

## **CRISIS POSTVENTION PROGRAM**

### Policy Statement

It is the intent of the Toronto City School District to provide after-care support for their students and staff after a sudden death or tragedy has occurred. The School District recognizes that it is in a position to be a positive factor in helping its staff and students adjust to a crisis. What to do after a sudden death or tragedy is of major importance if emotional traumas, crippling scars, and cluster or imitation suicides are to be avoided.

The Toronto City School District adopts the “Crisis Postvention Program” that was developed by the Crisis Postvention Committee. This program is to serve as a guide to building principals in deciding what steps need to be undertaken by appropriate personnel following a sudden death or tragedy.

### Definitions

The definition of “Crisis” includes, but is not limited to:

- A. Death of a student, faculty or staff;
- B. Critical injury;
- C. Attempt at suicide;
- D. Natural disaster;
- E. War;
- F. Significant loss; or
- G. Threat of loss or harm.

“Preventions” is defined as the acquiring of skills through various activities that enable students to make appropriate decisions and cope with stressful situations.

“Postvention” is defined as the organized response of a caring institution in addressing a crisis, such as a death of a student or staff, in such a way that the emotional needs of those remaining are dealt with effectively.

### Crisis Postvention Team Members

The members of the Crisis Postvention Team will be in effect for a specific school year. The members of this team will be updated before the start of each new school year.

The Superintendent will be responsible for calling the team members he/she feels are needed to serve on the Crisis Team. The Superintendent need not activate all members of this team and may choose to bring in other resource people.

### The Psychological/Psychiatric Crisis Specialist

This consultant is a person who has specialized training and experiences in dealing with tragedies and crises, especially with their aftermath.

The crisis specialist will be available:

- A. At faculty and staff meetings for support, information and suggestions;
- B. To individual students, faculty, and staff for support and to assess their emotional status and suicide risk;
- C. To meet with parents as a group to discuss their thoughts, feelings and concerns regarding the tragedy or crisis; and
- D. To the Crisis Team and principal for additional support and/or relief and for consultation.

### Role of the Principal

- A. Upon learning of a crisis, the principal must ensure that he or she has accurate information regarding all aspects of the crisis. He/she should endeavor to speak with someone of authority who has first-hand knowledge of the crisis. Communications should have been made with police/authorities long before any tragedy, and some policy should have been established regarding such information. Arrangements need to be made to have local authorities inform school administrators immediately of a crisis.
- B. The principal assumes the responsibility for the school's response to a crisis. The first concern should be to manage the school's response to the crisis by deciding what facts to pass along to students and staff members, coordinating counseling services and serving as the school's representative to the press.
- C. Notify the Crisis Team and meet with them to set up the timing and implementation of the postvention program.
- D. Inform the Superintendent and those community experts upon whose resources might be requested. The impact on the school may be greater than the intervention team can handle. Substitute teachers may be needed to fill in for teachers upset over the crisis.
- E. Conduct a staff meeting before school starts. Share facts, prepare the staff for what behaviors to expect from students, and give advice on how to handle the day. Explain the tone desired to be established for the school day. Have the Crisis Team explain strategies for dealing with students' inquiries and reactions of fear and grief and for recognizing high-risk students. These students should have immediate access to counselors.

- F. Inform the student body of the crisis. This may be done by the teachers discussing the facts, as they know them from the faculty meeting, with their classes or the principal may notify by way of the public address system or assembly, after giving the teachers the same information in a faculty meeting.

Crisis Team members can be assigned to those classes which seem to have greater needs, as recognized at the faculty meeting.

- G. Allow for and plan an adjusted class schedule, if necessary, to enable teachers and students an opportunity to discuss the crisis and to express their thoughts and feelings.
- H. Have substitute teachers available throughout the day for those teachers who need or require a “time out” period while adjusting to or dealing with their own reactions toward the crisis.
- I. Set up counseling areas where the Crisis Team can meet with students and staff members. Advise staff members that any students needing counseling should be accompanied on their visits to the Crisis Team.

