

Crisis intervention

in school environment



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“All We Have to Decide is What To Do With the Time That is Given Us.”

J. R. Tolkien

Introduction

There are many worrying events in the world nowadays: violence, death, wars, disasters, unpredictable events. Pleasant experiences are not the only ones creating our worlds. In the edition for Inclusive education, we also bring a view of the sad and hard situations and topics that life brings. It is also a part of the mosaic of the life and experience of the whole person in the school environment. The pandemic which brought many troubles is also the proof of that.

The topic of crisis interventions represents the reaction of the school to crises that happen to children and the school staff and not only does it affect their family life but also their experience in the classroom and at school. With a bulletin, that follows up on the material of the Ministry of Education, we would like to help conquer painful situations by improving and adapting the school environment to these kinds of life events through prevention and preparation, but also with a specific intervention. The school is after the family the most important environment, where our children, but also the staff spend the most time of their everyday life. By creating a safe environment, in which all their experience is accepted and reflected, we enable them to grow even in difficult times.

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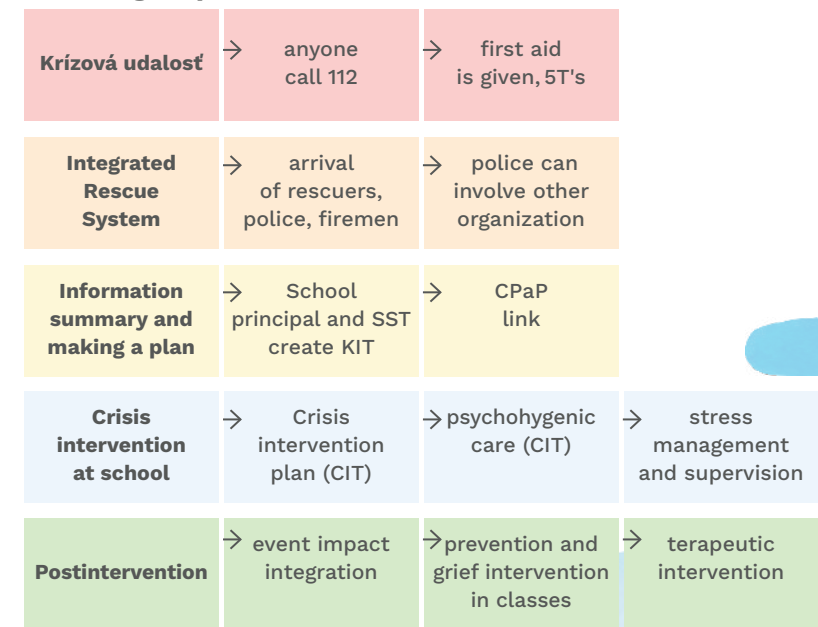
What is crisis intervention in a school environment?

A crisis is any event or its sequence (even in a school environment) that transcends our coping mechanisms. Crisis intervention is subsequently **a sensitive response of the school to a serious and acute crisis** experienced by people in a school environment that they do not have under control. There can be various developmental or situational crises:

- loss of a loved one, classmate or teacher, followed by grieving,
- difficult divorce, relocation, and remarriage of parents,
- violence, war, neglect, bullying, kidnapping,
- illness or disability,
- arrest or imprisonment of a parent,
- natural disasters, traffic accidents, injuries,
- self-harm, homicide, suicide, terrorist act,
- other extremely challenging situations that can significantly affect the child's/ human experience.

“...not all tears are an evil.”
J. R. Tolkien

A crisis has a certain sequence, and it is important to know, who is intervening at which stage. At the time of a crisis, the situation is usually tense and people can behave chaotically, aggressively, or even stagnate. **That is why it is important to understand the succession of the following steps in a critical situation:**



5T's: silence, warmth, fluids, relief, transport,
SST: school support team,
CIT: Crisis Intervention team,
CPaP: The Centre for Counselling and Prevention.

The support of crisis management at schools

Schools — not only during emergency social situations — experience minor or major shocks. **The basis for a good adaptation or management of challenging situations is a safe atmosphere inside the school (prevention)**, which protects from falling apart on the first impact. At a time, when nothing serious is happening and the school is not in a crisis, it is necessary to create a crisis plan **(preparation)** in case of a crisis. In a time of crisis, there is not enough time to prepare materials and divide competencies, who is responsible for what. Being well prepared significantly helps the school system to respond adequately to reduced safety, fear, the loss of control **(intervention)** and create opportunities for new values in a safe common life **(post-intervention)**, that help the school system to recover from a crisis or even strengthen itself **(resilience)**.

Prevenencia

1 The school environment, as the events in Vrutky have shown, is never sufficiently prepared for unpredictable threats. With different threats, it is important to work with a principle, that creates a strong safety net – safety prevention. It is not about bars on the windows or strict rules but **security created by strong interpersonal relationships, a solid network of cooperation, trust, and mutual respect. It is an inclusive environment in which everyone is welcome. The features of an environment that supports the prevention of social-pathological signs and the mental health of students and teachers are the following:**

- creating a school, in which an atmosphere of trust and psychological safety, an open and democratic culture is very important,



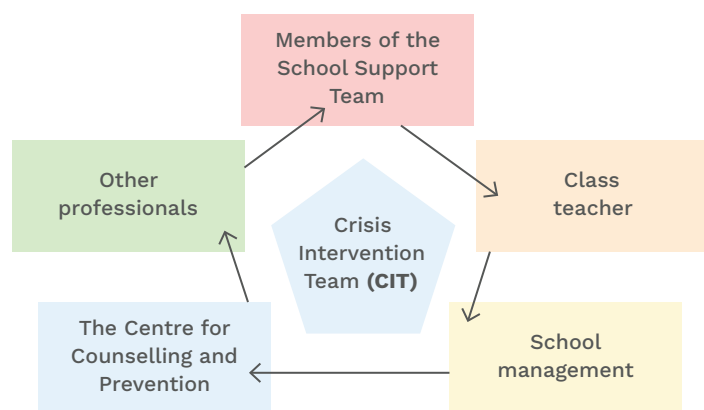
- regular reflection in education (morning circles, facilitative-reflective learning, class/school climate measurement) and care for classroom relationships,
- supporting the mental health of teachers and other staff members,
- conflict mediation and the use of non-violent communication,
- training of school management, teachers, and other staff in crisis intervention and mental health (for school support teams, it is essential to participate in comprehensive crisis intervention training for at least 50 hours according to the applicable standard for crisis intervention,
- developing its contingency plans for different situations,
- early identification of reactions to severe stress and sensitivity to signs of a child/adult at risk (e.g. worsened learning abilities, psychosomatic manifestations, worsening of social relationships, avoidance, rigidity depression, anxiety disorders, etc.).

Preparation

2 As a result of the crisis, the school must mobilize its forces and start following the crisis plan (who, how, what, when). **Right after the critical event, it is important to start with creation of the crisis intervention team** (hereinafter „CIT“). Depending on the severity and intervention in school life, the school principal appoints a trained professional to establish and coordinate the CIT.

The crisis intervention plan includes (according to the situation):

1. **Establishing contact with the police, social services, doctors, other institutions as needed.**
2. **Contacting the establisher, the school board and the parents' board.**
3. **Scheduling CIT meeting, division of task and competencies, planning regular meetings.**
4. **Gather relevant information to reduce the spread of gossip, share with the parents, and create a narrative and agree on how to inform others** (classmates, parents, media/public).



A Letter to Parents after a Tragic Event

Dear parents,
Our school is going through hard times right now – sudden death (unfortunate injury) of our students. We are deeply affected by this event. Our thoughts are with the student's family. We would like to inform you, that we have set up a crisis intervention team at our school **to support children and their adaptation to this situation.**

It is possible, that your children will have questions for you or they will want to share their feelings or what they are experiencing. It is important to provide him with information in an age-appropriate manner. **Each child is different and can express his feelings differently** – they might be frightened, anxious and crying, or having problems with concentrating, food, sleep, etc. These are immediate reactions to stress.

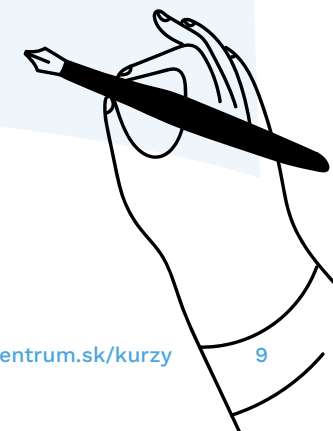
In the coming days, please, pay attention to your child and allow him to experience his feelings with understanding and support. Although teaching will continue, as usual, we suppose the following days will be hard on all of us. Informative meeting for parents will take place in our school on...

Young people and children will often **turn to social networks** to find out what other people are saying about the event and to look for more details. At this time, **it is important that you monitor what your child searches for** and how he processes obtained information. Try to also notice what your child posts.

If you need further information, consultations, or advice about how to proceed, please our experts on the following phone numbers:

School support team (contact)
The centre for counselling and prevention (contact)
Child safety link (contact)
Online counselling for the young – <https://ipcko.sk/>
Clinical psychologist or trauma therapist (contact)

Please remember that we are here for you and your children..



A similar letter may also be published by the school principal for potential media or the public.

Intervention

3 Usually 48-72 hours after the crisis, when the student and the teacher come back to school, first interventions in the school environment follow. **The crisis intervention in the school environment itself does not follow right after the event, or at the time of the event, but shortly after when the situation stabilizes and is assessed as safe.** In the matter of preparation and planning, there is an assessment of the impact of the event on the school and the community, mobilization of school resources, and access to external support.

Follows:

- **providing information and consultation** for all parts of the system,
- **counselling and support** of the staff and students including stabilization of individuals, groups, and the system, offering support and guidance to parents,
- **crisis intervention** — according to various types, e.g. CISM, group crisis intervention, EMDR, BASIC Ph, psychoeducation, etc.,
- **setting up a quiet room** with tissues, some stuffed animals, pillows, or drawing and writing supplies, and papers,
- **chaos management** — circles of vulnerability and support,
- long-term **care for affected groups and individuals**,
- **care for those who offer care**, networking, and intervention and supervision.

CIT, together with teachers, identifies students and others, who need individual help, notices other people who have been affected by the event (classmates, friends, witnesses, teachers, helping professions), and plans further strategies.

Příklad: **Two members of the crisis intervention team** enter the classroom at the request of the school and after preparation and agreement with the class teacher on the third day after the tragic event – the death of two classmates in the schoolyard. **Flipcharts and chairs placed in a circle** are prepared in the classroom. This is followed by a precisely **structured crisis intervention for 1-2 hours, involving working with emotions, stabilization techniques, education, and support for coping mechanisms.**

Note to (class) teachers

1. **children need safety** — to be with people that they know and trust,
2. in times of tragedy, **an early return to routine** is very important, it provides a sense of security,
3. it is alright to be frightened in difficult times and it is okay that the students see the teacher being as he is experiencing what they are,
4. talking to children about tragic events should always be the task of a person that is well known to the students, in a safe and known environment – a person, whom they can always go talk to, even later,
5. if it is too difficult for the teacher to talk about what happened, someone else is to help offer support to the class, the teacher can be present,
6. an external expert is primarily invited for the support of the staff,
7. it is important for the colleagues to talk to each other and support each other.

Post-intervention

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After providing crisis intervention, the work is not yet done. At least six months after the event, the school support team **monitors the experience and adaption of the children involved in classrooms and also adults.** In order to re-establish the sense of security and for the sadness to subside naturally, space for it must be created. How does this process work:

- **cleaning, rituals, anniversaries,**
- enable children to use different forms to **express emotions,**
- **visitation** of the affected family, **express compassion** (also in the form of a letter), closeness, meeting with the class teacher, the school psychologist, and the parents, etc.,
- ensuring **a routine** at school,
- preparation for the return of grieving students, **bereavement counselling,**
- **identification of individuals with the post-traumatic syndrome (PTSD),** who will need a group or individual therapeutic care.

“Yesterday, we were all in shock.
Today we can start feeling pain from the loss.”



“The beginning of my life was not the happiest one – without my mom. It was hard at home, everybody was sad. No one asked me about my sadness, only my teacher. I still remember how often she just talked to me. I bet there are also children in this world who have it much worse.”

Examples of crisis intervention from practice

“Our school support team is a part of a “big family” of supporting teams in the district, which are systematically cared for and supported by guidance counsellors who, with the support of the mayor, have organized crisis intervention training for us. The issue of safety, mental health, and relief from an acute crisis is something we have all been struggling with, and nowadays even more.”
— High school social pedagogue

“The offer to attend a training on crisis intervention was very intriguing for me. I can’t even imagine a more current topic for a school principal. It is my office, where children and families come when having hard times. They experience difficult situations and in case of need, I will now know how to be a full member of the crisis intervention team. I will also surely use my gained competencies in solving “typical” crises at school.”
— Elementary school principal

“Just like we remain in shock after a car accident, we remain in it even after receiving a serious message of a traumatic event at school. I don’t think it is necessary, how much the education in managing crisis intervention was beneficial for me and still is. Knowing I have people around me, who I can turn to is a relief and a rescue.”
— Elementary school psychologist

“I personally consider it important to point out a great idea of comprehensive networking and in context to territorial scope. It brings security, belonging, and safety for all of us, because we know, that with trust we can help and support each other. The theory of crisis intervention explained in real cases with demonstrations gave me the confidence and skills, which, in case of need, I can use. If sometimes, me, my school, or someone else finds himself in a crisis and I am expected to react in critical crisis management, I will be better prepared to offer help and support.”
— Primary school special pedagogue

“Helping people (not only) in crisis is an important virtue. Many times we see how many people are able to just give humanly, the most important things – interest and respect. Being a professional in emotionally charged situations requires, except a humanistic approach, competencies (Can I do it?) and will (Do I want to do it?). My job is to add to the feeling of safety and create work alliances, network the system, and draw the attention of the ones responsible to the priorities. Our common vision is to unite the system, that is what creates more certainty so that together we can help those that need our help.”
— Director of the Counselling and Prevention centre

“I did not hesitate with the idea to implement education and create a team of experts at schools in our district. The topic of traumas, losses, and pain associated with it affects us significantly. Even more, when it comes to children, our colleagues, employees, and citizens. Being united helps us build a better safety net and we believe more of a help to those who need it.”
— The mayor

What is the process of bereavement?

Grief is a normal, healthy, and predictable response to loss. The grief of children depends on the level of their development, it could take several years. Up to 6 months after the loss, denial, anaesthesia, and shock are characteristic reactions. Acute mourning usually lasts 6 weeks to 6 months. **Give yourself and your students the opportunity to talk about what happened, do not force the topic, but also do not stop it.** The death of someone close to us can also be denied.

A part of the process of grief in children and adults can be:

- Fear of life after death, nightmares, ghosts.
- Refusal to talk about death.
- Feeling emotional pain, depression, alternation of silence, and crying.
- Strong sense of guilt, especially with sudden death.
- Suppression of feelings. Feeling isolated.
- Confusion and forgetting common things and activities.
- Magical thinking, denial of loss.
- Behavioural problems, lack of concentration, anorexia, hyperactivity, aggression.

“Life has no meaning, the world is dead,
I cannot get rid of these thoughts, help me.”
American teenager before shooting at school,
2021

The Pandemic situation COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic is a specific global situation, that has unexpectedly affected people all around the world. The pandemic, in addition to casualties and major economic damage, has had less visible but no less important **consequences for mental health: social isolation, increased domestic violence, addiction, depression, and suicide.** Many children have lost coping strategies that helped them overcome difficult living conditions. Schools as „second homes for children were often closed or restricted, and the atmosphere at school was tense due to many concerns. Difficult times were experienced not only by medical personnel or teachers but also by the children. There was often crisis management at school.

“We will finally create a space at school for the whole person
— not only intellect but also experience and relationships.”
C . Rogers, 1980

In the context of crisis intervention (not only during the pandemic) it is important not to forget:

- Long-term stress and tension are breeding grounds for socio-pathological phenomena.
- Schools should slow down and prioritize the mental health of their employees and students before educational goals and monitor the situation vigilantly and on a long-term basis.
- The Slovak Ministry of Education in [the Manual for the promotion of mental health](#) at schools emphasizes eliminating hall supervision, allowing lunch in a quiet room, and reducing all unnecessary tasks for both the staff and students.
- Enable sharing and talking between the staff and students about their feelings and needs at the expense of academic performance.

The war and its consequences

A war conflict is a massive crisis event of devastating proportions and consequences. **There are several traumatic events: loss of loved ones, home, safety, culture, etc. Therefore, the school environment faces challenges at four levels:**

1. The affected migrating children and families enter into a whole new school environment.
2. Children in the classroom and key adults may experience worries, anxiety or anger from war.
3. The classroom becomes a place of adaptation of a new traumatized member.
4. The classroom becomes a scene of multicultural relations.

During usual crisis intervention the following should be emphasized:

- **Adequacy** – Sometimes only individuals are affected, sometimes many. “Tailor-made” adjustments need to be made for the needs of specific people, children, teachers, families.
- **Conflict** – Political disputes and fundamentally different views can arise between adults and sometimes children. This can only be stopped by non-violent communication – comprehension of all, not by escalating or confrontation. Condemning evil must be done with utmost regard for each person. Hatred towards children or adults should be de-escalated.
- **Anger** – in addition to fear, violence, endangerment, injustice, and war can bring lots of anger. It is necessary to teach children how to accept feelings, regulate them and use their energy for coping.
- **Volunteering** – leading people to activate and help others, helps to overcome feelings of helplessness, and activates a sense of control.

- **Natural discussion** – If adults need a discussion, there should be space created for them in the teachers’ room. If children need to discuss something, allow natural forms of discussion without forcibly imposing one topic e.g. through morning circles or facilitative-reflective learning. It is much more important to support child experience rather than specific thoughts and content – i.e. talk to children about what is alive in them, what are they thinking about, what they experience – even if it is not a war.
- **Regulation** – Regulation of flooding emotions is an important prerequisite for a good adaptation. Only adults with self-regulated emotions can help children to regulate their emotions.

“A crisis reveals the reality of the relationships between children and adults. Fast, universal, and unnatural activities and solutions will not work, only what schools are building for years in their culture of non- violence, respect, and good relationships.”

A child after the loss of a loved one

One of the most serious crisis events in the life of a child is the loss of a loved one – mother, father, sibling, grandparent, or a friend (sometimes even a pet). Children experience this kind of loss very differently and the degree of coping depends on the intensity of the relationship with the given person, whether the death was natural or through violence, natural or sudden.

Suicides in children

A very specific situation is when children hurt themselves, or take their own life. These event can often be prevented by early risk identification. Children often give signals, call for help in their drawings or conversations with their classmates.

- **Warn** and let others know, what have you found out, always take signals seriously.
- **Stay** with the child that wants to kill himself, do not let him leave alone.
- **Do not promise** to a child, that you will keep this a secret. Talk to him sensitively about what kind of steps you need to take as a part of your reporting obligation.
- If suspected, **contact the parent/guardian**, inform the school principal and monitor child behaviour.
- **Support the child** in seeking professional help, engage someone else who is important to the child.
- **Do not judge, evaluate or blame** – on the contrary, show understanding.
- **Pay attention to student**, who have problems, pay attention to truancy.
- **Provide information about help centres.**
- **Avoid devaluation, sensation** or romanticization of death to prevent contamination of other students.



USEFUL SOURCES

Responding to Critical incident (National Educational Psychological Service, Ireland) [Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools.](#)

Brock, S.E., Sandoval, J. (2002). Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention.

ANYALAIIOVÁ, M. Starostlivosť o školský personál a žiakov po kritickom incidente. [Príspevok na Medzinárodnej konferencie.](#) 2020.

[Medzinárodná vedecká konferencia KRÍZOVÁ INTERVENCIA V ŠKOLÁCH.](#) 2020. PVEŠ a IPčko.

Križo, V. – KRNÁČOVÁ, Z. (2020). Sprevádzanie smútiaceho dieťaťa v školskom prostredí. In Psychológia a patopsychológia dieťaťa: VUDPaP, roč. 54, č. 2, s. 167-187.

VÚDPaP: Štandardy odborných a odbornovo-metodických činností – [Krízová intervencia Krizova-intervencia.pdf \(vudpap.sk\)](#)

ONDRUŠEK, D. A KOL. [Polarizácia na školách.](#) Bratislava: PDCS, 2020

Bulletin is only informative material, it is not sufficient for the realization of crisis intervention, for that a specific training is needed. We recommend the following education training in crisis intervention in the school environment:

- Intensive training for work with therapeutic cards.
- Crisis intervention at schools in case of a natural disaster, car accident, attack, or death of a teacher/student. Grief work with students.
- Crisis interventions at schools in case of suicidal intentions.
- A webinar for school principals: What is a crisis and a crisis intervention in the school environment?



The Institute of Personal Development is a counselling and educational organization that provides professional solutions in the field of personal growth for adults deals with the topic of crisis intervention and represents the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic in the Network of European Psychologists in the Educational System (NEPES) in the crisis management section. The founder and expert guarantor is a psychologist, Mgr. Mária Anyalaiová, PhD. <https://www.iior.sk/>



The Centre for Counselling and Prevention in Bratislava III is a state educational facility that, in addition to complex services of individual and group intervention with children and parents, creates a network of schools in the district and partnerships with the school management and other resorts (social services, the police, doctors, etc.), methodically guides, educates and coordinates the school support teams. The director of the Centre for Counselling and Prevention is a social pedagogue PaedDr. Jana Lednická. <https://psychologickecentrum.sk/>

Our Publications:

We create the bulletins in cooperation with a team of experts on inclusive education. Employ them as a useful guide in your work or for explaining the principles of inclusive education to the general public.

We also create useful videos for you on Inklucentrum's YouTube channel, some of which are available in English or German. For deeper understanding of the topics, we recommend signing up for the training courses we organize.



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We cover Inclusive education

Inklucentrum – The Centre for Inclusive Education is an advocacy, educational, consulting expert organization on a national level, working in the field of support to inclusive education. It is dedicated to supporting quality and humanistic education in the school environment for the benefit of development of potential for all children, families and the school staff. It provides support, consulting and education in accredited programs and workshops, especially for pedagogical and professional employees.

INKLUCENTRUM – The Centre for Inclusive Education

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