

Threat Assessment

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Students' motives for violent and aggressive behavior are sometimes difficult to understand. It is even more challenging to assess and deter any potential threats students might make to their peers or staff members while in school. The tragic Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999, sparked a nation-wide growing concern for school safety and student mental health. A few months following the shooting, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) hosted a national conference to gather experts in law enforcement, education, and mental health to discuss the topic of school shootings. With the help of experts, the FBI decided that the best method of assessing school shootings and other school threats was to use a threat assessment approach.

While the risk of very serious threats, such as a shooting, is low in any given school, threats of violence and aggressive behavior are potential risks for all schools and should be taken seriously. To aid in the challenge of assessing and preventing student threats at school, schools should develop their own individualized policies and procedures for responding to and assessing threats and violent student behavior (O'Toole, n.d.). This Brief discusses what a threat is, and how it can be assessed, as well as provides an overview of the current research on threat assessment and how it can be implemented in the schools. This Brief is not meant to be a thorough literature review of threat assessment; rather, it is intended to briefly highlight the research and provide practical information for implementation in schools.

What is Threat?

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP; 2014), a threat includes spoken, written, electronic, or behavioral communication, which is used with the intent to physically injure or harm another person. Threats can be direct or indirect, meaning that they can be communicated to the victim directly or through a third party (OJJDP, 2014). There are three types of threats, which include: transient threats, substantive threats, and threats of undetermined seriousness. Transient threats are non-serious threats that typically occur impulsively and can be resolved through mediation, apology, or discipline (OJJDP, 2014). Substantive threats (e.g., bullying assault, serious harm, sexual assault, threat to kill someone) have sustained, serious intent to harm someone. The third type is the undetermined threat, which is when a threat is unclear and the seriousness is unknown. When a threat is deemed unknown, it should be considered substantive until a status is determined (OJJDP, 2014).

What is Threat Assessment?

Threat assessment is a process in which school administration and faculty use strategies to investigate, evaluate, and determine if a threat is credible, serious, and if it could be successfully completed (Jimerson, Brock, Greif, & Cowan, 2004; OJJDP, 2014). Threat assessment is not a disciplinary process, a therapeutic process, or a suicide assessment;



however, it may lead to further assessment and evaluation in these areas. The purpose of threat assessment is not only to assess threat, but also to help identify interventions that prevent school violence. The ultimate goal of threat assessment is to reduce the prevalence and risk of school violence (Cornell & Williams, 2012).

School Violence

There is no one single factor that leads to school violence. In fact, a multitude of factors (e.g., home environment, school environment, community environment, mental health, media, access to weapons, lack of mental health services) contribute to a person becoming violent (Jimerson et al., 2004). In order to select an appropriate prevention and intervention plan, it is important for educators to know the prevalence and common causes of violence in their specific buildings (Jimerson et al., 2004). The FBI and Secret Service have found that school violence is not an epidemic and that there is no single profile of a violent offender. Researchers have found that school shooters tend to have

social difficulties, but that is not to say that they are always loners or outsiders (Jimerson et al., 2004). Another preceding variable to school violence is bullying, which can play a key role in violence and can sometimes be a predictor of an attack (Jimerson et al., 2004). Violent threats are typically planned, and attackers usually disclose their plan to a trusted individual. For this reason, it is crucial that threats always be taken seriously and reported immediately.

Research on Threat Assessment

As this document was being prepared, a literature search of “threat assessment” using Academic Search Premier, eBook Collection, EBSCOhost, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO produced 1,678 results. Using the terms “threat assessment” and “school” produced 338 results. Research does not indicate one specific model of threat assessment that schools should use; however, experts (i.e., professionals in school crisis management, mental health, and public safety) agree on several similar components that produce effective threat assessment (Jimerson et al., 2004). Those components include:

- knowledge in the areas of school violence;
- threat assessment policies, procedures, and protocols;
- threat assessment implementation.

Once educators have a grasp on these core components, they will be better equipped to assess a threat and prevent school violence. Also, schools will be better prepared to establish an appropriate threat assessment protocol for their specific school.

Outcomes. The purpose of the threat assessment approach is to examine the different variables or elements that lead to acts of violence. To best predict a threat, threat assessment teams use a variety of sources to predict whether or not a threat might occur. In recent years, researchers have focused on evaluating the outcomes of threat assessment approaches. In one specific study, researchers found that the Virginia Guidelines was

associated with lower long-term suspension rates, student reports of fairer discipline, lower levels of student aggression, and teachers feeling safe in school (Nekvasil & Dewey, 2015). Strong and Cornell (2008) also found that a threat assessment approach is feasible, practical, and produces encouraging outcomes; however, overall, researchers agree that more detailed research is needed in the area of threat assessment and students' response to it as well as how well the procedures are carried out. Researchers also conclude that more randomized, controlled studies need to be conducted on the threat assessment process and how it affects students, schools, and communities (Cornell & Allen, 2011; Strong & Cornell, 2008).

Threat Assessment Policies, Procedures, & Protocols

The threat assessment approach is appropriate to be used by mental health professionals, school administrators, law enforcement professionals, and other individuals who are responsible for sustaining school safety (Reddy, Borum, Berglund, Vossekuil, & Fein, 2001).

In order to conduct threat assessments, procedures and protocols must be created. Districts should establish a district-wide policy and procedures for how to respond to threats of school violence. In the policy, a few key things must be clarified. In addition to the procedures that will be implemented, schools must have a clear understanding of who (i.e., educators, law enforcement) plays a role in threat assessment and what their responsibilities are.

Establishing a threat assessment team.

Virtually every discussion of threat assessment in schools requires that a team be established to evaluate threats. It is important that threat assessment teams are school-based so that the team can quickly assess and intervene when necessary (Cornell & Williams, 2012). If schools are hesitant or unable to create a new team, a preexisting team can assume the responsibility for threat assessment. This could include a

pre-existing crisis team, a school safety team, or even a PBIS implementation team based on the specific circumstances and resources available at that school. Threat assessment teams may include the principal and/or a school designee, school or district security officer, school psychologist or social worker, school counselor, and school resource officer (Cornell & Williams, 2012; OJJDP, 2014). Some threat assessment team members should be from the school, but some of the members can come from the community as well. However configured, the team must be ready to carry out the threat assessment team responsibilities.

Training for the team. School district policy should specify the school's threat assessment team training requirements. Training can be completed through the Secret Service (Jimerson, Brock, & Cowan, 2005), or other sources.

Team procedures. Typically, districts outline basic recommended procedures that schools should follow in response to threats of school violence. The school (i.e., threat assessment team) is responsible for ensuring that the procedures align with the district's outline. The following procedural protocols are suggested:

- evaluate and interview the potential offender,
- notify and work with parents or caregivers,
- interview with other students and staff,
- establish the threshold of concern for initiating a threat assessment,
- determine the level of intervention,
- consult with professionals (e.g., mental health, social service, law enforcement),
- provide follow-up observation and services, and
- respond to media (Jimerson et al., 2004).

Threat Assessment Implementation

One method that might seem logical is the profiling approach, which identifies students that have characteristics similar to those who have made a serious threat at school in the past. However, the FBI advised against using this approach because studies show that many

students are falsely profiled as potentially violent (Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000), as well as, has a great potential for bias, can stigmatize students, and can deprive them of civil liberties (Reddy et al., 2001). Also, the FBI pointed out that there is no set of characteristics that offer sufficient specificity for practical use of profiling potentially violent students.

Rather, the FBI specifically recommends the threat assessment approach to assessing school violence and aggressive acts. When assessing a threat, the threat assessment team might consider using Cornell and Sheras (2006) seven-step decision guidelines. These guidelines can help schools determine if a comprehensive threat assessment should be conducted. At

Steps in Student Threat Assessment (Cornell & Sheras, 2006)	
Step 1.	<p>Evaluate the threat. The principal investigates a reported threat by interviewing the student who made the threat and any witnesses to the threat. The principal considers the context and meaning of the threat, which may be more important than the literal content of the threat.</p>
Step 2.	<p>Decide whether the threat is transient or substantive. A transient threat is not a serious threat and can be easily resolved, but a substantive threat raises concern of potential injury to others. For transient threats, go to step three and for substantive threats skip to step four.</p>
Step 3.	<p>Respond to a <u>transient</u> threat. If the threat is transient, the principal may respond with a reprimand, parental notification, or other actions that are appropriate for the severity and chronicity of the situation. The incident is resolved and no further action is needed.</p>
Step 4.	<p>If the threat is <u>substantive</u>, decide whether it is serious or very serious. If a threat is substantive, the principal must decide how serious the threat is and take appropriate action to protect potential victims. A threat to hit, assault, or beat up someone is serious, whereas a threat to kill, rape, use a weapon, or severely injure someone is considered very serious. For serious threats, go to step five and for very serious threats, skip to step six.</p>
Step 5.	<p>Respond to a <u>serious substantive</u> threat. Serious substantive threats require protective action to prevent violence, including notification of potential victims and other actions to address the conflict or problem that generated the threat. The response to serious threats is completed at this step.</p>
Step 6.	<p>Respond to a <u>very serious</u> substantive threat. Very serious threats require immediate protective action, including contact with law enforcement, followed by a comprehensive safety evaluation. The student is suspended* from school pending completion of a safety evaluation, which includes a mental health assessment following a prescribed protocol.</p>
Step 7.	<p>Implement a safety plan. The threat assessment team develops and implements an action plan that is designed to protect potential victims while still meeting the perpetrating student's educational needs. The plan includes provision for monitoring the student and revising the plan as needed.</p>

times, students make inappropriate statements and rhetorical remarks that might be a joke or have minimal risk. For this reason, the following guidelines were created to help schools determine if issues can be quickly and easily resolved or if an extensive evaluation needs to occur (Cornell & Williams, 2012). In the easiest and clearest scenario, a case can be resolved within an hour or less. When cases are more complex and require extensive assessment, interviews, meetings, outside expertise, and formation of safety plans, the threat assessment process can be extended over several days (Cornell & Williams, 2012).

What do we know about the effectiveness of Threat Assessment Strategies?

Schools that use these threat assessment guidelines have reported numerous benefits. Students reported less bullying in the past 30 days when compared to students in schools that do not use threat assessment guidelines. Also, students reported a more positive school climate when compared to students that belong to a school that does not use threat assessment guidelines. Additionally, schools that used the guidelines reported less long-term suspensions when compared to other schools that do not use the threat assessment approach (Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009).

Conclusion

Understanding why students behave aggressively and violently can be a challenge. Even more challenging is trying to prevent aggressive and violent student behavior. Although serious violent acts by students, such as a shooting, are rare, it is still vital to be able to assess, evaluate, and deter potential threats in schools. Researchers suggest that schools create policies and procedures to evaluate and assess threats and violent student behavior. Also, researchers recommend that schools utilize the threat assessment approach to help facilitate the process of evaluating and assessing threats (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). Even though there has not been extensive research to support its use, threat assessment procedures hold promise of preventing school violence.



Resources

A Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment. Dewey G. Cornell, Ph.D.:

The Youth Violence Project of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia sought to determine how the threat assessment approach used in law enforcement could be adapted for schools. This document gives an overview of the Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment as well its seven-step decision making tree.

<http://www.doe.k12.de.us/cms/lib09/DE01922744/Centricity/Domain/156/virginia-model.pdf>

Early Warning Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools (August 1998):

“This guide presents a brief summary of the research on violence prevention and intervention and crisis response in schools. It tells school communities [what to look for and what to do].” Sections include: characteristics of safe and responsive schools, early warning signs, getting help for troubled children, developing a prevention and response plan, and responding to crisis.

<http://cecp.air.org/guide/guide.pdf>

Making Schools Safer. U.S Department of Homeland Security. Unites States Secret Service (May 2013):

The U.S. Secret Service provides a brief overview of challenges, considerations, and strategies that can be used to creating a positive school climate and promoting school safety.

http://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/ntac_saferschoolsmay2013.pdf

Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide: Implementing Early Warning, Timely Response Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institutes for Research, the National Association for School Psychologists, U.S. Department of Education (April 2000):

A follow up to the to the Early Warning Guide. Provides information on “how to” develop school safety plans. This guide provides practical steps for schools to design and implement schools safety plans. It stresses, prevention, early intervention, and intensive services to appropriately address school safety.

http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/actguide/action_guide.pdf

Threat Assessment in Schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates. United Sates Secret Service and United States Department of Education (July 2004):

United Sates Secret Service and United States Department of Education released this document as a comprehensive guide to school safety threat assessment as part of their Safe Schools Initiative. “The guide includes information on how to implement a threat assessment process, how to conduct a threat assessment and how to mange a life-threatening situation”.

<https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf>

The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States. United Sates Secret Service and United States Department of Education (July 2004):

“This document, the Safe School Initiative’s final report, details how [these] two agencies studied school-based attacks and what we found. [...] the findings of the Safe School Initiative do suggest that some future attacks may be preventable if those responsible for safety in schools know what questions to ask and where to uncover information that may help with efforts to intervene before a school attack can occur.”

<https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf>

Video. After Newtown: The Path to Violence.

“Psychologists, working with law enforcement officers, have devised tools to prevent violent attacks. The Path to Violence details a powerfully effective Secret Service program – the Safe School Initiative – that’s helped schools detect problem behavior.”

<http://video.pbs.org/video/2336803730/>

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