The Prevention of School Violence

Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.
Curry School of Education
University of Virginia

434-924-8929
Email: youthvio@virginia.edu
Website: youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu

Overview

1. Our schools are safe.
2. Prevention is effective
3. School climate is critical to bullying prevention.
4. Use threat assessment, not zero tolerance.

School shootings generate increased fear that can lead to over-reactions.

Sandy Hook Shooting Inspires Bulletproof Kids Clothing

Fear mongering

Zero Tolerance Suspensions

9 year old with toy gun
12 year old doodler
Poem about Sandy Hook, "I understand the killings..."


Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D., is a forensic clinical psychologist and Professor of Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Dr. Cornell is Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project, a Program Director for Youth-Nex, the UVA Center for Effective Youth Development, and a faculty associate of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy.

Dr. Cornell has studied youth violence for nearly 30 years and has assisted numerous schools in the development of violence prevention programs. He has authored more than 200 publications in psychology and education, including: Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence and School Violence: Fears versus Facts.
Objectively, our schools are safe.

Where do violent crimes occur in Virginia?

School violence is not increasing.
School homicides are not increasing.

What is the likelihood of a student committing a homicide at your school?

- 93 student homicides cases in 10 years = 9.3/year (1992-03 to 2001-02)
- 119,000 schools
- 119,000 ÷ 9.3/year = 12,796 years

Where do we need police protection?

- Location A -- highest crime rate
- Location B -- medium crime rate
- Location C -- lowest crime rate

Unless we have unlimited police resources, we should place any additional officers in locations with the highest crime rates.

What if the media devotes 95% of its coverage to crime in Location C?

- Location A -- highest crime rate
- Location B -- medium crime rate
- Location C -- lowest crime rate

Media coverage should not compromise an objective assessment of crime rates and security needs.

Arming our teachers is not that easy

Prevention means “to keep something from happening”
Crisis response is not prevention.

A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.

Prevention must start before the gunman is at your door.

Critics say, “We can’t predict who will be violent, so prevention is not possible.”

However,….

Prevention does not require prediction.

We cannot predict who will have an accident, but safety regulations make safer roads, cars, and drivers.

Prevention does not require prediction.

We cannot predict who will get cancer, but we can identify risk and protective factors that reduce cancer rates dramatically.

How do we know whether prevention works?
Reviewed 221 studies of diverse school-based violence prevention programs
Average effect size = .25 for demonstration programs, which would reduce fighting 50% in a typical school.

Numerous Effective Programs

- Anger management
- Bullying prevention
- Conflict resolution
- Family therapy
- Parenting skills
- Problem-solving
- Social competence
- Substance abuse resistance
- Etc.

Many school-based prevention programs have not been evaluated.

Do bullying prevention programs work?

Many school-based bullying prevention programs have yielded disappointing results.
• 44 studies show wide range of effects:
  - Some negative
  - Most positive
• Average reduction about 20%

Maybe formal programs alone are not enough.

Be the Hero

You do not have to be a super-hero to stop bullying.
Nor should schools just rely on a super program.

Formal programs alone are not enough.

Schools need a school climate that encourages appropriate student behavior.

Survey of principals

Two contrasting groups
  • “Get-tough” strict discipline-oriented
  • “Be supportive” prevention-oriented

Source: Skiba & Edl, 2004
**Classic study of parents**

Two contrasting groups
- "Authoritarian" strict discipline-oriented
- "Permissive" lacking in discipline

Source: Baumrind, 1966

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**One dimension....**

Many people intuitively think that being tough and being supportive are opposites on a continuum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Demanding&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Responsive&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Strict&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Warm&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Tough&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Or two dimensions?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>Hi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo</td>
<td>Lo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Four types of parenting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>Hi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**Four types of school climate**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>Hi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo</td>
<td>Lo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Virginia High School Safety Study**

How are structure and support related to student bullying and victimization?

7,400 ninth grade students and 2,300 teachers in 290 Virginia high schools
School Climate Scales

1. Structure
   - Rules are strictly enforced, but fair
2. Support
   - Teachers treat me with respect, willing to seek help from them.

Virginia High Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authoritarian</th>
<th>Authoritative</th>
<th>Negligent</th>
<th>Permissive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>Lo</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Structure</td>
<td>High Support</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bullying Climate Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree/Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Agree/Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying is a problem at this school.</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students here often get teased about their clothing or physical appearance.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students here often get put down because of their race or ethnicity.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics at this school.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Stable factor structure
- Works for males and females, grades 6-12, white and minority students
- Teacher and student versions

Victimization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>False</th>
<th>True</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Damage to personal property worth more than $10.</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft of personal property worth more than $10.</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was physically attacked and had to see a doctor</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was physically attacked, but not serious enough to see a doctor.</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received obscene remarks or gestures from a student.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was threatened in remarks by a student.</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a weapon pulled on me.</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

104 authoritative schools (high structure and high support) had bullying at the 27th percentile

- 66 High bullying
- 51
- 48
- 27

Type of School

Negligent  Permissive  Authoritarian  Authoritative

Low bullying

High bullying
Results using TEACHER perceptions were consistent with STUDENT perceptions.

Schools with least structure and support have the highest rates of bullying and student victimization.

Similar results for a broader measure of student victimization (e.g., theft, assault, threats)

Virginia High School Safety Study

Schools do not have to choose between “get tough” and “be supportive” policies, but should strive for both. However, rules must be enforced in a fair and consistent manner that respects and supports students.

Would results from high schools extend to middle schools?

Virginia Middle School Climate Survey

423 Schools (98%)
9,134 Teachers (79%)
43,805 Students 7-8 (85%)

http://curry.virginia.edu/research/projects/virginia-secondary-school-climate-study
Disciplinary Structure

- The school rules are fair: 64%
- The punishment for breaking school rules is the same for all students: 62%
- If a student does something wrong, he or she will definitely be punished: 60%
- Students at this school only get punished when they deserve it: 57%

Student Support

- Most teachers and other adults at this school care about all students: 75%
- There are adults I could talk to if I had a personal problem: 71%
- If I tell a teacher someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help: 81%
- Most teachers and other adults at this school treat students with respect: 72%

Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale

- Bullying is a problem at this school: 53%
- Students here often get teased about their clothing or physical appearance: 71%
- Students here often get put down because of their race or ethnicity: 37%
- There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics at this school: 54%
- Students here get teased or put down about their sexual orientation: 40%
- Students get teased or put down about their religion at this school: 22%
- Students treat one another with respect in this school (reverse scored for scale): 46%

Schools with high structure and high support:

Findings are consistent across schools regardless of:
- School size
- Student poverty %
- Minority students %
- Urbanicity

Virginia Middle Schools

- Authoritarian: 35
- Authoritative: 176
- Negligent: 176
- Permissive: 36
Middle school results using STUDENT perceptions of Prevalence of Teasing & Bullying

Middle School General Victimization

Have any of the following happened to you personally at school this year? This includes while you are going to or from school. This also includes school events like field trips, school dances, and sports events.

- A student stole my personal property. 42
- A student physically attacked, pushed, or hit me. 36
- A student threatened to hurt me. 34
- A student threatened me with a weapon. 9
- A student said mean or insulting things to me. 63

Middle school results using STUDENT and Teacher perceptions of Prevalence of Teasing & Bullying and Student General Victimization

Long Term Suspension Rates for Black and White Students by School Type

Short Term Suspension Rates for Black and White Students by School Type
How is school climate related to school performance on state-mandated testing?

School Climate and SOL Passing Rates

Case example: How schools permit and even promote bullying

- School newspaper
- Rest room monitoring
- Hallway teasing
- Classroom mischief
- Uneven enforcement
- Marching band initiation
- Gym class humiliation
- Group rivalry

Contributing Factors

Bullying
Mental Illness
Peer Influences
Access to guns

Why is snitching so reviled?

Snitch: blabbermouth, canary, fink, narc, rat, sneak, squealer, stoolie, stoolpigeon, tattletale, etc.
Teach students to distinguish snitching from seeking help

Snitching: informing on someone for personal gain
Seeking help: attempting to stop someone from being hurt

FBI Recommendations on School Violence

“Although the risk of an actual shooting incident at any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem at any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.”

(FBI report p 1)

Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:
- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Identify roles for school personnel.
- Clarify role of law enforcement.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

What is Threat Assessment?

Threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to violence prevention that involves assessment and intervention with students who have threatened violence in some way.

Threat Assessment

1. Identification of threats made by students.
2. Evaluation of seriousness of threat and danger it poses to others, recognizing that all threats are not the same (e.g., toy guns are not dangerous).
3. Intervention to reduce risk of violence.
4. Follow-up to assess intervention results.