Let the students know they can seek help on their own.

- J. Arrange for the consulting psychological expert to be available at the school for a reasonable period of time. This is to lend support, give information, and act as a consultant to the Crisis Team.
- K. The principal (or someone he/she designates) should be in contact with the public as necessary. All materials for the public and media should be disseminated by the principal or designee. If contact is made with the press, emphasis should be given to how the school is dealing with the impact of the crisis on students.
- L. In the event of a death, announce the wake and/or funeral arrangements. Faculty and staff should be encouraged to attend, appropriate to the school schedule and their relationship to the individual.

Someone designated by the principal should be available to the family as a contact person. That person may help the family with any school-related matters that may need attention.

- M. Arrange an evening meeting, perhaps in conjunction with PTO, open to the community to discuss the crisis and to review steps taken in the school to support the student population. Let parents and other adults know that school resources are available to them.

- N. At the end of the day, meet with the Crisis Team. After spending the day helping others deal with their grief, shock and fears, the principal and Crisis Team members need a chance to discuss their feelings and disengage at the end of an emotion-filled day.
- O. In the following days, encourage the staff to continue to observe at risk students and continue counseling as long as necessary.
- P. Exchange information with other school administrators. To address a crisis effectively everyone can benefit from reliable information.

In the event the tragedy is a suicide, in addition to the above, the following will also be done by the principal:

- A. The principal will want to set the tone to be established during the school day. He/she will want to acknowledge the loss of the student without dwelling on the death and quickly restore normalcy. Paying too much attention to the death can make some students romanticize the suicide and canceling classes shows students that suicide gives the deceased power over the school. These are messages that should not be given to troubled, confused students.
- B. Express support to the family as soon as possible. The principal or someone he/she designates should be available to the family as a contact person.
- C. Provide factual information regarding the suicide. Use informal communications networks to put a stop to rumors. Give staff members the name of the student, the time and place of the suicide, and the manner of death.
- D. Advise staff of high-risk students and identify teachers closest to the suicide victim. Make sure these students and teachers have the time and counseling that they need to come to terms with the event.
- E. At the beginning of the day, announce (options as given above) to the students, the circumstances of the student's death, and let them know counseling is available. This is the chance to set the tone for the day and put events in perspective.
- F. In the following day, the principal must encourage his/her staff to observe at risk students. Try to avert an outbreak of the disturbing phenomenon known as clustered suicide attempts -- when one suicide sets off other attempts or imitative behavior. The most dangerous period is the first two weeks following the original death, so alert staff members to keep looking for signs of suicidal behavior and continue counseling as long as necessary.

### Role of the School Nurse

- A. Be an active member of the Crisis Prevention Committee.
- B. Be responsible for notifying all school building principals to determine which other students may be affected by the crisis situation.
- C. Initiate the notification of persons on the community resource personnel list.

### Role of the Crisis Postvention Team

- A. Notify the community resource personnel and request necessary services.
- B. Meet with the principal prior to the faculty meeting to lend support, coordinate known information about the crisis, and set the timing and implementation of the postvention program.
- C. Be available at the school for faculty and student support as well as for the faculty meetings. A comprehensive profile will help all faculty and staff see the crisis in perspective.
- D. Attend the faculty and staff meeting to lend support and to answer questions regarding the crisis.
- E. During the faculty and staff meetings, discuss the methods and techniques for helping students to express their thoughts and feelings. Orient teachers as to what types of reactions to expect from children at various age levels.

Behaviors that may be seen by teachers and parents in children and adolescents who are not dealing appropriately with the crisis are:

1. Fear of returning to school, as evidenced by increased absences and truancy by adolescents, and unexpected and inappropriate classroom behaviors in children.
2. Clinging to parents (i.e., not wanting to separate or being overly concerned about where the parents are).
3. Somatic complaints: Increased visits to the health room.
4. Won't go out at recess.
5. Won't participate in extracurricular activities.

6. Isolating oneself by shutting out external stimuli by utilizing music, fantasy (i.e., walkmans, stereos, boom boxes).
  7. Increased peer group activity and outside home and school involvement.
- F. Set up a crisis center at a convenient and appropriate location where students and school personnel can be seen for individual help and support.
- G. Be aware of and offer support to especially close friends, as well as acquaintances, of the victim. Due to possible feelings of guilt and responsibilities that may be attached to the crisis, these students may be especially vulnerable and in need of outreach.
- H. For those classes in which the victim was enrolled, a member of the Crisis Team should meet with the class to discuss:
1. The accurate information known by school personnel about the crisis.
  2. The thoughts and feelings of the students regarding the immediate crisis.
  3. Any fears or anxiety the students may feel about themselves, friends or relatives.
  4. The fears and/or misconceptions of death in general.
  5. The availability of special personnel at the crisis center to offer individual help and support.
- I. Be available to any class or grade, as necessary or desired, to discuss the same factors listed above.
- J. Meet with peer counselors (if such a program is available at the school). Peer counselors are given the same accurate information as faculty and staff and are allowed an opportunity to react to their own thoughts and feeling. Discuss information regarding the crisis and make suggestions for how to deal with their peers. Any student for whom peer counselors feel concern should be brought to or encouraged to go to the crisis center. Concerns for these students should be discussed with the Crisis Team members. For those students with known concerns, outreach by Crisis Team members should be initiated.
- K. With parental notification and permission, refer high-risk students to the consultant psychological expert. If permission is not given, contact should be made with the state's child protective service.

- L. Contact parents of students who were unusually affected by the crisis to offer support and assistance in dealing with their child. In extreme cases, it may be suggested that the child be taken home, provided there is a parent home to render support.
- M. With parental permission, make arrangements for short-term individual and/or group counseling for students who require additional support.
- N. Maintain an ongoing liaison with the principal and consultants.
- O. Have appropriate and reliable sources of referral available for students and faculty and staff who need outside professional help.
- P. After the team has been activated and the emergency is over, meet to evaluate the team process and to make any necessary changes.

In the event the tragedy is a suicide, in addition to the above, the following will also be done by the Crisis Team.

- A. The team will be responsible for ascertaining, as much as possible, what behaviors, feelings and attitudes were exhibited in the days, weeks, perhaps months prior to the suicide. Care should be taken to protect the rights of the student and his or her family. If the student was being seen at the school for special service, care should be taken not to violate any confidentiality that may exist.
- B. For those classes in which the suicidal student was enrolled, a member of the Crisis Team should meet with the class to discuss the factors listed above and also the actual suicide.

This should be done in order to put it into perspective (i.e., it was the individual's choice -- not something forced onto him/her by fellow students, relatives, friends or enemies). Briefly discuss reasons why children and adolescents commit suicide, emphasizing the negative psychological, social and emotional elements, thus discouraging students from identifying with suicide.

At this time myths of suicide and any rumors should be dispelled.

- C. The Crisis Team should assess the suicide risk level of students referred to the crisis center or of students for whom teachers and peers have expressed concern.
- D. Special attention should be given to teachers who taught the suicide victim, as they may feel some responsibility or guilt (i.e., they may have given the student a failing grade, or reported some infraction of the rules, or felt that they should have seen it coming).
- E. With parental permission the Crisis Team, as an aid in preventing future suicides, should do a psychological autopsy of the suicide. This psychological autopsy, consisting of

known feelings, attitudes, and behaviors prior to the suicide, should be presented to the faculty and staff for their growth and development.

#### Role of the Community Resource Personnel

The role of the Community Resource Personnel will be to respond immediately to the crisis situation offering individual and small group support and counseling as needed.