



Excerpt From

*From the Center's Clearinghouse ...**

A Resource Aid:

Responding to Crisis at a School

This document is a hard copy version of a resource that can be downloaded at no cost from the Center's website (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>).

*The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.
Center for Mental Health in Schools, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095- 1563

Phone: (310) 825-3634 | Fax: (310) 206-8716 | E-mail: smhp@ucla.edu | Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Support comes in part from the Office of Adolescent Health, Maternal and Child Health Bureau (Title V, Social Security Act), Health Resources and Services Administration (Project #U93 MC 00175) with co-funding from the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Both are agencies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



SCHOOL-BASED CRISIS INTERVENTION

Crises are dangerous opportunities.

Chinese saying

Crisis, emergency, disaster, catastrophe, tragedy, trauma -- all are words heard too frequently at schools today. Almost every school has had a major crisis; every school is likely to have one. Besides natural disasters such as earthquakes and fires, students experience violence and death related to the suicide of friends, gang activity, snipers, hostage-taking, and rape. Some students react with severe emotional responses -- fear, grief, post traumatic stress syndrome. Moreover, such experiences and other events that threaten their sense of worth and well-being can produce the type of intense personal turmoil that leads students to think about hurting themselves or others.

If no effort is made to intervene, emotional reactions may interfere with a student's school and home performance, can be imminently life threatening, or may be the start of long-term psychosocial problems. And, when a significant portion of the student body is affected, major facets of a school's functioning are likely to be jeopardized.

As used here, the term, school-based crisis intervention, refers to a range of responses schools can plan and implement in response to crisis events and reactions. All school-based and school-linked staff can play an important role in crisis intervention.

Who Should Be Responsible?

Given the complexity of crisis events and reactions, planning and implementing school-based crisis intervention require special expertise (e.g., how to deal with natural disasters as contrasted to dealing with gang violence or suicide, how to plan for crowd management, rumor control, aftermath counseling, prevention). Thus, individuals and subgroups with diverse expertise need to be involved, and all who are involved usually need additional specialized inservice training.

Whatever happens at the school level is shaped by district policy and procedural guidelines. In most instances, the district's administration will have provided the school with detailed guidelines for handling major disasters during the emergency itself and in the immediate aftermath (see example in Section II). Such guidelines also should clarify available district support resources (e.g., district crisis teams, medical and counseling services).

It is rarer for districts to have addressed, in the same detail, policies and procedures for what to do in the days and weeks that follow the event and what to do to improve future responses or to prevent future occurrences where feasible.

Regardless of what guidelines the district provides, it falls to the school to develop a specific operational plan and to identify and prepare personnel to carry it out. This might all be done by a school's administration. That is, they might assume the task of planning and then identifying and assigning specific duties to staff (e.g., school nurse, specific teachers, psychologist). However, as noted above, the diversity of expertise required suggests a broad-based approach to planning and implementation. Thus, schools probably will find the concept of a school-based crisis team useful.

The proper handling of school-wide crises is essential to minimizing negative impact on learning and mental health. A comprehensive crisis intervention approach provides ways for school personnel, students, and parents to return to normalcy as quickly as feasible, address residual (longer-term) psychosocial problems, and explore preventive measures for the future. To achieve these desirable outcomes, a school district must adopt, implement, and institutionalize a set of crisis intervention procedures.

Developing procedures for a school-based response to crises requires mechanisms for initial planning, implementation, and ongoing evaluation and change. For purposes of this presentation, effective mechanisms to accomplish these tasks are seen as

- a school-based planning committee (whose efforts hopefully are augmented by district support staff)
- a school-based crisis team

Note: The planning and crisis team may be one and the same or may be two separate and coordinated groups.

Rather than asking one person to take responsibility for organizing for crises, the school administration is advised to form a small planning committee of school staff. The individuals asked to serve, by role and interest, should be ready to evolve a working plan and become the nucleus of a school-based crisis team. They also should be given appropriate released or compensated time, support, recognition, and appreciation.

In the best of circumstances, the district should provide not only policy and procedural guidelines, but support staff to help the school planning committee formulate a specific plan, organize and train the crisis team, and coordinate with relevant district and community resources.

Planning for Crises

Every school needs a plan for school-based crisis intervention. It is important to anticipate the specifics of what may happen and how to react. Once the need for a plan is recognized, it underscores the need to identify *who* will be responsible for planning responses to crisis events.

Once identified, planners of school-based crisis intervention can work out criteria, procedures, and logistics regarding such general matters as

- who will assume what roles and functions in responding to a crisis
- what types of events the school defines as a crisis warranting a school-based response
- what defines a particular event as a crisis
- how will different facets of crisis response be handled (who, what, where)
- how to assess and triage medical and psychological trauma
- how to identify students and staff in need of aftermath intervention
- what types of responses will be made with respect to students, staff, parents, district, community, media
- what special provisions will be implemented to address language and cultural considerations
- which school personnel will make the responses
- how district and community resources will be used
- which personnel will review the adequacy of each response and make appropriate revisions in crises response plans
- what inservice staff development and training are needed.
- how will everyone be informed about emergency and crisis procedures

As part of the general plan, it is essential to address contingencies.

What will be done if someone is not at school to carry out their crisis response duties? What if a location is not accessible for carrying on a planned activity?

It should be stressed that school crises often are community crises. Therefore, the school's plan should be coordinated with community crisis response personnel and, where feasible, plans and resources should be seamlessly woven together. The same is true with respect to neighboring schools. A blending of planning and implementation resources assures a wider range of expertise and can increase cost-efficacy.

Once a general plan is made, over time, planners can work out further details related to specific concerns (see Section VI of this resource aid). In doing so, they should give priority to those that seem to occur with the greatest frequency.

Figure 1 presents a matrix outlining the scope of crisis events and phases to be considered in intervention planning. In Section II, there is an outline of general ideas related to a school-based response to school-wide crises.

| | | <i>Scope of Event</i> | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|---|---|---|
| | | Major School-wide crisis (e.g., major earthquake, fire in building, sniper on campus) | Small Group Crisis (e.g., minor tremor, fire in community, suicide) | Individual Crisis (e.g., student confides plan to hurt self/others) |
| <i>Phases for which to plan</i> | During the Emergency | | | |
| | Immediate Aftermath | | | |
| | Days/Weeks Following | | | |
| | Prevention in the Future | | | |

Figure 1. Scope of Crisis Events and Intervention Phases

Several points should be highlighted related to Figure 1. Clearly, the scope of the event (major school-wide crises as contrasted to small group or individual crises) profoundly shapes how many staff members are needed during the various phases of the crisis.

Also, difficulties that must be dealt with during the crisis itself raise many problems that are quite distinct from those arising in the immediate aftermath and in the days and weeks following the event (e.g., hysteria and fear as contrasted with grief reactions and post traumatic stress).