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# THREAT ASSESSMENT AT SCHOOL: A PRIMER FOR EDUCATORS

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Threat assessment includes strategies to determine the credibility and seriousness of a threat and the likelihood that it will be carried out. It also provides a means of identifying appropriate interventions to prevent school violence. While there is no consensus on a single model for threat assessment, experts in school crisis management, mental health, and public safety have identified common components of effective threat assessment procedures. The U.S. Secret Service and Federal Bureau of Investigation have taken a leadership role in collecting data and developing recommended procedures and protocols (see “Resources” at the end of this handout).

The extant literature indicates that the threat assessment process should include both identification and intervention strategies to help potential offenders. This handout will provide a brief overview of facts relating to school violence, threat assessment policies, procedures, and protocols, and threat assessment interventions. This information can help schools establish a threat assessment process. School crisis management teams should also review comprehensive recommendations and provide staff development.

## School Violence and Potentially Violent Offenders

It is important to avoid misperceptions about the prevalence and causes of school violence. There is no *single* factor that leads to violence. Multiple factors cause a person to become violent. All approaches to prevention and intervention, including threat assessment, should be based on what we actually know. Secret Service and FBI findings have concluded that:

- School violence is not an epidemic.
- All school shooters are not alike, and there is no single profile of the violent offender.
- School shooters often have social difficulties, but are not always loners.
- Although revenge is a common factor, it is not the only motivation of school shooters.
- Most attackers have previously used guns and have had access to them, but access to weapons is not the most significant risk factor.
- Unusual or aberrant behaviors or interests are not necessarily the hallmarks of a student destined to become violent.
- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive.
- Prior to most incidents, the attacker has told someone about his or her ideas or plans.
- Most shooting incidents are not resolved by law enforcement.
- In many cases, other students are involved in some capacity.
- In a number of cases, bullying plays a key role in and can be a predictor of the attack.
- Prior to the incident, most attackers have engaged in behavior that has raised concern among either other students or faculty.

## Developing Threat Assessment Protocols for Schools

### Establish District-Wide Policy and Procedure

Operating on the premise that any threat or concern is serious, it is important to have a specific and well-articulated policy for how to respond to allegations of actual or potential violence. The policy should include clarification of the role of educators in relation to the role of law enforcement, identify

the threat assessment team, and specify the team's training requirements. Specific procedures should include protocols for evaluating and interviewing the potential offender, notifying and working with parents, interviewing other students and staff, establishing the threshold of concern for initiating a threat assessment, determining the level of intervention, bringing in additional professionals (e.g., mental health, social service, law enforcement), providing follow-up observation and services, and responding to media. The specific elements of a threat assessment protocol may include:

- A general operating premise that any threat or concern is serious
- Recognition that all threats are to be immediately reported to the appropriate personnel
- Agreement that the information source(s) will remain anonymous to the greatest extent possible
- Follow-up activities that occur after the threat assessment (both when the threat is credible and when it is determined not to be credible)
- Coordination with the school's legal counsel, local law enforcement, and mental health resources

### **Develop an Interdisciplinary Assessment Team**

Effective threat assessment is based on the combined efforts of a threat assessment team (usually composed of trained school-based personnel) and select members of the broader school community (such as law enforcement, spiritual leaders, and representatives of social service agencies). 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. It is recommended that members of a threat assessment team include an established and respected member of the school administration or faculty, a lead investigator (e.g., a police officer or school resource officer), a mental health professional (e.g., a school psychologist), and any other professionals needed (e.g., guidance counselors).

### **Specific Training**

Training of all team members is essential. The Secret Service now offers training on preventing incidents of targeted violence, responding to threatening situations, and creating safe school climates. Further information is available at the website (see "Resources" below). It is recommended that team members possess qualifications, skills, and knowledge, including:

- A questioning, analytic, and skeptical mindset
- An ability to relate well to parents, colleagues, other professionals, and students

- Familiarity with childhood and adolescent growth and development
- A reputation for fairness and trustworthiness
- Training in the collection and evaluation of information from multiple sources
- Discretion and an appreciation for keeping information confidential
- Awareness of the difference between harming and helping in an intervention

### **Implementing Plans**

All intervention efforts should be guided by the threat assessment plan. Implementing the plan begins with educating support staff, administrators, teachers, and other professionals about the protocol that will be followed. Consideration should be given to how to raise awareness of the plan in the greater school community. Elements to be addressed include policy and procedures related to authority of the threat assessment team to conduct investigations, the capacity of the school to conduct a threat assessment, and integrated systems relationships among school and community professionals.

