.g. secrecy, call me any time, confidentiality)
- Empathise and let him/her know you care (biggest single preventative is knowing someone cares)
- Encourage him/her to see a counsellor or therapist (carefully)
- Inform parents and management of school
- If seriously worried, don't leave him/her alone
- Seek advice and support yourself (nobody should carry the worry about a suicidal person alone)

## **WHAT NOT TO DO**

- Don't assume a student is not the 'type' to commit suicide
- Don't leave a student alone if you think the risk of suicide is imminent
- Don't act shocked at whatever is told to you

- Don't debate whether suicide is wrong. This may make him/her feel more guilty and intensify the depression
- Don't take responsibility for saving the young person. Get help
- Don't feel that you have to answer all his/her questions. If you don't know the meaning of life, say so. Make it clear that you are there to help, not to solve problems
- Don't be afraid to be the first to mention suicide. Generally it comes as a relief to the young person if you are willing to discuss the subject
- Don't deny or cover up his/her feelings or intentions. Don't be judgmental. Acknowledge his/her feelings without reinforcing the negative (e.g. "I believe you are feeling miserable right now. Let's talk about it.")
- Don't abandon the young person because the problems are too overwhelming. Follow through in getting help for him/her. Don't be another loss or rejection to him/her
- Don't wait too long because you hope s/he will get over it. It can't hurt to talk about his/her feelings

## **TRAUMA RESPONSE PLAN**

SRT meeting, including Principal, Deputy Principal, Class Teacher

- Agree on a common statement (with help of template) with regard to the crisis, giving the facts as they are known
- Decide who tells whom
  - i) the class/student
  - ii) close friends of the student
  - iii) teachers of the student
  - iv) all other teachers and students
- Decide how to inform classes and teachers. Avoid whole school announcements.
- Discuss and decide on school routine for the first day, including visit to home of the bereaved, time out for staff and students
- Arrange a further meeting for later in the day to discuss school routine for the following days, arrangements for the funeral, etc.
- Staff:
  - i) Ask for volunteers from staff to inform students in no larger than class size
  - ii) Allow time for SRT to go through guidelines with these staff members on how to do this. Highlight the support that will be available in the school for students and staff
  - iii) Distribute guidelines on bereavement to all staff
  - iv) Arrange for a meeting of SRT to discuss prayer services/assembly for the day beginning with the year group of the deceased student

## **TRAUMA RESPONSE PLAN**

### **SRT Co-ordinator**

Contact the available support services, i.e. Health Board Crisis Services or private bereavement counselling services.

Be available to visit the home of the bereaved to check out needs of the family in relation to school presence at the funeral and funeral arrangements.

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO WHEN A STUDENT SAYS: " I WANT TO KILL MYSELF."**

- Try to keep your own shock under control
- Reply with an open question
- Try to find out how long s/he has been feeling this way
- Who else has s/he told?
- Can you speak to his/her mother and/or father?
- If 'everything' is wrong, start checking 'everything'
  - i) p a r e n t s
  - ii) s c h o o l
  - iii) e x a m s
  - iv) s i b l i n g s
  - v) f r i e n d s
  - vi) h o m e e n v i r o n m e n t
  - vii) e t c .
- Reassure ô everything is redeemable. There is always a second chance. Nothing is ever so bad that a parent will not love a child (this includes their sexual orientation, failing exams, missing CAO points, being a horrible person, etc.)
- Make a contract that s/he won't hurt him/herself until you meet again and get help
- Where are your back ups?
- Contact the parents
- Contact the student's GP
- Make a list of possible helping agencies and follow through
- Get support for yourself