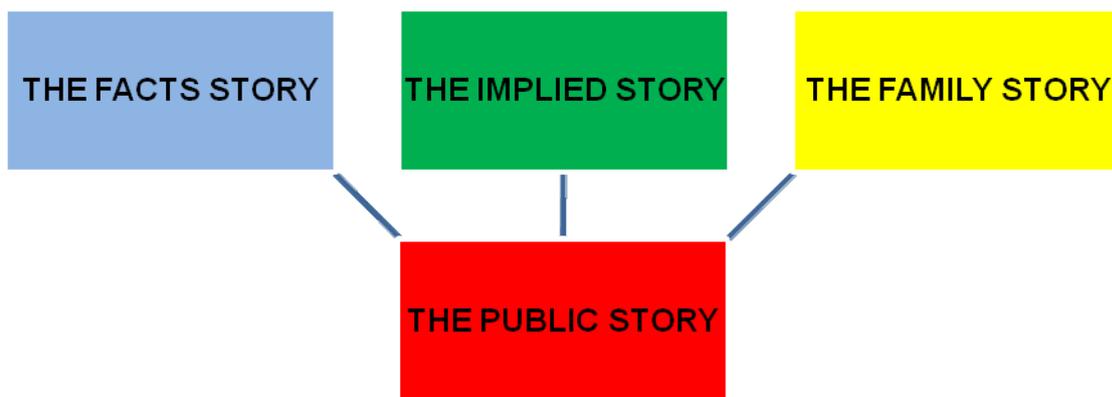


**Management  
of  
Information  
at a  
Critical  
Incident**

## **Managing the Information by Co-ordinating The Stories**

At first-contact for any Critical Incident, there will be 3 stories, which will naturally compete and conflict with each other. The closer these can be pulled together, the easier it will be to manage the incident i.e.



### **a) The Facts Story**

These are the basic facts as you know them and usually come from the family directly or the police. The temptation is always to speculate and infer from this limited information. The facts are identified by the following questions.

- What has happened?
- Where and when?
- Extent of injuries, numbers and names?
- Names and numbers of individuals closely affected by the event?
- Key people involved in school and external agencies?

### **b) The Family Story**

Where there is a bereaved family, they should own the information which is in the public domain. There have been cases where schools have shared information or photographs which the family did not want to be shared.

It is therefore really important to identify a key contact person (often an adult sibling or

in-law) and information shared should always be run past them before being made public.

### c) The Implied Story

Whenever there is a critical incident such as a child sudden death, the general public would like to know, and the media try to demand a complete answer to the why question, at a time when the facts have yet to emerge.

The following areas have an influence on the Implied Story which can grow and grow e.g. the most dramatic was the Hillsborough Disaster, the perception of which was cruelly distorted by the speculative reporting, particularly of the Sun newspaper, and as has emerged a strategy of deliberate misinformation.

- i. The Media. It has been suggested that the media are less interested in “the facts” and more on “an angle” (e.g. a child death is more unusual/interesting if someone is to blame or the child is bullied/victimised).

The general public often interpret these speculations or exaggerated accounts as “the truth”.

A child killed by a car crossing a busy road was described as “being tossed like a ping-pong ball between cars” and this had a scarring impact upon his peers.

- ii. The Neighbourhood. The local community will formulate its own impression and there have been extreme examples where search parties have been sent out, funds have been raised etc for a child who was eventually found to be held captive by a relative. Young people killed in car chases, have resulted in high tension and attacks on police stations. In cases of child abductions paediatrician’s houses have been attacked (after being confused with paedophiles)

- iii. The Peer Group. In a child death, the peer group may be both shocked and fearful for themselves. When the reason for the death is unclear then the rumours will abound and this will be accelerated by electronic communication.

There is a particular issue in apparent self-induced death of a concept called “contagion” where others are encouraged to “copy-cat”.

- iv. The Impact of the Local Busy-Body. It is said that everyone will be famous for 15 minutes and there are always individuals who want to gain notoriety by being associated with spectacular news *e.g. A 9 year old girl who was playing and hanged herself and had no history of emotional behavioural or relationship difficulties was suddenly branded by a distant relative as a bullying victim. The result was her parents and the school were bombarded by the media and it took a joint statement to TV by both to scotch the lie.*
- v. Electronic Media. Social media, e-mailing and texting means that children and the wider community can spread information extremely quickly.

It also means that misinformation can be spread very fast and is extremely difficult to challenge.

#### **d) The Public Story**

It is imperative that the management team identify a Shared Public Story about the events in order to share with children and parents.

N.B. This should consist of the Facts as known tempered by the Parent’s Story. This story should be prepared in consultation with the Local Authority Press Officer

i.e. Neil Beecham, Corporate Communication Officer, 07720 561622. (Neil is a trained and experienced journalist who will advise on the nature, content and presentation of a Press Statement).

## **Presenting well when facing the News Media**

It is important to remember that any presentation is likely to be edited and that the media are interested in any “back-story” including the way in which key people are presented. The following do and don’ts may be useful but it is crucial that you have a prepared script/story which you’ve discussed with the Press Officer.

### Do

- Do respond to what and when questions.
- Do tell your story quickly, accurately and get your key message(s) across.
- Do consider, when possible, the needs of your audience.
- Do choose your own time when to report to the media.
- Do prepare and rehearse so that everyone has the same story.

### Don't

- Don't reply to why and how questions.
- Don't speculate, stick to the known fact.
- Don't bluff or lie.
- Don't make “off the record” comments.
- Don't make promises you cannot keep.
- Don't make excuses or blame others.

- Don't respond to "blind quotes" e.g. "one of your staff tells me that ....., do you agree?"
- Don't respond to the unplanned question e.g. you may be told a list of questions to prepare then at the live interview another emotive question is "thrown in".
- Don't say "no comment" – explain why you can't comment.
- Don't allow words to be put in your mouth e.g. "Would you agree that ....."?"

## **Identification of a Management Team for any Incident**

The management of any critical incident can be particularly demanding on the managers concerned, particularly if this crisis occurs at a particularly demanding period e.g. near an OFSTED inspection, near SATS or National Examinations, during a transition period etc.

A number of factors need to be considered:-

1. Even with a charismatic Headteacher, encourage him/her to develop a team approach with shared responsibilities.
2. Delegate key responsibilities such as family link person, staff support person, children link person, contact person with public.
3. Think beyond the formal management team i.e.
  - Some academic managers may not be most suited to this exercise.
  - Some of the most emotionally mature, supportive personnel may be identified in the support staff rather than the teachers.
  - Remember to include the reception/clerical staff as they will have to “field” the first contacts from anxious parents and the media.
4. Be absolutely clear what the “Public Story” should be.
5. Ensure that the rest of the staff do not go “on a frolic of their own” and refer any issues to the management team.

## **Safety Considerations**

Whenever there is a critical incident, particularly involving a potential risk, harm to staff or children, then there will be concerns about safety and the management team will need to ascertain:-

- The level of past or present risk for staff and children.
- The existence of any safety procedures (and if these had been complied with).
- The culpability of anyone for the critical incident (from current available information).

Demands for this information will come from a range of areas and appropriate responses should be prepared. These include:-

- Parents generally (who will have concerns about their own children's safety and emotional well-being).
- Parents of close group (either bereaved or parents of peers/friends).
- Children (particularly where a death could affect them personally, like a child dying of asthma).
- The Local Authority accountability for safeguarding.
- The police in terms of criminal responsibility.
- The Coroner in terms of a later inquest.

N.B. The response may need to change over time i.e.

- What are the safety concerns from the immediate available information?
- What are the longer-term implications which emerge as the story unfolds?

