Recognise the potential impact of critical incidents

Learning communities that prepare and inform themselves about the potential negative effects of critical incidents will be better equipped to respond if they occur.

What is a critical incident?

A critical incident is an event outside the range of typical experience. It is often sudden and unexpected, involves the perception of a threat to life and can include physical or emotional loss.

Critical incidents may occur within or outside your early learning service or school.

They may include the death, suicide, or terminal illness of a child or young person, staff member, family or associated community member; accident or serious injury; natural disasters; fire or vandalism at the learning environment; and many other situations.

Experiencing a critical incident doesn't necessarily mean a child or young person will experience a mental health issue or condition.

How someone responds to a critical incident will vary according to their cognitive abilities, developmental stage, levels of resilience, understanding of the situation, level of support, presence of risk and protective factors, previous exposure to other critical events or adversities, and the personal meaning attributed to the experience. Some events may have little impact on one person but cause severe distress in another.

A coordinated and planned response is important.

What affects how we experience a critical incident?

Understanding how critical incidents can affect mental health and wellbeing will help you to best support the children and young people in your care.

This module explores what factors may affect how a child or young person might experience a critical incident. These include:

- the characteristics of the incident itself
- the characteristics of the environment

- the child or young person's individual traits, such as their age and developmental stage, prior history of traumatic events and personality style.

What are the impacts of a critical incident?

Understanding the range of typical responses to critical incidents, including physiological changes, can help you support children and young people in coping with their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. These include:

- behavioural responses (for example, irritability, aggression, regression, difficulty enjoying activities, children repeatedly recreating parts of the critical incident events in their play)
- physical responses (such as change in appetite, sleep difficulties, headaches, stomach aches, restlessness)
- emotional responses (such as outbursts of anger, frustration or distress, anxiety, sadness, helplessness)
- changes in thinking and cognition (such as difficulty concentrating, difficulty remembering the incident, preoccupation with the incident).

The impact isn't always obvious or immediate – sometimes a child or young person will seem to be recovering well but may then have a delayed response.

Introduction to critical incident management

A clear and considered critical incident management plan provides the overarching framework for preventing, preparing for, responding to and recovering from a critical incident.

Understanding critical incidents and their impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is a vital first step in this process.

Educators can plan a response to create an environment that promotes recovery. This provides children and young people with opportunities to express their feelings, navigate the tricky moments, settle back into a predictable and supportive routine, and, ultimately, promote a mentally healthy community.

By completing the Recognise module, you will be able to:

- appreciate the importance of recognising the potential impacts of critical incidents
- understand critical incidents and their impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people
- recognise what you need to do as an educator to prepare for critical incidents
- start taking steps to prepare yourself and your learning community to respond to the impacts of critical incidents.