Key Point

Threat assessment is not designed to determine whether a student has MADE a threat, but whether a student POSES a threat.
Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

A collaborative project of:
University of Virginia Curry School of Education
Albemarle County Public Schools
Charlottesville City Public Schools
Funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund

Goals of Threat Assessment

1. Prevent violence.
2. Address problems such as bullying before they escalate.
3. Reduce use of school suspension
4. Improve student trust in staff.

Team roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal or Assistant Principal</th>
<th>Leads team, conducts Step 1.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Resource Officer</td>
<td>Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Staff</td>
<td>Team member to conduct mental health assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(School counselors, psychologists, social workers)</td>
<td>Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not required to serve on team</td>
<td>Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, aides, other staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.

No Magic Formula or Crystal Ball

There is no formula, prescription, or checklist that will predict or prevent all violent acts. School authorities must make reasoned judgments based on the facts of each individual situation, and monitor situations over time.

What is a threat?

A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone.

Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured.
Threats may be direct or indirect, and need not be communicated to the intended victim or victims. ("I’m going to get him.")
Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise. ("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")
When in doubt, assume it is a threat.
Prevention of School Violence
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.
Alberti Center, October 10, 2013

Grade Levels for 188 Student Threats of Violence

What did the students threaten to do?

N = 188 cases

A primary goal of threat assessment is to prevent violence.

Just screaming or having a tantrum is not a threat. The question is whether the student expresses intent to harm someone.

Continuum of Threats

- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate or frighten
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech

Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1: Evaluate Threat

Step 2: Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.

Step 3: Respond to transient threat.

Step 4: Decide if the substantive threat is serious or very serious.

Step 5: Respond to serious substantive threat.

Step 6: Conduct Safety Evaluation.

Step 7: Follow up on action plan.
Step 1. Evaluate the threat.

- Obtain an account of the threat and the context from the student and witnesses.
- Write down the exact threat.
- Obtain student's explanation of the threat's meaning and his/her intentions.
- Obtain witness perceptions of the threat's meaning.

Document your evaluation.

Typical Questions

1. Do you know why I wanted to talk to you?
2. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
3. What exactly did you say and do?
4. What did you mean when you said/did that?
5. How do you think [person threatened] feels about what you said?
6. What was the reason you said that?
7. What you going to do now?

Witness Questions

1. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
2. What exactly did [student who made threat] say and do?
3. What do you think he/she meant?
4. How do you feel about what he/she said?
5. Why did he/she say that?

All threats are not the same.

“I could just kill you for that!” (laughing)
“I’m gonna kick your butt.”
“There’s a bomb in the school.”
“Wait until I get my gun!”
“Let’s really make them pay for what they did.”

Context matters...

Step 2. Transient or Substantive?

- Determine whether the threat is transient or substantive.
- The critical issue is not what the student threatened to do, but whether the student intends to carry out the threat.
- When in doubt, treat a threat as substantive.

Transient versus substantive threats

Substantive Threats

Transient Threats
Prevention of School Violence

Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Alberti Center, October 10, 2013

Transient threats

- Often are rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm.
- At worst, express temporary feelings of anger or frustration.
- Usually can be resolved on the scene or in the office.
- After resolution, the threat no longer exists.
- Usually end with an apology or clarification.

Substantive threats

- Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation.
- There is at least some risk the student will carry out the threat.
- Require that you take protective action, including warning intended victims and parents.
- May be legal violations and require police consultation.
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.

Substantive threats: Factors to consider

- Age of student
- Capability of student to carry out the threat
- Student’s discipline history
- Credibility of student and willingness to acknowledge his or her behavior
- Credibility of witness accounts
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.

Presumptive indicators of substantive threats

- Specific, plausible details. (“I am going to blast Mr. Johnson with my pistol.”)
- Threat has been repeated over time. (“He’s been telling everyone he is going to get you.”)
- Threat reported as a plan (“Wait until you see what happens next Tuesday in the library.”)
- Accomplices or recruitment of accomplices.
- Physical evidence of intent (written plans, lists of victims, bomb materials, etc.)

Case examples: Transient or substantive threat?

1. Two elementary students to throw paper wads pretending to bomb one another.
2. Two middle school students get in a shoving match. One says, “I’m gonna bust you up.”
3. A boy turns in an English essay that describes an especially violent scene from a war.
4. Two students get into a fight. After they are separated, both are sullen and quiet.
5. A student says he is being bullied. He was warned that if he told anyone, they would beat him up.

Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

Step 4. Decide if the substantive threat is serious or very serious.

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.


Step 7. Follow up on action plan.
Step 3. Responses to a transient threat.

- No need to take safety precautions.
- See that threat is resolved through explanation, apology, making amends.
- Provide counseling and education where appropriate.
- Administer discipline if appropriate.

Key Point

Students DO NOT have to be suspended for making a threatening statement.

Many threats can be resolved without suspension.

Zero Tolerance

A policy that mandates a severe punishment that is applied to all violations regardless of the circumstances.

From APA Zero Tolerance Task Force Report, 2006

The Expansion of Zero Tolerance

From No Guns to
- No Toy Guns
- No Nail clippers
- No Plastic utensils
- No Finger-pointing
- No Jokes
- No Drawings
- No Rubber band shooting

No Accidental violations

The disconnect between youth violence and school safety practices

Cub Scout utensil gets boy, 6, school suspension

First-grader brought it to eat his lunch with; now he’s facing reform school

Nervous Officials No Longer Ignoring Threats by Students

Around the Country, Children Are Being Arrested

- 4 Kindergarten students suspended for playing cops and robbers during recess.
- New Jersey district zero tolerance policy resulted in 50 suspensions in 6 weeks, mostly in kindergarten and 3rd grade for verbal threats.
- 8 yr old suspended for pointing a chicken finger at a teacher, saying pow-pow
- 10 yr old expelled for a 1” GI Joe toy gun
- 14 yr old convicted of felony for e-mail threat
- 17 yr old arrested & expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band
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Alberti Center, October 10, 2013

**Suspension Practices**

Suspension is a practice that has more negative than positive effects on students:

- Fall behind in their classes
- Feel alienated and rejected
- Continue to misbehave and be suspended
- Drop out of school
- Juvenile court involvement

The school-to-prison pipeline

**Zero tolerance is not effective. Suspension associated with poorer outcomes for students.**

**Suspension Practices**

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- Feel alienated and rejected
- Continue to misbehave and be suspended
- Drop out of school
- Juvenile court involvement

The school-to-prison pipeline

**Zero tolerance is not needed for student threats of violence. Threat assessment is a more flexible and effective alternative.**

**Transient Case Steps**

**Step 1. Evaluate the threat.**
- Obtain a specific account of the threat by interviewing the student who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses.
- Write down the exact content of the threat and statements by each party.
- Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student’s intentions.

**Step 2. Decide whether the threat is transient or substantive.**
- Consider criteria for transient versus substantive threats.
- Consider student’s age, credibility, and previous discipline history.

**Step 3. Respond to transient threat.**
- Typical responses may include reprimand, parental notification, or other disciplinary action.
- Student may need to make amends and attend mediation or counseling.

**Who made transient threats?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Transient Threats</th>
<th>Substantive Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Transient versus substantive threats**

- Transient Threats 70%
- Substantive Threats 30%
**Prevention of School Violence**
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

**Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.**
Alberti Center, October 10, 2013

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**Step 1. Evaluate Threat.**
- Interview the student who made the threat and any witnesses.
- Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made, the student's intentions, and the victims' interpretations of the threat.

**Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.**
- Does the student express remorse and retract the threat?
- Is the student willing to make amends or resolve the conflict?
- What is the student's history of discipline problems?

**Step 3. Respond to transient threat.**
- Take protective action by notifying parents of perpetrator and victims.
- Identify any other student support or intervention needs.

**Step 4. Decide if substantive threat is serious or very serious.**
- Did this threat involve a weapon, or a threat to kill, rape, or inflict severe injury?

**Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.**
- Take precautions to protect potential victims. May consult with law enforcement.
- Notify intended victim and victim's parents.
- Notify student's parents.
- Discipline student for threat.
- Identify any other student support or intervention needs.
- Follow up to verify that threat has been resolved and interventions in progress.

**Step 4. Serious or very serious substantive threat?**
- Substantive assault threats are classified **serious**. ("I'm gonna beat him up.")
- Substantive threats to kill, rape, or inflict very serious injury are classified **very serious**. ("I'm gonna break his arm.")
- Substantive threats involving a weapon are classified **very serious**.

**Who made substantive threats?**

**Substantive Case Steps**
- Interview the student who made the threat and any witnesses.
- Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made, the student’s intentions, and the victims’ interpretations of the threat.

**Very serious cases are relatively rare**

**Very Serious**

**Substantive Threats**

**Transient Threats**

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434-924-8929
How many student threats?

- 15 (8%) Very serious
- 42 (22%) Serious
- 131 (70%) Transient

188 Total threats reported
16,434 Students


Safety Evaluation conducted by a team.
- Principal leads the team.
- School psychologist or other mental health professional conducts Mental Health Assessment.
- School resource officer consults on legal issues.
- School counselor leads intervention planning.

Very Serious Substantive Threat: Case Example of 8th Grade John

- 8th grade John reported by another student to have a hit list.
- Tells former girlfriend, “I’m gonna get even with you and all your friends by blowing you all away with a shotgun.”
- John denies hit list or threatening statement. Later acknowledges anger at several classmates and at Alice, his former girlfriend.

Very Serious Substantive Threats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat Reported to Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threat is clearly transient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat is substantive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat is serious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat is very serious.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Point

In a threat assessment, we try to determine why a student made a threat, and therefore how we can prevent the threat from being carried out.

Immediate responses to a Very Serious Substantive Threat

- Take precautions to protect potential victims.
- Consult with law enforcement promptly.
- Notify intended victim and victim’s parents.
- Notify student’s parents.
- Begin Mental Health Assessment.
- Determine safety during suspension.
Very Serious Substantive Threat: Case Example of 8th Grade John

- Principal contacted SRO. They inquire about John’s access to firearms.
- Parents summoned to school. John is suspended, referred for evaluation.
- Parents of victims are informed of threat, reassured about school’s actions.

Law Enforcement Investigation of Very Serious Substantive Threats

- Interview suspects and witnesses.
- Conduct searches for weapons and other evidence of planning.
- Serve as a resource for students with fears or information to share.
- Take appropriate protective action.

Mental Health Assessment

- Not a prediction model.
- Identify any mental health needs.
- Identify reasons why threat was made.
- Propose strategies for reducing risk.

Our mental health assessments are not designed to PREDICT violence, but to find ways to PREVENT violence.

Very Serious Substantive Threat: Case Example of 8th Grade John

- John describes feeling rejected by Alice, teased by other boys.
- John admits hit list. Denies intent to hurt anyone. “They was messing with me and I was messing back.”
- John is willing to attend mediation sessions.

Very Serious Substantive Threat: Case Example of 8th Grade John

- John’s mother reports that John was treated for depression, stopped his medication a few months ago.
- John is stressed over parental separation and conflict.
- John does not have history of violence, does not have ready access to firearms.
Mental Health Assessment Report Template

Identifying Information

Give the student’s name, age, grade, school, and other relevant identifying information.

Reason for Referral:

State that this evaluation was requested by the school principal because the student made a threat of violence that was judged to be a very serious, substantive threat. Describe the threat, including the exact statement or threatening behavior, and where and when it took place.

Sources of Information:

Describe or list the sources of information used in this report, including information from the principal, interviews with the student and witnesses, any parent interviews, and any psychological tests or scales administered.

Major Findings:

Describe how the child presented and any important aspects of his or her mental state, including any indications of mental disorder. Identify any stresses, conflicts, or unmet needs that affect the child's functioning or bear on the threat incident.

Review the child's understanding of the threat and its meaning from his or her perspective. Note whether the child has a history of violent or aggressive behavior, and any findings from the assessment that raise concern about the child's potential for violence, such as access to firearms, peer encouragement to fight, drug use, or inadequate home supervision.

Recommendations:

In general, the mental health professional should not be expected to make a definitive statement that a child is or is not dangerous. Instead, the report should identify risk factors and protective factors, and express concern where there appear to be compelling risk factors. More importantly, the report should include recommendations for reducing the risk of violence, and in the nature of these recommendations that should convey the nature and degree of concern about the potential for violence. In all cases, the goal is to reduce the risk of violence rather than predict violence. Recommendations may include a wide range of strategies, but should address both any immediate safety needs to protect potential victims and broader efforts to resolve conflicts or problems that precipitated the threat.

Step 7. Follow up with action plan.

- Determine action plan to reduce risk of violence.
- Identify appropriate interventions for student.
- Schedule follow-up contact with student to assess current risk and update plan.

Note: This form may be photocopied.

Very Serious Substantive Threat: Case Example of 8th Grade John

- John returns to outpatient treatment. Parents recognize impact of their conflict on John.
- Dispute with boys is investigated. John attends mediation sessions with other students. Mutual apologies are given.
- John meets with SRO, agrees to report further problems to him. School counselor establishes relationship.

Typical Threat 1

- An angry student says “I’m gonna kill you” to a classmate.
- What do you do?
Typical Threat 1
- On interview, the student says he has no plans to harm the classmate and that he just lost his temper. He offers to apologize.
- What kind of threat?

Typical Threat 2
- A student tells a friend that he is going to beat up Joe in the back parking lot after school today. The friend tells you.
- What do you do?

Typical Threat 2
- On interview, the student denies making such a statement. He says that what he does after school is his own business.
- What kind of threat?

Typical Threat 3
- A student sends an email threatening to "blow away the preps" at school. When interviewed, the boy says he has a right to free speech. He has a history of discipline problems and students say they are worried.
- This threat is **substantive** because it cannot be easily resolved. It is **very serious** because it involves a threat to kill.
- What kind of threat?
- What do you do?

Research on Threat Assessment
1. Initial field-test study
2. Memphis field test
3. High school climate study
4. High school suspension study
5. Randomized controlled trial
Prevention of School Violence
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

What did the students threaten to do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hit/Beat Up</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoot</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut/Stab</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Bomb</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 188 cases

How did schools respond to 188 threats?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrest</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expel</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspend</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Follow-up interviews on student threats

- Interviews conducted with school principals at end of school year and again the following fall.
- Follow-up time periods averaged 148 days until end of school year.
- Four students did not return to school after the threat, 17 left within 30 days after threat.

Memphis Field-Trial

Memphis Public Schools resolved 209 threats in 194 schools, including 110 threats to kill, shoot, or stab.
- 5 permanent expulsions, 3 incarcerations
- Office referrals declined >50%
- No reports of any threats carried out

Behavioral Disorders, 2008
Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

- 95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model
- 131 using locally developed models
- 54 not using threat assessment

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009

Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

Findings for Virginia Model Schools
- Less bullying and other victimization
- Greater student willingness to seek help
- Perceive adults as more caring and fair
- Fewer long-term suspensions

Controlled for school size, poverty, minority %, school security measures, and neighborhood violent crime.

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009

Virginia High School Climate Study

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- Less bullying and other victimization
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School Psychology Quarterly, 2009
Prevention of School Violence
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

High School Discipline Study

• Compared 23 high schools implementing threat assessment with 26 control high schools (no threat assessment).
• Used school records of suspensions and discipline infractions for baseline year prior to training and follow-up year after training.

In press, NASSP Bulletin

Randomized Controlled Trial

• 40 schools (K-12)
• Randomly assigned
• 1 year follow-up
• 201 students

Students in threat assessment schools...
• Received more counseling
• More parent involvement
• Fewer long-term suspensions
• Fewer alternative placements

Logistic regression odds ratios: 3.98, 2.57, .35, and .13

Outcome Odds for Students in Threat Assessment versus Control Schools

Odds ratios control for effects of student gender, race, grade, and threat severity. Table shows how likely an outcome would be for a student attending a school with threat assessment in comparison to a control school without threat assessment.
Prevention of School Violence
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

2013 NREPP Listing

Virginia Public Schools
133 school divisions
2,002 public schools
1.2 million students

Virginia Schools Using Virginia Guidelines
Source: UVA training records and Safety Audit Survey records

Association of Threat Assessment with Suspensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
<th>LTS</th>
<th>STS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Used Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines</td>
<td>19% fewer</td>
<td>8% fewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Years Using TA Associated with Suspensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
<th>LTS</th>
<th>STS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One year increase in number of years using UVA TA (1-5)</td>
<td>17% fewer</td>
<td>5% fewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Training Workshops

- California
- Colorado
- Delaware
- Florida
- Georgia
- Indiana
- Kansas
- Maryland
- Ohio
- South Carolina
- Tennessee
- Vermont
- Washington
- Wisconsin

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Prevention of School Violence
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.
Alberti Center, October 10, 2013

Intensive Interventions
- Students with severe mental health problems
  - Intensive monitoring and supervision
  - Psychotropic medication
  - Community-based treatment
  - Alternative school placement
  - Special education evaluation and services

At-Risk Students
- Students with some problem behaviors
  - Social skills groups
  - Short-term counseling
  - After-school and other school programs
  - Tutoring and other academic support
  - Special education evaluation and services

Schoolwide Prevention
- All students
  - Clear and consistent discipline
  - Positive behavior support system
  - School security program
  - Programs for bullying and teasing
  - Character development curriculum
  - Conflict resolution for peer disputes

Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach

http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu