

## Crisis Communications – Surviving Crisis Gracefully by Sue Coueslan

Negative press can bring down huge companies. It drives away business. Damages reputations. Scares clients and puts strain on otherwise strong relationships. These are basic facts about bad press in any business, but in situations where children are at stake, the damage escalates dramatically.

If a crisis occurs in your child care program, there are many things you can do to prevent it from becoming a front page horror story, or at least limiting that front page coverage to one day, instead of weeks.

### Learn From the Boy Scouts

All businesses could do well to learn from the old-fashioned adage of the boy scouts – Always Be Prepared. Thinking about how you would communicate in the event of a crisis is a huge first step that cannot be skipped. It's just like the fire drills you practice with the children in your centre. No one wants to think a fire could happen, but you'd be pretty naïve to think you could just wish it away with your head in the sand. Instead, you have to avoid the harm that could come from a fire by having clearly marked fire exits, practicing getting the children out, and knowing where you would take the children if the building were actually burning.

So too, you need a plan for the communications surrounding a crisis. Who will do the communicating? You, your staff, your owner/ board members? Who will you communicate with? Parents? Local community? Media? How will you do it? Phone? Fax? Email? These three elements are the basis for your crisis communication plan, regardless of what kind of crisis that you may experience.

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### Creating Your Plan

Your crisis communication plan is something you develop, absorb, and then put on the shelf until you need it, (and hopefully you won't). But what will go in it? There are several basic activities involved in every solid communications plan.

1. Establish Crisis Communications Team
2. Establish Crisis Scenarios
3. Ensure Safeguards to Avoid These from Happening
4. Establish Your Audiences
5. Establish Procedures (step-by-step template)
6. Practise Your Plan

#### 1. Your Crisis Communications Team

Handling crisis communications is no fun. It's a huge responsibility, and just like the unpleasant issues of dealing with funeral arrangements and dividing up an estate, it happens at a time when you are already emotionally upset, often shaken and not as strong as you normally are. These things alone are enough reason to have a solid crisis communications plan, but they are also the reason you want to have assistance to deal with all the details.

Your crisis communications team can be made up of any number of people, with any number of backgrounds. Ideally, you'll have people who work well under pressure. You probably won't want people who are falling apart all around you. There will be enough to keep you busy without that added to your shoulders.

You'll also want one or two people for whom communication is a strength. Writers, public relations or marketing people or anyone who is in the communications profession would be a great asset. You may have people within your circle of colleagues, friends or associates, or you may want to hire outside help, depending on your level of comfort with communicating difficult messages. If you hire a consultant, you will add a lot more value by bringing them in to assist you in the development of your plan, so that they are familiar with your practices and standards long before a crisis happens.

## 2. Establishing Crisis Scenarios

Each program will have its own range of things that could constitute a crisis. If you live by the sea, you're probably pretty safe leaving tornadoes off your list. If you live in Alberta, you can scratch tidal waves. You and your crisis communication team will know best what kinds of scenarios can play out in your centre. Several come to mind no matter where you are; fire, flooding, storms, food poisoning and a security breach. You shouldn't have any trouble thinking of a solid list - just look at the papers and watch the news for items that make other centres look bad, and add them to your list.

Once you have a list together, prioritize the items by their likelihood, and by the damage they could do to your reputation. There's more to making the list than just scaring yourself. Thinking of these possibilities helps you make the preparations you need to avoid them from happening, as well as helping you determine how you would deal with them if they actually occurred.

## 3. Ensuring Safeguards

The best way to avoid the negative effects of bad press, is to avoid a crisis in the first place. Being impeccable in your daily operations, not just meeting the bare minimum of licensing standards for safety, is a huge investment in your long-term public relations and communications strategy. If you see a situation that could give parents cause for concern, fix it - not next month, not tomorrow. - Now!

The temptation in the wildly busy world of child care programs is to put things off that can wait. But that idea can cost you. The time and money invested in avoiding an accident, fire or food poisoning is far less costly than the bad press and lost business that could come from a crisis experience. Even if you're lucky enough to keep the press out of it, word of mouth communication can burn a devastating hole in your reputation. The bottom line is, don't take chances. It's not worth it. Do whatever it takes to prevent the items on your crisis list from happening.

## 4. Establish Your Audience

Take a look at your crisis list. Choose an item. Let's say fire. Who would you need to communicate with in the event of a fire in your centre? Besides calling 911 to bring the emergency vehicles to deal with the fire, whom else do you need to reach? For each crisis, you will have a range of important stakeholders that must become part of your communication audience. Parents, owners/board members, neighbours of the centre, reporters, politicians, associations and the general public. How do you determine whom to contact? It's based on your relationships with the party in question. Will these people be concerned about what happened? Will the event have the opportunity to damage the relationship you have? Will they have access to all the facts about what happened?

Determining scenarios, crisis by crisis, will help you see which relationships are most important, and which stakeholders will be a priority recipient of information during and after a crisis.

## 5. Establish Your Procedures

Here's the tricky part. What will you actually do when the crisis scenario plays out? Will you call the press? Will you call the parents? And who will do what? If you are not comfortable with the press, delegate someone who is. If someone on your team is great with people, put them on the phone calling task. You will also want to determine how you will communicate information to each member of the team.

