

Introduction

Preventing violence in our schools is a top priority. Considerable energy has been devoted to school safety by establishing crisis response teams, creating positive learning environments, and increasing security measures. An important part of school safety plans is identifying students at-risk of becoming violent and providing appropriate interventions.

Many approaches have been developed, but unfortunately, there is not a simple formula that will precisely determine the next violent offender. Although there is no proven method, threat assessment appears to be a practical approach (NASP, 2002).

Threat assessment is a process of evaluating the threat, and the circumstances surrounding the threat, in order to uncover any facts or evidence that indicate the threat is likely to be carried out (Fein, Vossekuil, Pollack, Borum, Modzeleski, & Reddy, 2002; NASP, 2002).

It focuses on a student's thinking and behavior and avoids profiling psychological characteristics. The vital question of a threat assessment is not whether the student made a threat, but whether a student poses a threat (Fein, Vossekuil, Pollack, Borum, Modzeleski, & Reddy, 2002).

Disclaimer:

The results of this assessment guide do not predict future violence nor are they a fool proof method of assessing an individual's risk of harm to others. The purpose of an assessment is to identify the circumstances and variables, which may increase risk for potential youth violence as well as to assist the school staff in developing an Intervention Plan.

Threat assessments are best performed by a multidisciplinary team that has been trained to assess threatening behavior and then manage students of concern through various intervention methods. The Student Threat Assessment worksheet included in this guide is a tool to aid in organizing a threat assessment, but the final conclusion drawn and management strategy used by the assessment team relies solely on the assessment team's professional judgment. *Total Safety Solution LLC, or its officers, take no responsibility for the conclusion(s) drawn by individual(s) using this, or any derivative of this threat assessment tool/guide.*

Risk Factors

The risk factors used in this threat assessment tool are adapted from the U.S. Secret Service’s 10 key questions to guide a protective intelligence or threat assessment investigation (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). These questions flow directly from the fundamental threat assessment principles outlined in Borum and Vossekuil’s: “Threat assessment: Defining an approach to assessing risk for targeted violence.” Behavioral Sciences & the Law

1 MOTIVE FOR VIOLENCE OR THREAT

What is motivating the subject to make the threats or engage in the behaviors that have raised the level of concern to make them the subject of a threat assessment?

Risk Indicators:

Statements or observed behaviors that indicate the subject is seeking to address a grievance or injustice through violent means. The subject sees violence as a legitimate option to achieving their goal. Their goal may also include: end pain, gain notoriety, restore dignity or self-worth, and or revenge/retribution for a perceived wrong done to them.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- What is the subject’s motivation that lead to their threatening behavior or statements?
- Does the subject feel unfairly threatened or wounded by someone or by an institution?
- What does the subject want, or goal?
- Does the subject see violence as an expectable means to an end? Their end or goal?
- Does the situation or circumstance that led to these statements or actions still exist?

Risk Rubric:

1. Motive for violence or threat		
Absent/Mild	Moderate	Severe
Subject is not motivated by violence to address a perceived grievance, or subject has a grievance but does not see violence as an acceptable response.	Subject has a perceived grievance or other motivating factor and possibly contemplating violence.	Subject has a perceived grievance or other motivating factor and sees violence as a desirable option to resolve issue.

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2 EXPRESSED INTENT TO ATTACK

What, if anything, has the student communicated to someone else (targets, friends, other students, teachers, family, others) or written in a diary, journal, or website concerning his or her ideas and/or intentions?

Risk Indicators:

Any specific plans, threats, or expressed intentions to harm individuals at their school. Many individuals who engage in targeted violence do not direct threats to their targets, but communicate their ideas, plans, or intentions to others. Some also keep journals or diaries recording their thoughts and behaviors. Collateral informants (family, friends, caregivers, and co-workers) should be questioned about any unusual or inappropriate ideas and any signs of the subject's desperation or deterioration. (Borum)

Possible lines of inquiry:

- What is the subject's words, writings, or drawings say about their intention to do harm to others?
- Does the subject's words, writings, or drawings point to specific planning to do harm to others?
- Does the subject's words, writings, or drawings indicate a time frame within they want/need to do harm to others?

Risk Rubric:

2. Expressed intent to attack		
Absent/Mild	Moderate	Severe
Subject has not communicated a desire to hurt others. No homicidal intent.	Violent threats (regardless of condition) are expressed with little or no contrition. Homicide is considered or expressed.	Threats are violent with homicidal intent: direct, repeated, with details; possibly with time frame.