### **Student and Community Involvement**

Students often know of potential problems well in advance of adults. They need to feel comfortable telling a trusted adult about their concerns regarding threats of violence of any kind. Parents and community leaders should be included as part of the supportive and trusted school and community environments. Students, staff, and parents should understand that violence prevention is everyone's responsibility, that all information will be handled discreetly, and that the purpose of the plan is to protect both the potential victim and the perpetrator. Everyone should also understand how the threat assessment plan works and who is involved.

### **Conducting Threat Assessment Interventions**

All threats are not created equal. A threat is an expression of intent to do harm or to act out violently against someone or something. The threat may be spoken, written, or symbolic. However, many students who make a threat will never carry it out. Conversely, others who pose a real threat may never make one.

### **Assess the Type of Threat and Level of Risk**

There are a number of different types of threats. The FBI has identified the following ones:

- *Direct threats:* These specify a specific act against a specific target delivered in a straightforward, clear, and explicit manner.

- *Indirect threats:* These tend to be vague, unclear, and ambiguous. Violence is implied, but threat is phrased tentatively, and suggests that a violent act *could* occur, not that it *will* occur.
- *Veiled threats:* These strongly imply but do not explicitly threaten violence.
- *Conditional threats:* These are often seen in extortion cases with a warning that a violent act will happen unless certain demands or terms are met.

There are also several different levels of risk. Again, the FBI has identified these:

- *Low-level threats:* These pose a minimal risk to the victim and public safety and are vague and indirect. Risk assessment information is inconsistent, implausible, or lacking in either detail or in realism. The content suggests the person is unlikely to carry it out.
- *Medium-level threats:* These can be carried out, although they may not appear realistic. They are more direct and more concrete than low-level threats, and their wording suggests that the individual has given some thought to how the act will be carried out. These threats include a general indication of place and time, but signs still fall well short of a detailed plan. There is not a strong indication that the individual has taken preparatory steps. However, threatening statements seem to convey that the threat is not empty (e.g., “I’m serious!” or “I really mean this!”).
- *High-level threats:* These are direct, specific, and plausible. They appear to pose an imminent and serious danger to the safety of others and suggest that concrete steps have already been taken (e.g., stalking of a victim, acquisition of a weapon). This level always requires the involvement of law enforcement.

### Profiling Cautions

There is no easy formula or profile of risk factors that accurately determines the next school shooter. Most students who display multiple risk factors will never become violent offenders and some who pose a real threat will 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) strongly increases the likelihood of *misidentifying* students who are thought to pose a threat. Moreover, the process focuses solely on identification, not intervention, and fails to provide the necessary help to potential offenders.

Instead of profiling, guided professional judgment is recommended for evaluating risk. This approach is

characterized by a set of activities that incorporate investigative processes, information-gathering strategies, and target-violence-related questions. Guiding principles include recognizing that there is no single profile of perpetrators of school violence: School violence is a product of a combination of many influences, there is a distinction between making a threat and posing a threat, and targeted school violence is not random or spontaneous.

### Factors Shaping the Student’s Behavior

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, and resiliency and coping style. You probably know less about the potential offender than you think and you should try to view information through the student’s eyes. Remember that it is critical that the threat assessment team be well trained in examining student characteristics. The FBI has proposed a *Four-Pronged Assessment Model* that examines:

#### 1. *Personality of the Student*

##### *Behavioral Characteristics*

- Capacity to cope with stress and conflicts
- Ways of dealing with anger, humiliation, sadness, or disappointments
- Level of resiliency related to failure, criticism, or other negative experiences
- Response to rules and authority
- Need for control
- Capacity for emotional empathy or respect for others
- Sense of self-importance compared to others (superiority/inferiority)

##### *Personality Traits*

- Tolerance for frustration
- Coping skills
- Focus on perceived injustices
- Signs of depression and/or other mental illness
- Self-perceptions (narcissistic and/or insecure)
- Need for attention
- Focus of blame (internalized versus externalized)

#### 2. *School Dynamics*

- Student’s attachment to school
- Tolerance for disrespectful behavior
- Approach to discipline (equitable or arbitrary)
- Flexibility and/or inclusiveness of culture
- Pecking order among students
- Code of silence
- Supervision of computer access

### 3. *Social Dynamics*

- Peer group relationships and culture
- Use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Media, entertainment, and technology
- Level and focus of outside interests
- Potential copycat effect from past incidents

### 4. *Family Dynamics*

- Parent-child relationship
- Attitudes toward pathological behavior
- Access to weapons
- Sense of connectedness and intimacy
- Attitude toward/enforcement of parental authority
- Monitoring of TV, video games, or the Internet

## Implementing Threat Assessments

**Intervening following assessment.** 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 before recommending mental health or law enforcement intervention). Considerations should include whether or not the student can stay in school, what alternatives may be needed, how and when to notify parents, if and when to involve law enforcement, and what mental health, social service, and school-based interventions are needed to reduce the student's risk for violence. The threat assessment continuum involves both threat assessment *inquiry* and threat assessment *investigation*. Inquiry refers to the process of the team's gathering information about a potentially threatening situation. Threat assessment investigation refers to the process carried out by law enforcement if a threat has been determined to be valid and/or a violation of the law.

**Threat management plans.** If the school determines that an individual poses a threat of violence, a plan should be developed that involves individual management (controlling and/or containing the situation to prevent a possible attack, protecting potential targets of the threat, and providing support and guidance to aid the student who is at risk for violence in dealing with his or her problems in an appropriate and adaptive manner), monitoring, and support. It is essential that teams be aware that violence, homicide, and suicide are strongly correlated with each other. The assessment of suicide risk must be included in all risk-assessment protocols.

## Providing Supportive Interventions

The goals of threat assessment are to keep schools safe and 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. The assessment process should incorporate referral to appropriate mental health and social services, as well as a system for following up of the effectiveness of the intervention. Among the other potential student risks that can be identified and prevented are suicide, alcohol and drug use, physical abuse, dropping out, and criminal activity.

A comprehensive interventions-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 promotes 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 upon their strengths when given the appropriate support.

## Resources

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Available: [www.ustreas.gov/usss/ntac\\_ssi.shtml](http://www.ustreas.gov/usss/ntac_ssi.shtml)

### Websites

National Association of School Psychologists—  
[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)  
U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment  
Center—[www.ustreas.gov/usss/ntac\\_ssi.shtml](http://www.ustreas.gov/usss/ntac_ssi.shtml)  
U.S. Secret Service training site—  
[www.threatassessmentseminars.org](http://www.threatassessmentseminars.org)

*This handout is adapted from material posted by the authors on the National Association of School Psychologists website in 2002. Shane R. Jimerson, PhD, NCSP, is on the faculty of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Stephen E. Brock, PhD, NCSP, directs the School Psychology program at California State University, Sacramento and is a member of the National Emergency Assistance Team of the NASP. Jennifer L. Greif is a graduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Katherine C. Cowan is Director for Marketing and Communications at NASP.*

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website [www.naspcenter.org](http://www.naspcenter.org). Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

**About School Psychology**—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.  
[www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/spsych.html](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html)

**Crisis Resources**—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.  
[www.nasponline.org/crisisresources](http://www.nasponline.org/crisisresources)

**Culturally Competent Practice**—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.  
[www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence](http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence)

**En Español**—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. [www.naspcenter.org/espanol/](http://www.naspcenter.org/espanol/)

**IDEA Information**—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.  
[www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html](http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html)

**Information for Educators**—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.  
[www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html)

**Information for Parents**—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.  
[www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html)

**Links to State Associations**—Easy access to state association websites.  
[www.nasponline.org/information/links\\_state\\_orgs.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html)

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**Position Papers**—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.  
[www.nasponline.org/information/position\\_paper.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html)

**Success in School/Skills for Life**—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.  
[www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit](http://www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit)