

# Understanding and Preventing School Violence

## Introduction

Over the past few years there have been several incidents of school violence across the United States, including Littleton, CO, where 15 were killed and 23 injured and Nickel Mine, PA, where a 32-year old male shot 10 girls, ages 6 to 13, in a one-classroom rural Amish school. The most recent tragedy in Blacksburg, VA, where two separate attacks on April 16, 2007, on the campus of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, where 61 people were shot resulting in 32 deaths, is yet another example of a phenomenon that has parents, administrators, law enforcement officials, and students wondering “Why?” and “What can be done about it?” Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to either of these questions.

However, taking into account even the most violent occurrences, most schools are safe. Fewer than 1% of all violent deaths of children occur on school grounds. Indeed, a child is far more likely to be killed in the community or at home than at school, but no school is immune.

The violent incidents in recent years serve as a dramatic wake-up call to the fact that guns *do* come to school, and some students (or non-students) *will* use them to kill. One after another, communities across the country have been forced to face the fact that violence can happen in their schools. While these incidents trouble us deeply, they should not stop us from acting to help prevent school violence of any kind.

Prevention and early intervention efforts can work. There is ample documentation that prevention and early intervention efforts can reduce violence and other troubling behaviors in schools. Research-based practices can help school communities recognize the warning signs early, so that troubled children can get the help they need before it is too late. In fact, research suggests that some of the most promising prevention and intervention strategies involve the entire community – administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members – working together to form positive relationships with all children.

If we can understand 1) what leads to violence and 2) the types of support proved to be effective in helping to prevent violence and other troubling behaviors, we *can* help make our schools safer.

LOSS CONTROL TIPS

## Characteristics of a Safe School

Effective prevention, intervention, and crisis response strategies generally operate best in school communities that do the following:

- *Focus on academic achievement.* Effective schools convey the attitude that all children can achieve academically and behave appropriately, while at the same time appreciating individual differences.
  - *Involve families in meaningful ways.* Students whose families are involved in their growth – both inside and outside of school – are more likely to experience school success and less likely to become involved in antisocial activities.
  - *Develop links to the community.* Everyone must be committed to improving schools. Schools that have close ties to families, support services, community law enforcement, the faith-based community, and the community at large can benefit from many valuable resources.
  - *Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff.* Research shows that a positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when it is needed is one of the most critical factors in preventing student violence.
  - *Discuss safety issues openly.* Schools can help reduce the risk of violence by teaching children about the dangers of firearms, as well as teaching and modeling appropriate strategies for dealing with feelings, expressing anger in appropriate ways, and resolving conflicts.
  - *Treat students with equal respect.* Students who have been treated unfairly, because of ethnicity, gender, race, social class, etc., may become scapegoats and/or targets of violence. In some cases, victims may react in aggressive or violent ways.
  - *Create ways for students to share their concerns.* Schools should consider creating ways for students to safely report troubling behaviors that may lead to dangerous situations. Schools must protect students who report potential school violence.
  - *Help children feel safe expressing their feelings.* It is very important that children feel safe when they express their needs, fears, and anxieties to school staff. Feelings of isolation, rejection, and disappointment are more likely to increase the probability of acting-out behaviors.
  - *Have a system for referring children who are suspected of being abused or neglected.* Work with your attorney to consider the implementation of an appropriate referral system that complies with any applicable federal and state guidelines.
- *Offer extended day programs for children.* School-based programs before, and after, school, can be effective in reducing violence.
  - *Promote good citizenship and character.* In addition to their academic mission, schools must help students become good citizens. Schools should reinforce and promote the positive values shared by their local communities, such as honesty, kindness, responsibility, and respect for others.
  - *Identify problems and assess progress toward solutions.* Safe schools continually assess their performance by identifying problems and collecting information about their progress toward solutions. Moreover, effective schools share this information with students, families, and the community at large.
  - *Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace.* Young people need assistance in planning their future and in developing skills that will result in success. Schools can provide students with community service opportunities, work-study programs, and apprenticeships that help connect them to caring adults in the community.

## Security Controls

Each school should consider the development of a written school security plan. The plan should consider the implementation of the following elements:

- *Control access.* Ensure that there is only one unlocked entrance door to each building. (this is usually the main entrance) Keep other doors locked. Remember, though, that door locks must permit the evacuation of the building should it become necessary. Consider installing “panic” hardware. Post signs in the parking lot, grounds areas, and in the building to direct visitors to the office.
- *Require visitor sign-in and escort.* Require visitors to sign in and out on a log. Review the log at the end of each day. Provide visitors with some means of identification (for example, a badge, tag, etc.) Escort visitors to and from their destinations. Do not allow visitors to roam the building unescorted.
- *Report strangers.* Staff and students should report (to the administration manager or security personnel) all unaccompanied strangers who lack the appropriate means of identification utilized for authorized visitors.
- *Install alarms.* In addition to fire alarms and sprinkler alarms, schools should consider a central station security alarm. The security alarm should have full perimeter protection as well as interior motion detection. Consider

silent “panic” alarms for offices or out-of-the way areas. Alarms may be monitored by a qualified alarm company, by local law enforcement, or by the 911 emergency system.

- *Use metal detectors.* Some schools have metal detectors or x-ray units through which students must pass every day. Other schools use hand-held metal detectors on a random basis. Depending on your particular situation, your school and community will have to carefully consider whether to implement the use of any of these devices.
- *Employ on-site security staff.* This can be a privately contracted security staff on duty during school hours or part time. The local police department can provide different levels of security; from regular patrols that cruise the schools at different times during the day and night, to part time officers on the premises, to full time officers assigned to the school. Ensure that officers or security personnel assigned to schools are properly supervised and trained to handle the assignment. Consider requiring training in school psychology, conflict resolution, state and federal law concerning schools and child abuse or neglect, and recognition of the warning signs for violence.

## Early Warning Signs

In many cases of violence to self and others, young people exhibit early warning signs: certain behavioral and emotional signs that, when viewed in context, can signal a troubled child. However, early warning signs are just that: indicators that a student may need help. The presence of such signs may or may not indicate a serious problem. They do not necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward anyone. In addition, there is a real danger that early warning signs may be misinterpreted. Educators and parents, and in some cases, students, can help ensure that the early warning signs are not misinterpreted by applying several significant principles to better understand them:

- *Do no harm.* Do not use the presence of early warning signs as a rationale to exclude, isolate, or punish a child.
- *Understand violence and aggression within a context.* Violence is contextual. Violence and aggressive behavior as an expression of emotion may have many antecedent factors. Certain environments or situations can trigger a violent action. Stress can be a factor.
- *Do not tolerate stereotypes.* Stereotypes can interfere with, and even harm, the school community’s ability to identify and help children. In fact, stereotypes such as

race, socio-economic status, physical appearance, etc., can unfairly harm children, especially when the school community acts upon them.

- *View warning signs within a developmental context.* Children and youth at different levels of development have varying social and emotional capabilities that may be expressed differently at different age levels.
- *Understand that troubled children typically exhibit multiple warning signs.* It is common for troubled children to exhibit multiple signs. Thus, it is important not to over-react to single signs, words, or actions.

Some of the *early warning signs* include the following:

- Social withdrawal
- Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone
- Excessive feelings of rejection
- Having been a victim of violence
- Feelings of being picked on and persecuted
- Low interest in school and poor academic performance
- Expressions of violence in writings and drawings
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors
- History of disciplinary problems
- Past history of violent and aggressive behavior
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- Drug use and alcohol use
- Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms
- Serious threats of violence

## Imminent Warning Signs

In contrast to early warning signs (which may indicate that a student needs help), *imminent warning signs* indicate that a student may be very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to him or her self or others. *Imminent warning signs generally require an immediate response.*

Imminent warning signs may include the following:

- Serious physical fighting with peers or family members
- Severe destruction of property
- Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons
- Detailed threats of lethal violence
- Possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons
- Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide

## Responding to Warning Signs

When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, the safety of everyone involved must always be the first and foremost consideration. *Take action immediately.* School authorities, and possibly law enforcement officers, should take action immediately when a child:

- Has presented a detailed plan (time, place, method) to harm or kill others, particularly if the child has a history of aggression or has tried to carry out threats in the past.
- Is carrying a weapon, particularly a firearm, or has threatened to use one.

In situations where students present other threatening behaviors, inform parents of the concerns immediately. School communities may have the responsibility to seek assistance from appropriate agencies, such as child and family services and community mental health.

## Developing a Plan

Consider the creation of a violence prevention and response plan and form a team that works to implement it. A sound violence prevention and response plan should reflect the common and unique needs of educators, students, families, and the greater community. An effective written plan often includes:

- Descriptions of the early warning signs of potentially violent behavior and procedures for identifying children who exhibit these signs.
- Descriptions of effective prevention practices the school community has undertaken to build a foundation that is responsive to all children and which enhances the effectiveness of interventions.
- Descriptions of intervention strategies the school community can use to help troubled children. These include early interventions for students who are at risk of behavioral problems, and more intensive, individualized interventions and resources for students who have severe behavioral problems or mental health needs.
- A crisis intervention plan that includes immediate responses for imminent warning signs and violent behavior, as well as a contingency plan to be used in the aftermath of a tragedy. The plan must be consistent with federal, state, and local laws. It also should have the support of families and the local school board. The plan should include provisions for good community communications, training, and monitoring and assessment of the violence prevention efforts.

The core prevention and response team should include the following:

- Building administrator
- General/special education teachers
- Parents
- Pupil support services representative (school psychologist, social worker, or counselor)
- School resource officer
- Safe and drug-free schools program coordinator

This list may include many others, such as community leaders, law enforcement personnel, attorneys and judges, clergy, and media representatives.

Because violence can happen any time and anywhere, schools should be well-prepared for any potential crisis or violent act. Crisis response is an important component of a violence prevention and response plan, especially these two components:

***Intervening during the crisis to ensure safety.*** Some situations – such as the presence of weapons, bomb threats or explosions, fights, natural disasters, accidents, and suicides – call for immediate, planned action as well as long-term post-crisis intervention. Thus, the crisis response segment of the plan may contemplate contingency provisions such as:

- *Evacuation procedures* and other procedures to protect students and staff from harm. It is critical that schools identify safe areas to where students and staff should go in a crisis. It is also important that schools conduct evacuation drills so that they can evacuate the premises in an orderly manner.
- *An effective communication system.* Designate roles and responsibilities to specific people to prevent confusion.
- *A process for securing immediate external support* from law enforcement officials and other appropriate community agencies.

***Responding in the aftermath of a crisis.*** Members of the crisis team should understand how people react to stress. They should also understand how different individuals might respond to death and loss, taking into account developmental variability, religious beliefs, and cultural values. Schools that have experienced tragedy have often included the following provisions in their response plans.

- *Help parents understand children's reaction to violence.* In the aftermath of tragedy, children may experience unrealistic fears of the future, have difficulty sleeping, becoming physically ill, and be easily distracted.
- *Help teachers and other staff deal with their reactions to the crisis.* Debriefing and grief counseling is just as important for adults as it is for students.
- *Help students and faculty adjust after the crisis.* Provide both short-term and long-term mental health counseling following a crisis.
- *Help victims and family members of victims re-enter the school environment.* Often, school friends need guidance on how to act. The school community should work with students and parents to design a plan that makes it easier for victims and their classmates to adjust.
- *Help students and teachers address the return of a previously removed student to the school community.* Whether the student is returning from a juvenile detention facility or a mental health facility, schools need to coordinate with staff from that facility to make the transition as smooth as possible.

## Conclusion

Violence can occur at any time and any place, including schools. Although violence cannot be completely prevented, research and experience indicate there are effective ways to lower the risk. Schools that develop a specific focus, devise and implement appropriate security systems, understand and train their staff to recognize and deal with the early warning signs and imminent warning signs, and develop and implement prevention and response plans are often in a better position to handle situations before they develop into a crisis or after one occurs.

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This paper provides only general information and should not be considered as a complete resource. For more detailed information, consult *Early Warning, Timely Response, A Guide to Safe Schools*, produced by the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institutes for Research.

## Reference

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