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3 VIOLENT FANTASIES OR HOMICIDAL IDEAS

Does the subject have a preoccupation with violent themes, fantasies, weapons, or do they identify or have a fascination with perpetrators of violence (past school shooters)? Are any of their violent fantasies directed toward the school or students?

Risk Indicators:

Subject entertains thoughts of violence towards the school in general or towards specific individuals they know. Subject has a preoccupation with past school shooters or other perpetrators of mass violence.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Does the subject introduce violent themes into school projects where violence is unrelated to the subject matter?
- Does the subject share their violent idea/fantasies with friends and acquaintances?
- Does the subject's writes or drawings contain homicidal or violent imagery?
- Does the subject have an unhealthy preoccupation on violent music, movies, video games, or websites?
- Does the subject collect information or images of past school shooters or other perpetrators of mass violence?

Risk Rubric:

3. Violent fantasies or homicidal ideas		
Absent/Mild	Moderate	Severe
No evidence of violent fantasies, or preoccupation with other violent themes.	Subject is preoccupied with thoughts or expressions of violent themes in their life. Unhealthy interest in past perpetrators of mass violence and/or weapons.	Subject is obsessed with violent themes, past perpetrators of mass violence. Intense fascination with weapons.

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4 PRE-ATTACK BEHAVIORS

Has the subject engaged in a pre-attack behaviors necessary to carry out their attack?

Risk Indicators:

Subject has moved past violent ideas and has started making physical preparations to carry out a violent act: planning and/or practice; increased weapons acquisition; access to potential targets; research to increase knowledge of targets' whereabouts; or actions to increase access to targets. Pre-attack behaviors may accelerate in frequency leading up to an attack (Energy burst warning behavior).

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Is there physical evidence that the student is actually preparing for an attack:
- Written plans or timetable;
 - a) Internet searches for target intelligence or attack methods;
 - b) attempt to acquire or successful acquisition of weapons; or
 - c) gathering of costume/tactical clothing.
- Has the subject tried to recruit others to help him?
- Has the subject tried to penetrate or test security (dry run)?
- Has the subject engaged in stalking or harassing behavior towards the target individual?
- Is there a decline in their usual routines or responsibilities, such as going to work, clubs, or sport practice?

Risk Rubric:

4. Pre-Attack Behaviors		
Absent/Mild	Moderate	Severe
No evidence of planning or preparations for violence.	Evidence of some planning or preparations for violence.	Evidence of weapon acquisition, tactical preparation, or accelerated preparation activity.

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5 MEANS AND ACCESS

Does the subject have the capacity/cognitive sophistication to carry out an act of targeted violence?

Risk Indicators:

The subject has the mental capacity and cognitive ability is organized and sufficient to carry out a act of targeted violence.

Counter Indicators:

Acting out or making a violent statement has been identified by a mental health professional as a manifestation of their special needs diagnosis. The subject does not have the cognitive ability to carry out an attack.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- How organized is the student’s thinking and behavior?
- Does the student have the means, e.g., access to a weapon, to carry out an attack?
- Based on the student’s baseline behavior or cognitive abilities, are they capable of carry out a targeted act of violence?

Risk Rubric:

5. Means and Access		
Absent		Present
Subject does not have the cognitive capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence, or access to weapons.		Subject has the cognitive capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence, and has access to weapons.

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6 HOPELESSNESS, PERSONAL STRESS, AND NEGATIVE COPING

Has the subject experienced a recent loss and or loss of status, and has this led to feelings of desperation and despair?

Risk Indicators:

The subject has experienced significant losses in the following areas: material (treasured object); relational (death or separation of close relationship); or losses of status (narcissistic injury). Potential losses can be examined in at least four domains: family relations, intimate/peer relations, occupational, and self-image/status. The subject expresses a sense of hopelessness/desperation and may consider suicide as a means of elevating their pain. Subject demonstrates inability to cope with stressors in their life. (Borum)

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Is there information to suggest that the student is experiencing desperation and/or despair?
- Has the student experienced a recent failure, loss and/or loss of status?
- Is the student known to be having difficulty coping with a stressful event?
- Is the student now, or has the student ever been, suicidal or “accident - prone”?
- Has the student engaged in behavior that suggests that he or she has considered ending their life?

Risk Rubric:

6. Hopelessness, loss, and negative coping		
Absent/Mild	Moderate	Severe
Subject has not experienced extraordinary loss or setback that has caused a crisis and shows some positive coping skills.	Subject has recently experienced, or anticipates to experience a moderate loss or setback. Although stressed, shows some coping strategies.	Subject has recently experienced, or anticipates to experience a serious and significant loss or setback. Subject shows little to no coping strategies.

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7 ANGER

Is the subject displaying uncontrollable outburst of anger, belligerence, or bullying that is causing concern or fear in others? Has the intensity and frequency of the displays of anger increased?

Risk Indicators:

Angry and impulsive reactions to frustrations coupled with physical displays of danger, e.g., throwing objects, vandalism, bullying, intimidation, and fighting, which cause fear and concern in others. Subject's displays of anger are increasing in intensity and frequency.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Does the subject have angry outbursts?
- What is their intensity? What is their frequency?
- Has the intensity or frequency changed? Increased or decreased?
- Does the subject react inappropriately frustrated to situations?
- Has the subject acted out in physical displays of anger, e.g., throwing objects, vandalism?
- Has the subject shown a pattern of bullying, intimidation, and/or fighting?

Risk Rubric:

7. Anger		
Absent/Mild	Moderate	Severe
Subject's outbursts are minor in intensity and frequency. Sub takes responsibility for behavior and acknowledges other's feelings. Others have not expressed fear or concern.	Subject has regular angry outbursts. Sub throws objects, bullies, and/or intimidates others. Sub takes little or no responsibility for behavior and its impact on others. Others report fear or concern.	Subject demonstrates frequent and/or intense outbursts of anger that are often manifested in physically though bullying, intimidation, vandalism, and fighting. Fear and concern is reported by others.

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8 SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Does the subject abuse any substances, and is violence or anger associated with their substance abuse?

Risk Indicators:

The subject has either self-identified as a substance abuser, or has exhibited signs of intoxication. The subject has history of anger or violence associated with alcohol or drug dependency problem.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Is there any direct or indirect evidence that the subject is abusing drugs or alcohol?
- Does the subject have a history of violence or physical displays of anger associated with alcohol or drug use?
- Has the subject ever shown up for work or school while under the influence of drugs or alcohol?

Risk Rubric:

8. Substance abuse		
Absent/Mild	Moderate	Severe
No indication that subject has a current or recent substance abuse problem.	Pattern of substance abuse is present with noted changes in behavior, mood, and conduct. (or) Sub has shown up for work/school at least one time under the influence of alcohol or drugs.	Subject's substance abuse is causing major problem in sub's impulse control, and is acting out violently as a result of their substance abuse.

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9 HISTORY OF VIOLENCE AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

Does the subject have a history of violence or criminal activity?

Risk Indicators:

Subject has a history of violence; frequent or severe. Subject has engaged in criminal activity; violent or nonviolent crime. Displays outward antagonism and towards authority figures.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Does the subject have a school discipline record of violence or criminal activity?
- Has the subject ever been arrested or detained for criminal activity? Are there calls for service to the subject's home?
- When was the last recorded act of violence or criminal activity? Does the subject have a school discipline record of violence or criminal activity?
- Is the subject honest about their past acts? Does the subject show remorse?

Risk Rubric:

9. History of violence and criminal activity		
Absent/Mild	Moderate	Severe
Subject does not have a history of violence or criminal activity. (or) Subject has had one violent act or crime in their past, but no other issues of concern in the recent past.	Subject has had one or two acts of violence or criminality in the recent past. So recent to indicate that is an ongoing issue that has not resolved. Sub is antagonistic towards authority figures.	Subject has had one or more serious acts of violence and/or criminal acts in their recent past that indicate a pattern of conflict with authorities.

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10 INHIBITORS AGAINST VIOLENCE

Does the subject have positive attitudes, attachments, supportive family structure, respect for others, positive life goals, and coping/problem solving skills that inhibit violent acts?

Risk Inhibitors:

Subject demonstrates resiliency and limit-setting that is derived from positive attitudes, pro-social attachments, supportive family structure, peer support, respect for others, respect for authority figures, and positive life goals.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- How does the subject respond to adversity in their life?
- What is the subject’s attitude towards authority figures?
- Does the subject have long term life goals? Does the subject “see” themselves achieving these goals?
- Does the subject have positive peer relationships?
- Does the subject have a positive relationship with at least one adult?
- What is the subject’s genuine remorse for fear inducing behavior?
- Does the subject seek out appropriate help for their problems?

Risk Rubric:

10. Inhibitors against violence		
Strong	Moderate	Absent
Strong positive attitudes, attachments, supportive family structure, respect for others, positive life goals, and coping/problem solving skills. Seeks sources for help. Has long term life goals.	Subject has supportive family or peer structures. Responds to limit-setting techniques. Seeks sources for help.	Absent positive attitudes, attachments, supportive family structure, respect for others, does not seek sources for help. Does not have long term life goals. Not concerned with consequences for conduct.

Risk Categories

Experts recommend categorical rather than probabilistic systems for communicating the results of risk assessments. This five category system for describing violence risk potential can guide the construction of action steps appropriate to the level of risk. The Risk Investigation Model (Hatcher, 1994, 1995, 1996) recognizes that risk behavior does not fall into two simple of violent versus non-violent, but rather extends across a continuum. These categories are a useful way of describing and communicating-not diagnosing-the results of risk and threa1 assessments at different phases of the process. For example, as information is initially presented to team members, it may be helpful to hypothesize what the level of risk may be, so that initial precaution may be taken. (Mohandie, 2002)

Category 1

An individual is, or is very close to, behaving in a way that is, potentially dangerous to self or others. Examples include detailed threats of lethal violence, suicide threats, possession/use of firearms or other weapons, serious physical fighting, etc. Most of these individuals will qualify for immediate hospitalization or arrest.

In the Category 1 situation, the individual is imminently dangerous to self or others and qualifies for immediate hospitalization or arrest. In a composite case example, two high school students have been dating though out their high school years, but the female half has broken off the relationship anticipating moving away to college. The male half has taken the rejection very hard and has started to display stalking type behavior. The parents of the female half found a kind of suicide note from their daughter's ex-boyfriend, left on their front door. The ex-boyfriend was contacted at school with a loaded gun in his backpack and a journal detailing how he planned to kill his ex-girlfriend on the last day of school and then kill himself. These types of cases, although very serious in nature, are very clear in presenting an associated crime or grounds for a mental health commitment. (Mohandie, 2002)

Category 2

An individual has displayed significant Early Warning Signs, has significant existing Risk Factors and/or Precipitating Events, and has few Stabilizing Factors. May not qualify for hospitalization or arrest at present, but requires referrals for needed services and active case management.

Category 2 cases involve individuals who evidence high violence potential but do not qualify for arrest or hospitalization. In the Category 2 situation, the threat of violence has a qualification or condition associated with the threat. This means that the individual is going to hurt someone if some designated or inferred event in the future does happen or does not happen. In this circumstance, the reported behavior of the student, employee, or other person, while of serious concern to school personnel, is not reasonably likely to qualify for immediate arrest or involuntary psychiatric hospitalization. For example, a long term disabled school employee anticipating his upcoming disability pension hearing states, "If

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they decide against me, I know where they live and I will teach them a lesson." He then embarks upon extensive discussions with others about his violent fantasies, his detailed knowledge of their personal addresses and driving habits, and his past military training in surveillance and firearms. (Mohandie, 2002)

Category 2 cases present a significant challenge to school personnel, campus law enforcement, and mental health professionals. In this category, the threat may or may not be explicit. An individual may make a threat and/or pose a threat for future harm (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; Gelles, Fein, & Sasaki, 1998; Macdonald, 1968). Risk assessment specialists, particularly mental health consultants, play a critical role in distinguishing Category 1 from Category 2 cases, evaluating the level of risk to self and others as indicated by the student or employee's actions, and assessing options for continued school safety. (Mohandie, 2002)

Category 3

An individual has displayed some Early Warning Signs and may be existing Risk Factors or recent Precipitating Events, but also may have some Stabilizing Factors. There may be evidence of internal emotional distress (depression, social withdrawal, etc.) or of intentional infliction of distress on others (bullying, intimidation, seeking to cause fear, etc.).

Category 3 is defined as insufficient evidence for violence potential, but sufficient evidence for the repetitive and/or intentional infliction of emotional distress upon others. In the Category 3 situation, it is the threat of violence rather than the act of violence that is important. The threat of violence or other behaviors are intended to cause other students, co-workers, administrators, and/or others sufficient distress so that no interpersonal and/or school action will occur that would be adverse to the individual making the threat. These cases often involve intimidators who are extremely effective at making others take notice of their concerns. They believe that they are entitled to do so, and will often acknowledge to others that this was their intended goal, a goal that they will often perceive as justified. justified. An example is the student who regularly bullies his classmates when he feels like they have not given him an appropriate degree of respect, angrily and abusively berating their personality ("You are a punk and a loser!"), using ambiguous and not so- ambiguous threatening language ("I could kick your ass" or "I'm gonna mess you up!"). While the bully denies that he would ever get violent, he is very effective at getting others to "walk on eggshells" to appease him. The Category 3 description also applies when the person denies any intention to cause distress, but the behavior is repetitive across time, and sufficient to cause distress in coworkers, classmates, and others. Many times the person fails to respond to limit-setting by district personnel. (Mohandie, 2002)

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Category 4

An individual has displayed minor Early Warning Signs, but assessment reveals little history of serious Risk Factors or dangerous behavior. Stabilizing Factors appear to be reasonably well-established. There may be evidence of the unintentional infliction of distress on others (insensitive remarks, "teasing" taken too far, etc.).

Category 4 cases have insufficient evidence of violence potential, but sufficient evidence for the unintentional infliction of emotional distress upon others. In the Category 4 situation, the threat of violence occurs and could reasonably cause emotional distress in other students/employees. The individual makes a single threat or threatening behavior, but does not have the intent or motive to cause emotional distress in other students, co-workers, supervisors, or others. Subsequently, the individual is able to acknowledge the reasonable impact of his/her behavior upon the emotional health and welfare of the targeted people. The student further acknowledges and endorses the school and his or her parents' code of conduct that such behavior is unacceptable. S/he promises it will not occur again. For example, a high school junior joked to another student about how a "Columbine- type shooting might liven up their school's first fall dance" as he was complaining about the "brainless jocks." This other student, concerned about this statement due to another recent shooting, did the right thing and told a teacher who intervened and referred the boy to the vice principal. The vice principal convened a threat assessment team. Upon the TAT recommendation, she made arrangements for an interview of the student with security present. The teenager acknowledged making the statement, felt bad that he had caused others to become upset, admitted that it was in bad taste, and said he would apologize to put people at ease. When his mother, a single parent, was notified about the incident, she attended a school conference. Campus police officer searched the boy's room, found no weapons or anything else to lend credibility to the statement. (Mohandie, 2002)

Category 5

Upon assessment it appears there is insufficient evidence for any risk for harm. Situations under this category can include misunderstandings, poor decision-making, false accusations from peers (seeking to get other peers in trouble), etc.

In the Category 5 situation, insufficient evidence is present for either violence potential or the infliction of emotional distress. This category indicates an unfounded allegation of violent threat by another student or co-worker(s) for unknown reasons. In one case, a teacher was referred to the police and an *ad hoc* school based threat assessment team after she accused students of attacking her and dousing her with fecal matter. After an investigation, it was determined that she had concocted the story, and she was charged and convicted of filing a false police report (Leonard, 1998). (Mohandie, 2002)

Management

The following interventions are suggestions. This list is not exhaustive. A comprehensive Management Plan will use several interventions from all areas.

STUDENT INTERVENTIONS

- Daily/weekly check with administration and/or counselor/social worker.
- Early dismissal between classes with an escort.
- Travel card and time accountability.
- Backpack, coat, and other belongings checked-in and checked-out.
- In-school group counseling (e.g. stress management, anger management, social skills instruction).
- In-school individual counseling.
- Refer for outside individual counseling.
- Refer for substance abuse evaluation or treatment.
- Encourage participation in extra-curricular activities (e.g., clubs, sports).

FAMILY INTERVENTIONS

- Regularly scheduled meetings with student's family.
- Request removal of weapons from the home.
- Request reduction in exposure to violence (e.g. movies, video games, and internet).
- Request parents monitor student behavior related to curfew, school attendance, and homework.
- Refer to family counseling.
- Refer to parenting education program.
- Assist families if they are eligible for county health care.

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SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS

- Re-entry conference (include student, parent, and appropriate school staff).
- Modify student's schedule to ensure safety of target peers or staff.
- Alert teachers and staff on a need-to-know basis.
- Provide staff mentor.
- Provide peer mentor.
- Provide behavioral monitoring (hourly, daily, weekly).
- Develop a behavior contract.
- Involve School Resource Officer.
- Refer to Building Intervention Team (BIT) if suspect a student with a disability.
- If the student has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment and a Behavior Intervention Plan (if it is warranted).
- Refer to alternative special education setting (if the student has an IEP and it is warranted).
- Recommend suspension/expulsion with expectation of interventions during time out of school (if warranted).

COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS

- Call Department of Family Services (DFS) if there is a referral for abuse or neglect.
- Refer to Big Brothers, Big Sisters.
- Refer to drug abuse intervention program for youth who are affected by family members using substances.
- Refer to Youth Services.
- Assist with finding employment.
- Initiate/increase communication between school, home, and outside counselor.
- Involve local police department (e.g., notification, arrest, etc.).
- Refer for an outside psychological/psychiatric consultation/evaluation.
- Refer to a mentoring program.

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