

## RESPONDING TO STUDENTS WHO THREATEN VIOLENCE: HELPING HANDOUT FOR THE SCHOOL

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Although recent events have many concerned about school violence, schools are safer today than in years past (Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk, 2017). 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 (e.g., Amman et al., 2017; Fein et al., 2004; Goodrum & Woodward, 2016; Kanan, Nicoletti, Garrido, & Dvoskina, 2016; Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, 2015; 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 (Reeves & Brock, 2017).

### WHAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS?

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 professionals trained in threat assessment: a school administrator, a school-employed mental health professional, and for moderate to serious risk situations, a law enforcement professional, such as a school resource officer (Amman et al., 2017). While behavioral consequences may need to be applied to students who threaten violence (due to violation of school rules), 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 (Reeves & Brock, 2017).

Effective BTAM also includes both the assessment of risk factors and warning signs, and management of threatening behaviors to ensure safety. However, there is a difference between making a threat and posing a threat, and neither words nor actions can be viewed in isolation. The following discussion reviews considerations important to identifying a potentially threatening situation and selecting the appropriate intervention for the student who presents as a possible danger to others.

## Risk and Threat Assessment

A *risk* assessment considers empirically derived variables that may be static (constants) or dynamic (changing), and estimates an individual’s capacity to react violently (Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2011; Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi, & Guldemann, 2014). Risk assessments are used for the initial identification of students at risk for violence. A *threat* assessment determines the level of concern (Meloy et al., 2011); that is, how dangerous is this student at the time of the assessment. Threat assessment includes risk management, with the primary goal of redirecting the student away from pathways leading to violence.

No psychological or behavioral profile is available that reliably predicts school violence. Further, profiles can unjustly stigmatize students (Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002), because 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 violence, the greater the number of risk factors that can be identified, the greater the need to be vigilant. Suggested risk factors are offered in the following table.

### *Violence Risk Factors*

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

## Warning Signs

Warning signs are statements, actions, and appearances suggesting that a student is about to display violent behavior (Brock & Reeves, 2017). 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. 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 occurring in a student’s life. Nevertheless, warning signs coupled with multiple risk factors do elevate concerns. Suicidal ideation is also a warning sign, as thoughts of violence are often paired with suicidal thoughts. Warning signs of violent behavior are offered in the following table.

### ***Violence Warning Signs***

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

Threats typically do not occur without some kind of warning. They 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”). The individual may state threats in writing or verbally, or 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. Deisinger and Randazzo (2017) view violence as an interaction between several factors, abbreviated as STEP: the individual, or the *subject*; vulnerabilities of the *target*; the *environment* that facilitates, perpetuates, or does not discourage violence; and *precipitating* events that can trigger the subject’s reactions. They also assess the threat more specifically for MMOP: *means* to carry out violence, *method* of the attack, *opportunity*, and *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 they see other *alternatives* to violence? Does the person of concern care about the *consequences* of his or her actions? Does the person have the *ability* to carry out the act?

Interviews that use STEP, MMOP, and JACA are critical and should be conducted by mental health professionals who have been trained in interviewing students of concern, intended victims, and others who may know the student (e.g., the school psychologist, school social worker, or school counselor; Reeves & Brock, 2017). Interview goals are to (a) gather information about the grievances, motivations, and plans; (b) identify additional interviews needed; (c) redirect the person of concern away from known targets and opportunity to use violence; (d) offer appropriate assistance; (e) deliver admonishments against future negative behaviors; and (f) serve as an effective deterrent by letting persons know their behavior has been noticed (Amman et al., 2017). The following table lists additional data that should be collected and that are critical to understanding the context of the threat and stressors associated with it (Reeves & Brock, 2017). Additional data critical to understanding the context of, and stressors associated with, the threat that should be collected include: attendance records, discipline referrals (types and history), academic records and history, special education records, medical records, mental health evaluations, law enforcement records, history of interventions or assessments (e.g., academic, behavioral, mental health), history of parent involvement, history of frequent moves, interviews with the subject and potential targets, and comments from teachers.

If the result of such 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 such as a school resource officer should be immediately notified to ensure students' safety. If there is not an imminent risk of violence, and violence is not an imperative, the student's primary caregiver needs to be notified and a safety, supervision, and intervention plans needs to be put into place, with resources provided to the parents. Even if the student is determined to be low risk, the primary caregiver should still be contacted, even if no additional formal interventions are necessary. Failure to notify parents has resulted in schools being held liable for negligence (Reeves & Brock, 2017).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND THE SCHOOL**

### ***1. Promote a positive school climate and school-wide prevention programs.***

- Make use of universal social emotional programming that increases students' problem-solving capacity
- Conduct school wide screenings for mental health concerns.
- Improve school connectedness. Doing so decreases behavioral issues and increases academic achievement, and in turn mitigates the potential for violence. A positive school climate and school connectedness also increase the odds of students reporting concerning peer behavior.

### ***2. Train all school staff members to identify risk factors and warning signs of violence.***

- Failure to do so or to appropriately respond when concerns are identified exposes the school to negligence claims.
- Help staff members to understand the exceptions to confidentiality rules. That is, when a staff member has a reasonable suspicion that a student may be a danger to self or others, or is at risk for harm from someone else, confidentiality agreements do not apply.
- While FERPA ensures educational record confidentiality, it was modified to allow school officials to disclose information to appropriate parties (i.e., staff who have legitimate educational interests in the behavior of the student), without consent, when the sharing of such information is necessary to protect the health and safety of others, and if there is a significant and identifiable threat to the safety of an individual (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**3. Train students how to confidentially report concerns of a potentially violent classmate.**

- Students are on the “front lines” when it comes to observing or otherwise learning about the concerning behaviors of their peers, including posts on social media.
- Helping students to break the so called “code of silence” is critical to a confidential reporting system.
- Awareness of risk factors, warning signs, confidential reporting, and giving permission for students to “get help” vs. being a “snitch,” should be integrated into universal safe schools programming.

## SUMMARY

A comprehensive threat assessment requires careful training and planning in advance of a student presenting as being at risk for violent behavior. Specifically, the assessment protocol includes:

1. Establish quality universal programming that focuses on a positive school climate, social–emotional learning, school connectedness, awareness, and confidential reporting.
2. Ensure that all staff members and students are trained to recognize the risk factors and warning signs of violent behaviors, and know how to get help.
3. Ensure that the school or district has a confidential reporting system for students, educators, and parents to bring forth concerns. Provide training and information on how and whom to report.
4. Ensure that at least three school staff members (administrator, school-employed mental health professional, and school resource officer or other law enforcement official) have training in conducting threat assessments, are able to effectively manage behaviors of concern, and know how to provide adequate and timely support for students. This training must be done by professionals with expertise in conducting kindergarten–12 threat assessments.
5. Identify community resources that can be activated to support students. Such resources may include community crisis centers, mental health professionals, law enforcement, and child protective services.

When it comes to responding to the needs of students with thoughts of violence, there is no one response that is always appropriate. Thus, schools should have a protocol that identifies under what circumstances law enforcement needs to be engaged, when child protective services need to be involved, or when a student’s primary caregivers are the appropriate resource for ensuring that the necessary mental health support is provided by professionals outside the school.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- 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. [https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making\\_prevention\\_a\\_reality\\_identifying\\_assessing\\_managing\\_threats\\_of\\_ta.pdf](https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making_prevention_a_reality_identifying_assessing_managing_threats_of_ta.pdf)
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