When making these choices, consider the effects of each decision. Going back to the fire example, the reporters in the news room are going to hear about it on the police and emergency scanner, and possibly report on it immediately, so they're probably a little low on your list. The parents, however, may hear on the radio that there's a fire, and be frantic about their child's safety. Obviously, calling the parents quickly to assure them that all the children are safely waiting in another location is your priority.

Remember, someone within your crisis communications team will need to have the list of parent contacts easily accessible. If this is a fire, that list will be useless if it's in your desk drawer. Plus, you won't have time to make the calls. All this points to a possible solution of having your owner or a board member who has the list, and can make the calls, away from the scene of the crisis.

These types of decisions will need to be made on a case-by-case basis with you and your communications team. They may not be followed to the letter on the day of a crisis, but they will provide a level of organization that will help in a time of chaos.

## 6. Practicing Your Plan

Practice makes perfect. It's the thing that separates the amateurs from the professionals. With such a serious thing as crisis communications, you will want to practice your plan, every six months or so, to ensure that people are familiar with their roles, the procedures and the key issues surrounding each crisis scenario.

Two very important things to practice are writing press releases, and dealing with the press. This article should not be construed as the definitive source of information for either, but here are a few tips.

### Crisis Press Releases

- *Establish the 'who, what, where, when', and, if possible, the 'why'.* More than likely, on the day of a crisis, you are not going to have much information about how something happened. A line such as 'Investigations are ongoing' is acceptable. Just presenting the facts to the media automatically indicates that you are willing to be open and communicative about the situation. In dealing with the press, an attitude of cooperation, rather than opposition will go a long way.
- *Make sure that your contact information is clearly available.* Ninety nine percent of reporters are still scrambling for facts for a story after five o'clock. If you want them to call you, leave a number where you can be reached after hours.
- *Have a fact sheet ready* that can be delivered with the press release. Background information about the program, its history, any special programs, how many children attend, and

awards or acknowledgements are essential - anything that can show your credibility and commitment to quality care. This may be the first time the reporter has heard about you. You want them to know as much about your great track record as possible.

### Interviews

- *Show empathy* – This is the most important element to remember. Your business is about caring. The minute you appear to be callous or cold, even if it is because of stress and nerves, you lose a valuable component of your centre's key service offering. No matter what has happened, or what questions you are asked, show compassion, concern and empathy for the situation, even if you are saying, 'I'm sorry, that information is unavailable at this time'. It will speak louder than any of your words.
- *Stick to the facts* - Know exactly what information you have, and have it clearly written out to refer to during the interview. Don't rely on your memory in such a stressful time.
- *Think like a reporter* – Prepare to meet with a reporter by thinking what questions they might ask. They will look for worst-case scenarios, and opportunities to place blame and show fault. Study these possibilities before you have an interview, and know what your response will be.

### Conclusion:

Crisis communications are complex and complicated. There is no simple set of rules to follow. But it is essential to have the core elements of a plan in place, for the day of, and in the days and weeks that follow a negative event. And like other elements of a child care program, you may want to bring in a professional to manage it. Regardless, you will want to be involved as much as possible. The investment is time-consuming and difficult. But careful preparation will allow you to communicate effectively during a crisis, maintain key relationships with your clients and other members of your audience, and ultimately avoid damage to your hard-earned reputation. All of this will allow you to get on with the business of providing quality child care for the individuals entrusted to your care.

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## Resources in the Connections' Library:

### Risk Management:

**Charlton, K.** (1991). "Managing Risk in a Risky Business", Caring Connection Conference workshop video, CCCNS No. A-120-char

**Copeland, M.L.** (1996). "Code Blue! Establishing a Child Care Emergency Plan" Child Care Information Exchange, #107, 17-22. CCCNS, CCCNS No. A-060-Cop/CCIE.

**Levin, R.** (1991). "Your Centre Needs an Emergency/Crisis Plan!" Child Care Information Exchange #79, 34-37. CCCNS No. A-120-Lev/CCIE.

**Wassom, J.** (1995). "Turning Bad Press into Prestige - Enrolling your wits when a center crisis strikes", Child Care Information Exchange, #101, 69-72. CCCNS No. A-180-Was/CCIE.

**Wassom, J.** (1996). "Guess Who's In the News", Child Care Information Exchange, #110, 26-30. CCCNS No. A-180-Was/CCIE.

**Uhlenberg, J. M.** (1996). "After the Alarm Rings" Young Children, 51(2), 46-47. CCCNS NO. A-060-Uhl/YC.

### Communications:

**Maddalena, L.** (1985). *A communications Manual for Nonprofit Organizations*, Madison, Wisc: Society for Nonprofit Organizations. CCCNS No. A-180-Mad.

**Mattila, A.** (1990) "Public Relations and Communications," the Associations Management Handbook, CASE. CCCNS No. A-180-Mat.

**Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, How to Work with the Press.** CCCNS No. A-180-CACSW

### Web Links:

**Peter Kells Safety vs. Challenge – The Playground Dilemma** [http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca/practice/policy/safety\\_en.html](http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca/practice/policy/safety_en.html)

**Child Care Liability**  
<<http://www.haskayne.ucalgary.ca/inrm/industry/childcar/childcar.htm>>

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