

Threat Assessment: An Essential Component of a Comprehensive Safe School Program

The second of a three-part series on school violence explores how to identify and help students who may pose a threat to school safety.

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Schools are among the safest places for children and youth, yet predicting and preventing violence on campus remains a serious concern for school officials today. Identifying students who are at risk of harming themselves or others is a necessary component of any program that promotes safe, supportive, and effective schools. Unfortunately, as underscored by recent school shootings, recognizing the signs of a deeply troubled student can be difficult. There is no easy formula or “profile” of risk factors that accurately determines the “next school shooter.” In fact, most students who display multiple risk factors will never become school shooters, and some who pose a real threat do not demonstrate a prescribed level of risk. The use of profiling (i.e., ranking a student’s

behaviors and risk factors against a set of criteria) is not recommended because it is likely to misidentify youth and in doing so to cause more harm than good. Moreover, a process that focuses solely on identification, not intervention, will fail to provide necessary help to potential offenders.

Systematic threat assessment, on the other hand, is an optimal strategy for determining the credibility and seriousness of a threat and the likelihood that it will be carried out. An effective system must:

- Be an integral part of a comprehensive school safety program that includes creating positive school environments, supporting the needs of individual students, establishing crisis response teams, increasing security measures, and improving school and community collaboration.

(See Counseling 101, September 2005.)

- Be conducted by a team of trained professionals with the support of all members of the school community (e.g., students, staff members, parents, and the public).

- Carefully examine the full range of relevant factors and provide appropriate interventions for the potential offenders.

Experts in school crisis management, mental health, and public safety have identified common basic components of this process. The U.S. Secret Service and FBI, in collaboration with the U.S.

Department of Education, have taken a leadership role in collecting data and developing recommended procedures and protocols appropriate within a school context. The following information provides a basic overview of such a threat assessment process; however, school administrators should review primary sources to obtain comprehensive information, arrange for formal training of staff members, and develop a program best suited to their school or district.

Just the Facts

It is important to avoid misperceptions about the prevalence and causes of school violence. Perhaps the most important truism to keep in mind is that no single factor leads to violence;

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multiple factors cause a person to become violent. All approaches to prevention and intervention, including threat assessment, should be based on what is actually known about the phenomenon. Secret Service and FBI findings include:

- School violence is not an epidemic
- There is no single profile of the violent offender
- Youth who engage in violence often have social difficulties, but they are not always loners
- Although a common factor, revenge is not the exclusive motivation for school shootings
- Most attackers had previously used guns and had access to them, but access to weapons is not the most significant risk factor
- Unusual or aberrant behaviors or interests are not the hallmark of a student destined to become violent
- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive
- Prior to most incidents, the attackers told someone about their ideas or plans
- Most shooting incidents were not resolved by law enforcement
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity
- In a number of cases, students who became school shooters were bullied
- Prior to most incidents, most attackers engaged in behavior that caused concern to others.

How to Assess

The following guidelines can help a school establish a process for effective and accurate threat assessment.

Establish a Clear Policy

It is important to have specific, well-articulated procedures for exploring allegations of actual or potential violence. These matters require prompt, discreet, and responsible action on the part of school officials. The policy should include protocols for:

- Assigning and training the threat assessment team

- Evaluating and interviewing the potential offender
- Notifying and working with parents
- Interviewing other students and staff members
- Determining the level of intervention required
- Bringing in additional professionals (e.g., mental health, social service, law enforcement)
- Providing follow-up observation and services
- Responding to media should the need arise.

Build an Assessment Team

Effective threat assessment is based on the efforts of a threat assessment team that is usually composed of trained school-based personnel and select members of the broader school community, such as law enforcement officers, faith leaders, and representatives of social service agencies. School personnel that should be on the team include top administrators, mental health professionals, and security staff members. The interdisciplinary team approach improves the efficiency and scope of the assessment process (which can be time-consuming), provides diverse professional input, and minimizes the risk of observer bias. Specific training for all members of the team is essential. The Secret Service offers training on preventing incidents of targeted violence, responding to threatening situations, and creating safe school climates. Further information is available at www.threatassessmentseminars.org.

Know the Fundamental Principles

The U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education have produced *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*, a document that emphasizes six key points regarding the response to a student's threat of violence. These include:

- Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and often

discernible, process of thinking and behavior

- Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target
- An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment
- Effective threat assessment is based on facts rather than on characteristics or "traits"
- An "integrated systems approach" should guide threat assessment inquiries and investigations
- The central question in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation is whether a student poses a threat, not whether the student has made a threat.

Create a Climate of Trust

Students often know of potential problems well in advance of adults. They need to feel comfortable telling a trusted adult about concerns they have regarding threats of violence. Parents

and community leaders should be incorporated as part of the supportive and trusted school-community environment. Students, staff members, and parents should understand the following:

- Violence prevention is everyone's responsibility
- The school has a threat assessment process in place
- How the threat assessment process works and who is involved
- All information will be handled discreetly
- The purpose of informing adults of potential threats is to protect both the potential victims and perpetrators.

Assess the Type of Threat and the Level of Risk

All threats are not created equal. A threat is an expression of intent to do harm or act out violently against someone or something. It can be spoken, written, or symbolic. But many students who make a threat will never

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carry it out, and conversely, others who pose a real threat never convey their intentions one first. According to the FBI, there are a number of different types of threats and levels of risk.

Types of threats

- A *direct* threat that identifies a specific act against a specific target and is delivered in a straightforward, clear, and explicit manner.
- An *indirect* threat tends to be vague, unclear, and ambiguous. Violence is implied, but the threat is phrased tentatively and suggests that a violent act could occur, not that it will occur.
- A *veiled* threat is one that strongly implies but does not explicitly threaten violence.
- A *conditional* threat is often seen in extortion cases. It warns that a violent act will happen unless certain demands or terms are met.

Levels of risk

Low level of threat:

- Poses a minimal risk to the victim and public safety
- Is vague and indirect
- Information is inconsistent or implausible or lacks detail
- Lacks realism
- Content suggests that the person is unlikely to carry out the threat.

Medium level of threat:

- Could be carried out, although it may not appear entirely realistic
- Is more direct and more concrete than a low-level threat
- Wording suggests that the individual has given some thought to how the act will be carried out
- Includes a general indication of place and time, but signs still fall well short of a detailed plan
- No strong indication that the individual has taken preparatory steps
- Statements seek to convey that the threat is not empty: "I'm serious!" or "I really mean this!"

High level of threat:

- Direct, specific, and plausible
- Appears to pose an imminent and serious danger to safety of others
- Suggests concrete steps have been taken, such as stalking or acquiring of a weapon
- Almost always requires bringing in law enforcement officers.

Consider All Factors

Threat assessment done correctly entails a deliberate and focused process for examining all relevant information, such as the student's personal history, relationships at home and school, recent life events, resiliency, and coping style. It is important to remember

that you probably know less about the potential offender than you think and to try to view information through the student's eyes (see figure 1). The FBI has proposed a four-pronged assessment model (see figure 2) that examines school, peer, family, and individual factors that are important to consider when examining the potential threat and needs of an individual youth.

Determine and Implement Interventions in a Timely Manner

Specific procedures should be established in advance. Once the initial assessment has taken place, the team must decide the appropriate next steps. Interventions may need to be staged (e.g., immediately bringing the student in question under adult supervision versus recommending mental health counseling). Considerations should include:

- Whether the student can stay in school
- What alternatives may be needed
- When and how to notify parents
- When to contact law enforcement
- What mental health, social service, and school-based interventions are needed to reduce or eliminate the student's risk of becoming violent.

Figure 1

Questions to Consider During the Threat Assessment Process

The Secret Service and Department of Education recommend the following 11 key questions to be asked during the threat inquiry process.

- n What are the student's motives and goals?
- n Has the student shown inappropriate interest in school attacks, attackers, weapons, incidents of violence, etc.?
- n Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack?
- n Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviors, such as developing a plan or making efforts to acquire weapons?
- n Is the student's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions?
- n Does the student have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?
- n Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation, or despair?
- n Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?
- n Are other people concerned about the student's potential for violence?
- n What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?
- n Does the student see violence as an acceptable, desirable solo or way to solve problems?

A document outlining these questions and providing a format that can be used to record the information is available (www.pent.ca.gov/09ThreatAssess/11questions.pdf).

Provide Supportive Interventions

The goal of threat assessment is not only to keep schools safe but also to help potential offenders overcome the underlying sources of their anger or hopelessness. Effective threat assessment provides useful information about a student's risks and personal resources. In most cases, students will not carry out their threat but still need help. The assessment process should incorporate a referral to appropriate mental health and social services, a system for following up on the effectiveness of interventions, and a means of monitoring the student's progress and behavior. Among the other potential risks that can be identified and prevented are suicide, alcohol and drug use, physical abuse, dropping out, and criminal activity.

Conclusion

Although there is no way to guarantee the elimination of school violence, a comprehensive intervention-based approach can greatly minimize the risk to both the potential victims and perpetrators. Threat assessment must be an integral part of a system that fosters a positive school environment; trust between students and adults; respect for others; intolerance for violence of any kind; collaboration between home, school, and community; and the belief that everyone can build toward their strengths given appropriate support. When implemented appropriately, threat assessment supports the social, emotional, and academic well-being of all students, particularly those in need of help. **PL**

Figure 2

A Four-Prong Approach

School Dynamics to Consider

It is important to consider school factors and dynamics that may impact antisocial behaviors among students, including

- n Tolerance for disrespectful behavior
- n Approach to discipline (equitable/arbitrary)
- n Flexibility/inclusiveness of culture
- n Pecking order among students
- n Code of silence
- n Supervision of computer access
- n Student's engagement in school

Peer and Social Dynamics to Consider

It is important to consider peer relationships and social dynamics that may increase the risk of antisocial behaviors among students, including:

- n Peer group relationships and culture
- n Use of drugs and alcohol
- n Media, entertainment, technology
- n Level and focus of outside interests
- n Potential copycat effect of past incident

Family Factors and Dynamics to Consider

It is important to consider family factors and dynamics that may increase the risk of antisocial behaviors among students, including:

- n Parent-child relationship
- n Attitudes toward pathological behavior
- n Access to weapons

- n Sense of connectedness/intimacy
- n Attitude toward/enforcement of parental authority
- n Monitoring of TV, video games, or Internet

Behavioral and Personality Characteristics to Consider

It is important to consider student behavioral and personal characteristics that may increase the risk of antisocial behaviors among students, including:

- n Capacity to cope with stress and conflicts
- n Ways of dealing with anger, humiliation or sadness, disappointments
- n Level of resiliency related to failure, criticism or other negative experiences
- n Response to rules and authority
- n Need for control
- n Capacity for emotional empathy or respect for others
- n Sense of self-importance compared to others (superiority/inferiority)
- n Tolerance for frustration
- n Coping skills
- n Focus on perceived injustices
- n Signs of depression or other mental illness
- n Self-perceptions (narcissism/insecurity)
- n Need for attention
- n Focus of blame (internalizes/externalizes)

Source: Derived from D. Toole, ME. (n.d.). *School Shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. VA: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Resources

- o *Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention*. S. Brock, P. Lazarus, & S. Jimerson (Eds.). 2001. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- o *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence*. D. Cornell & P. Sheras. 2005. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- o *School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*. M. E. O'Toole. n.d. Quantico, VA: Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Center for the Analysis of Violent

Crime. Available from www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf

- o *Appraisal and Prediction of School Violence*. M. J. Furlong, M. P. Bates, P. M. Kingery, & D. C. Smith (Eds.). 2004. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science
- o *The Handbook of School Violence and School Safety: From Research to Practice*. S. R. Jimerson, & M. J. Furlong, in press. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- o *U.S. Secret Service Threat Assessment Center* www.ustreas.gov/uss/ntac_ssi.shtml

- o *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and To Creating Safe School Climates*. R. Fein, B. Vossekuil, W. Pollack, R. Borum, W. Modzeleski, & M. Reddy. 2002. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center. U.S. Secret Service/Department of Education Report, Available from www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf