

Using Early Warning Signs

Early Warning Signs¹

- Excessive feelings of rejection
- Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone
- Being a victim of violence
- Impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, bullying
- Affiliation with gangs
- Social withdrawal (e.g., gradual or complete social withdrawal)
- Feelings of being picked on and persecuted (e.g., being teased, bullied, ridiculed)
- Low school interest and poor academic performance (e.g., feelings of frustration, unworthiness, chastisement, and denigration)
- Expression of violence in writings and drawings (e.g., overrepresentation of violence in writings and drawings directed at specific individuals over time)
- Uncontrolled anger (e.g., expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants)
- Serious threats of violence (e.g., detailed and specific threats to use violence)

Imminent Warning Signs

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

¹From Dwyer, Osher & Warger

Resources

U.S. Department of Education
Special Education & Rehabilitative Services
Room 3131 Mary E. Switzer Building
Washington, D.C. 20202-2524
Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html>

American Psychological Association
750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4242
(800) 374-2721; (202) 336-5500
Warning Signs of Teen Violence
<http://helping.apa.org/warningsigns>

National School Safety Center
141 Duesenberg Drive, Suite 11
Westlake Village, CA 91362
(805) 373-9977
<http://www.nssc1.org/>

Recent incidents of multiple victim school shootings have highlighted the critical importance of procedures for detecting early warning signs of violence, and providing assistance to students who may be at-risk for violence. In an era where threats of violence among students have become almost commonplace, teachers and administrators need to be aware of the early warning signs of violence. Many schools have begun to consider procedures that will enable staff to identify students at risk and to provide support for students who may be at risk for violence or disruption.

Overview

Accounts of recent multiple shooting incidences have indicated that the perpetrators exhibited a number of warning signs that were to some extent overlooked. Before the shooting at Columbine High School, Harris and Klebold made a class video acting out much of the violence they would perpetrate only a few weeks later. Both research and analyses of recent school shootings have identified characteristics that may indicate that a student is at risk for violence.¹ (See insert for list of warning signs.) Some of these warning signs include acting-out and disruptive behaviors. Additionally, these signs identify students who are socially withdrawn, isolated and rejected, or have been picked on, bullied, or persecuted. When viewed in context, these signs can signal that a child is troubled and can provide a starting point for addressing the child's needs.

It is critical, however, that any system of identifying students be used with caution. Warning signs should not be used as a checklist for labeling, stereotyping, or isolating children. Rather, they should be viewed within context and used to establish a pattern. This information can in turn be used as a guide for providing appropriate support and intervention.

Some schools have found school-wide screening measures helpful in the early identification of students at risk for disruptive behavior and violence. Commercially available measures such as the Systemic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD) and the Early Screening Project (ESP) use a variety of teacher rankings, ratings, and direct observations to identify students with emotional and behavioral needs who may need intervention or support.²

In response to threats of violence directed at students, staff, and facilities, schools need clear policies and procedures that outline staff roles and actions to be taken when a threat is made. Although building- or district-specific policies will vary, they should at the very least include the following components:

Reporting of threats by students: Students need to understand that it is in their best interest to report threats to adults. Students may need some guidance and discussion concerning what constitutes a reportable threat or warning sign, and must be assured they will be protected from retribution for their report.

Taking threats seriously: It is important that all reports are passed along to school administration, and where appropriate, local law enforcement.

Pre-planned responses: Good policies are well planned, written, and communicated to all staff in advance, to avoid panic in a threat situation.

Relationships with local law enforcement and mental health agencies: Some threats, especially those involving possession of a firearm, require contact with local law enforcement officials. Well-established lines of communication with local police

departments and mental health agencies regarding threats are extremely important.

What We Know

There is much we still need to learn about effective systems to identify students at risk for violence. We know that children at-risk for violence engage in visible minor behavior problems, such as aggression and poor school attitude, before progressing to the more violent acts.³ School-wide screening systems appear to provide valid and reliable information about at-risk students and can assist in developing interventions for identified students. Teachers and service professionals have found such approaches both time- and cost-efficient; the Early Screening Project, for instance, can be completed in about 1½ hours.

More importantly, training in and use of procedures for handling threats have already begun to avert tragedy and preserve school safety. In Cleveland, a plot to stage a Columbine-like event was foiled when a student asked to join the plot informed her mother, who called the high school principal. By the next day, school and city leaders and police officials had mobilized, closed the school for one day, and taken action against the plotters. Similar recent incidents in Wisconsin and Michigan highlight the critical importance of effective plans for reporting threats.

Making It Work

When warning signs are detected, effective procedures encourage an interpretation that provides support to students, rather than labeling them. The use of existing procedures and a school team can assist in assessing and responding to the needs of the students.

Do No Harm. Although increased awareness of risk factors can be helpful to schools and families, warning signs can be harmful if not used with caution. Warning signs should not be used to punish, exclude, label, or stereotype students, but rather to help at-risk students before they engage in violent behavior. Schools and families should be careful not to overreact to a single sign. Students at-risk for serious aggression or violence typically exhibit more than one warning sign. Early warning signs are most helpful if interpreted as part of a serious pattern that may worsen over time. Finally, schools and families should also understand warning signs within an appropriate developmental context and with common sense. What is a warning sign at one grade level may be more typical of students at another age.¹

Use Existing Data. Some schools have begun to consider using school disciplinary code violations as an index to better identify and support students in need of behavioral or emotional assistance. In this type of system, a certain number or type of disciplinary infractions might be considered a flag that would

trigger a team consultation or the development of an individual plan. One major advantage of this approach is that it uses data already available at most schools. In addition, the use of documented incidents may put schools and school teams on firmer legal footing.⁴

Appropriate Responses. When warning signs or threats are detected, team-based procedures should be in place to assess the seriousness of those signs or threats and to preserve the safety of students and staff. The team should include at the very least an administrator, a teacher, and a mental health professional such as a school psychologist. The team can evaluate the seriousness of behavioral or emotional warning signs through interviews with the student, consultation with teachers, staff, parents, and students who know the child, and standardized measures of emotional and behavioral functioning. The team can also assist in identifying and monitoring interventions for students who are at risk, and assist in the coordination of services.⁵

Conclusion

In summary, it is critical that schools educate administrators, teachers, and parents in recognizing early warning signs and interpreting those signs in a way that will help rather than harm students. Additionally, school-wide systems, such as school-wide screening or tracking disciplinary infractions, may provide efficient and reliable methods of early identification. Once students are identified, team-based procedures assist in assessing and responding to the needs of the student. Lastly, in the current unsettled climate, schools need established procedures in place that allow for the reporting and handling of threats and quick action to preserve school safety. These should include, at a minimum, planned procedures for reporting threats and ensuring that they are taken seriously, and effective lines of communication with law enforcement and mental health agencies.

— Russell Skiba and Kimberly Boone

References

- ¹Dwyer, K., Osher, D., & Warger, C. (1998). *Early warning, timely response: A guide to safe schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- ²Feil, E. G., Severson, H. H., & Walker, H. M. (1998). Screening for emotional and behavioral delays: The Early Screening Project. *Journal of Early Intervention, 21*, 252-266.
- Walker, H. M., Severson, H. H., Nicholson, F., Kehle, T., Jenson, W. R., & Clark, E. (1994). Replication of the systemic screening for behavior disorders (SSBD) procedure for the identification of at-risk children. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 2*, 66-77.
- ³Loeber, R. (1998). *Serious and violent offenders (Juvenile Justice Bulletin)*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- ⁴James, B. (1999, December). *School safety and the law*. Presented at the Orientation Meeting of the Indiana School Safety Specialist Academy, Indianapolis, IN. In his comments, Dr. James noted that use of "known offender" status will likely be a more defensible approach for early identification.
- ⁵Dwyer, K.P., Osher, D., & Hoffman, C.C. (In press). Creating responsive school communities: The context of *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*. *Exceptional Children* (Spring issue).

About the Safe & Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing and studying prevention-based approaches to school safety. The Project is currently working with schools in districts in Indiana and Nebraska to integrate best-practice strategies in school violence prevention into comprehensive school-based plans for deterring school disruption and violence.

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