

Threats of Violence: Helping Handout for Assessing Risk at School

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INTRODUCTION

Although recent events have many concerned about school violence, schools are safer today than in years past (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016). Nevertheless, one act of violence is one too many, and schools need to be ready to implement protocols and procedures, such as behavior threat assessment and management (BTAM), that prevent and mitigate school violence. In the wake of recent acts of targeted and mass violence, multiple reports and agencies have recommended that schools establish multidisciplinary BTAM teams (Amman et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The primary purpose of a BTAM team is to ensure school safety. However, it is also important to acknowledge that failure to respond to a known or suspected threat can have legal implications. School districts have been held accountable under legal claims of foreseeability and negligence for failing to respond appropriately when a threat has been identified (*Pace v. Talley*, 2006; *Shuman v. Penn Manor SD*, 2005; *The Estate of Montana Lance et al. v. Kyer et al.*, 2011; *Witsell et al. v. School Board of Hillsborough*, 2011).

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

BTAM includes establishing a multidisciplinary threat assessment team, training students and staff to report concerns, and being prepared to conduct a risk assessment. At a minimum, an effective BTAM team should include three trained threat assessment

professionals: an administrator, a school mental health professional, and for moderate to serious risk situations, a law enforcement professional, such as a school resource officer (Deisinger & Randazzo, 2017). The primary goal of a BTAM process is to prevent the immediate risk of harm to others and to implement interventions that redirect students who are judged to present threats toward more positive pathways. If school rules have been violated, consequences related to those rules may still be applied; however, supports also need to be identified concurrently for these students. Otherwise, consequences can potentially escalate a threatening situation.

Effective BTAM also includes both the assessment of risk factors and warning signs and the management of threatening behaviors to ensure safety. There is a difference between making a threat and posing a threat, thus the context of words and actions must be considered. The following discussion reviews considerations that are important to identifying a potentially threatening situation, conducting a comprehensive threat assessment, and selecting the appropriate intervention for the student who is judged a danger to others.

Risk and Threat Assessment

A *risk* assessment considers empirically derived static (or constant) and dynamic (or changing) variables in a student's life, and estimates the individual's capacity to react violently (Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi, & Guldemann, 2014). A *behavioral threat* assessment determines the level of concern and also includes risk management, with the primary goal of redirecting the

student away from pathways leading to violence. Thus, a risk assessment is used for prevention and initial identification, whereas a threat assessment is activated when the concern is known and threat management is necessary.

No psychological or behavioral profile is available that predicts school violence. Further, profiles can unjustly stigmatize students, because, as noted above, there is a difference between *making* a threat and *posing* a threat. For example, a student may say or do something out of frustration, anger, or as a joke, but does not have any intention of harming others. Pathways to violence are a complex interaction of risk factors, warning signs, situational and contextual barriers, and mental states (Reeves & Brock, 2017).

Risk Factors

The presence of risk factors increases the odds of violent behavior. Although no one risk factor, or set of factors, perfectly predicts violent behavior, the greater the number of risk factors that are present, the greater the need to be vigilant. Risk factors are shown in Table 1.

Warning Signs

Warning signs are statements, actions, and appearances that suggest that a student is about to display violent behavior. Although warning signs are a critical element in initiating a threat assessment, the absence of warning signs does not necessarily mean there will not be a future act of violence. In many instances, individuals who have no history of

warning signs have engaged in an act of violence. Thus, it is critical to look at both the static and the dynamic factors that are occurring in a student's life. Nevertheless, warning signs coupled with multiple risk factors do elevate concerns (see Table 2). Suicidal ideation also is a warning sign, as thoughts of violence can be paired with suicidal thoughts.

Threats typically do not occur without some kind of warning. Threats can be direct (e.g., "I am going to kill Mr. Smith"), conditional ("If you continue to mess with me I will mess with you worse"), and indirect (e.g., "You might not want to eat in the cafeteria at lunch tomorrow"). Individuals may state threats in writing or verbally, and more recently, they often post threats on a personal social media account or an Internet site. Specific threats combined with multiple warning signs are especially concerning.

Risk Assessment

Assessment of a student's risk for violence is not an exact science and requires clinical judgment. There are a number of interview acronyms designed to assist mental health professionals in conducting a risk assessment. Deisinger and Randazzo (2017) view violence as an interaction among several factors, which form the acronym STEP (subject, target, environment, and precipitating event): the individual who may pose a threat, or the *subject* of concern; vulnerabilities of the *target* individuals and group; the *environment* that facilitates, perpetuates, or does not discourage violence; and *precipitating* events that can trigger the subject's reactions. BTAM teams

Table 1. Risk Factors That Increase Odds of Violent Thinking and Behaviors

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is socially withdrawn • Is isolated, alienated, and/or rejected • Has been a victim of violence and/or bullying • Feels persecuted and picked on • Has low school interest and performance • Expresses intolerance and prejudice • Has used drugs and alcohol • Has been affiliated with gangs • Expresses personal grievance or moral outrage • Expresses ideological thinking (often reinforced by others, including websites or virtual sites) • Does not affiliate with prosocial groups • Is dependent on virtual communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has occupational goals that have not been achieved or are unattainable • Has failed in relationship(s) • Has had a mental health disorder • Has access to or possesses firearms • Has a history of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ violent expressions in writings and drawings ▪ serious threats of violence ▪ uncontrolled anger ▪ impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, or bullying ▪ disciplinary problems that involve criminal violence
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Note. Adapted from Amman et al. (2017); Fein et al. (2004); Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James (2011); Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi, & Guldemann (2014); Meloy, Mohandie, Knoll, & Hoffmann (2015).

Table 2. Warning Signs That Indicate Violent Thinking and Behaviors

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific targets (may or may not be verbalized to others) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Persons ▪ Places ▪ Programs ▪ Processes ▪ Philosophies ▪ Proxies of the above • Articulated motives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Personal ▪ Political ▪ Religious ▪ Racial or ethnic ▪ Environmental ▪ Special interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing intensity of violence-related <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Efforts ▪ Desires ▪ Planning • Direct or indirect communications about violence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Words that are consistent with actions ▪ Perception that violence is acceptable or the only solution ▪ Postings on social media and Internet • Access to weapons or methods of planned harm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional state <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hopelessness ▪ Desperation ▪ Despair ▪ Suicidal thinking • Increasing capacity to carry out threats • Engagement with social media facilitating or promoting violence • Intimate partner problems • Interpersonal conflicts
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Note. Adapted from Amman et al. (2017); de Becker (n.d.); Fein et al. (2004); Meloy et al. (2011); Meloy et al. (2014); Meloy et al. (2015).

also assess the threat more specifically for MMOP (means, method, opportunity, and proximity). It asks: Does the individual(s) of concern have the *means* to carry out violence? Does the person have a planned *method* and the *opportunity* to carry out the attack? And does the person have *proximity* to the target? De Becker and Associates (2017) use the acronym JACA to ask the following four questions: What is the *justification* for the act of violence? Can the individual see other *alternatives* to besides violence to solve problems? Does the person of concern care about the *consequences* of the planned actions? Does the person have the *ability* to carry out the act?

Interviews that use STEP, MMOP, and JACA are critical and should be done by mental health professionals who have been trained in interviewing skills (e.g., the school psychologist, school social worker, or school counselor). The goals of an interview are to (a) gather information about the grievance, motivations, and plans; (b) identify

additional interviews to be conducted; (c) redirect the person of concern away from known targets and the opportunity to use violence; (d) offer appropriate assistance; (e) deliver admonishments against future negative behaviors; and (f) serve as an effective deterrent by letting students know their behavior has been noticed (Amman et al., 2017). Table 3 lists additional data to be collected that are critical to understanding the context of the threat and associated stressors (Reeves & Brock, 2017).

If the result of questioning suggests that the risk of violent behavior is imminent (e.g., the student is in possession of the means and has a strong desire), law enforcement (e.g., school resource officer) should be notified immediately to ensure students' safety. If there is not an imminent risk of violence, the student's primary caregiver needs to be notified, and a safety, supervision, and/or intervention plan needs to be put in place, with resources provided to the parents. Even if the team determines that the student is low risk and

Table 3. Records Collected as Part of a BTAM Assessment

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance records • Discipline referrals: types and history • Academic records and history • Special education records • Medical records • Mental health evaluations • Law enforcement records 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of interventions or assessments: academic, behavioral, mental health, etc. • History of parental involvement • History of frequent moves • Interviews with subject and targets • Comments from teachers • Knowledge of current life circumstances
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that no additional formal interventions are necessary, the primary caregiver should still be contacted. Failure to notify parents has resulted in schools being held liable for negligence (e.g., *Rogers v. Christina School District*, 2013).

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PREVENTION, EARLY IDENTIFICATION, AND EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF POTENTIAL VIOLENCE

A comprehensive BTAM process requires careful training of school personnel and planning for its implementation. When a student presents as being at risk for violent behavior, use the following guidelines.

1. **Establish universal programming that focuses on a positive school climate, social-emotional learning, school connectedness, and confidential reporting.** See Related Helping Handouts for recommendations related to school climate, social and emotional learning, and student engagement.
2. **Provide professional development and training.** Ensure that all staff members and students are trained to recognize the risk factors and warning signs of potentially violent behaviors, and know how to get help.
3. **Ensure that the school or district has a confidential reporting system.** The confidential reporting system would be for students, educators, and parents to bring forth their concerns. Provide training and information on how to report and to whom.
4. **Ensure that at least three school staff members have training in conducting threat assessments.** These should be school administrators, school mental health professionals, and school resource officers. That training must be done by professionals with expertise in conducting kindergarten–12 threat assessments, and should emphasize effective management of identified concerns and adequate and timely support for students.
5. **Identify school and community resources that can be activated to support students who have academic and social-emotional needs.** Such resources may include academic supports, social-emotional skill building, counseling or mental health services, and interventions provided by law enforcement and child protective services to ensure the safety of students. When it comes to

responding to the needs of students who have thoughts of violence, collaboration is critical. Thus, schools should have a protocol that identifies the circumstances in which law enforcement needs to be engaged, when child protective services need to be involved, and when a student's primary caregivers are the appropriate resource for securing additional mental health supports. The goal is to help a student off the pathway to violence by increasing prosocial problem solving and social relationships.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Articles and Handouts

Amman, M., Bowlin, M., Buckles, L., Burton, K. C., Brunell, K. F., Gibson, K. A., ... Robins, C. J. (2017). *Making prevention a reality: Identifying, assessing, and managing the threat of targeted attacks*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. <http://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=804728>, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=804728>

This document provides guidance for current best practices in threat assessment and management. Topics covered include general awareness, barriers to successful engagement of threat assessment teams and protocols, identification and assessment of risk to determine the level of concern, effective threat management, and establishment of the threat assessment team.

Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2004). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education. https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

This document was one of the first publications to describe a K–12 threat assessment model for schools, which was based on research and findings that originated from the Secret Service study on assassinations and attacks on public officials and public figures. It includes suggestions for developing a threat assessment team within a school or district, steps to take when information of concern comes to light, consideration about when to involve law enforcement, issues of information sharing, and ideas for creating safe school climates.

NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee. (2014). *Threat assessment for school administrators and crisis teams*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

This handout provides a brief overview of K–12 threat assessment, including the general process, types of threats, considerations for risk, the schools psychologist's role, and threat management.

Reeves, M. A., & Brock, S. B. (2017). School behavioral threat assessment and management. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 1–15. doi:10.1007/s40688-017-0158-6 <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40688-017-0158-6>

This journal article addresses the critical components and training needed to establish an effective process for conducting a behavioral threat assessment and to establish an effective management and support plan. Topics include legal implications, effective teams, risk factor and warning signs that indicate potential violence, threat assessment models and tools, risk evaluation, and intervention planning.

Related Helping Handouts

Bullying: Helping Handout for School

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for School

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de Becker, G. (n.d.). *An introduction to threat assessment and management: A confidential white paper report*. Studio City, CA: Gavin de Becker & Associates.

de Becker, G., & Associates. (2017, April). *Advanced Threat Assessment and Management Academy*

(training materials; not publicly available), Lake Arrowhead, CA.

Deisinger, G., & Randazzo, M. (2017, May). *Integrated threat management: A collaborative approach to identifying, assessing & managing threatening behaviors*. Workshop presented to Maryland Center for School Safety, Annapolis, MD.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), 20 U.S.C. § 1232g.

Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2004). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

Meloy, J. R., Hoffmann, J., Guldemann, A., & James, D. (2011). The role of warning behaviors in threat assessment: An exploration and suggested typology. *Behavior Sciences and the Law*, 30, 256–279. doi:10.1002/bsl.999

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Pace v. Talley, No. 05-30528 (5th Cir. Nov. 21, 2006).

Reeves, M. A., & Brock, S. B. (2017). School behavioral threat assessment and management. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 1–15. doi:10.1007/s40688-017-0158-6

Rogers v. Christina School District, 45, 2012 (July 16, 2013). Retrieved from <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/de-supreme-court/1639232.html>

Shuman v. Penn Manor School District, No. 04-2715 (3d Cir. Sept. 7, 2005).

The Estate of Montana Lance et al. v. Kyer et al., No. 4:11-cv-00032 (Texas Eastern 2011).

U.S. Department of Education. (2013). *Guide for developing high-quality school emergency operations plans*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Balancing student privacy and school safety: A guide to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act*

(FERPA) for elementary and secondary schools.
<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/safeschools/index.html>

Witsell et al. v. School Board of Hillsborough County, Florida, No. 8:2011cv00781 – Document 18 (M.D. Fla. 2011).

Zhang, A., Musu-Gillette, L., & Oudekerk, B. A. (2016). *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2015* (NCES 2016-079/NCJ 249758). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, and U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.ct.gov/oca/lib/oca/sandyhook11212014.pdf>

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