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**School Practitioner  
Listserv**

**A Weekly Community of Practice Network  
for Sharing and Interchange**



**October 6, 2014**

**Parent Request**

**>What to do when a student at my child's school makes threatening comments?**

**Input from a Colleague**

**>Assessing a threat**

**Featured Center Resource**

**>Info on grant opportunities for school/district/community**

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**Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested.  
The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.**

**For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of  
the weekly exchange, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

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## **P**arent Request

### **What to do when a student at my child's school makes threatening comments?**

"A 10 year old boy at my child's school has been talking to other kids at recess and lunch saying things to them such as 'I want to kill all the people in this school.' He also said he wanted to hurt all of the dogs in the neighborhood because a dog bit him. He said he was going to make poisonous dog treats. These incidents were reported to the school principal. The boy was called in and questioned. He told the principal he saw it on a television show he was watching. I am concerned that these threats are not being taken seriously and the school has dropped the matter. You would think with all of the mental health issues facing our schools these days there would be a protocol on how to handle this boy, this issue, and make the other students feel safe."

## **C**enter Response

The situation you describe is all too common at many schools and is a controversial one to address. Here are some points to think about.

- (1) With respect to the student making the comments, we would ask whether the school is
  - (a) monitoring the student?
  - (b) helping the student develop socially and emotionally?
  - (c) in direct communication with the parents?

*Re. monitoring and helping* - In such cases, we recommend that the school keep a close track of the student (especially in unstructured situations at school). In such situations, one positive approach is to invite the student to be an "assistant" (e.g., to playground supervisor or coach) so he is in regular contact with an adult and is involved in a role that he and others may see as constructive. Besides making sure the student is busy doing good things, the adult can counter inappropriate plans and interactions and turn them into teachable moments. More generally, because bullying can be caused by a variety of underlying factors, it is wise to ask the school psychologist, counselor, social worker, or nurse to determine how best to help the student.

*Re. direct communication with the parents* - In addition to what the school does, it is reasonable to contact the parents to see what they think. Most will be concerned and willing to engage in some mutual problem solving.

- (2) With respect to other students who are concerned, we would ask whether the school is
  - (a) reducing contact between the involved students?
  - (b) using the experiences to teach affected students how to deal with such circumstances?

*Re. reducing contact* - The above approaches can take time, so if there is need for immediate action, the school could arrange ways for those affected to avoid close contact with the student (e.g., a change of class, involvement in activities during recess and lunch that don't bring them into contact with the student).

*Re. teaching ways to deal with such events* - It is our experience that schools tell

students what to do when they encounter bullying and often have a mediation process. In general, we would ask what the school is doing to help students learn from and deal with such situations.

For some helpful resources, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/threatassessment.html>

**L**istserv Participants: **How is this concern handled in your local schools?**

We look forward to sharing your response. Send to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

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## **I**nput from a Colleague

### **A**ssessing a threat

The above concern raises the topic of threat assessment. Here is what one colleague shared about that.

"Assessment of dangerousness is incredibly difficult. You don't want to wrongly say a truly dangerous person is no threat. On the other hand, you don't want to incorrectly label someone as 'dangerous' either. ... In these times there should be already in place a school protocol describing how this assessment should be done, and that it should be more comprehensive than one principal's interview. In my experience, the schools assemble a team of people with different training backgrounds to make sure no significant detail goes unnoticed. The parents should be an active part of this team whenever possible.

The National Association of School Psychologists website has a nice article on this topic at: [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/threatassess\\_fs.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/threatassess_fs.aspx)

Even with a protocol in place and a good team working hard, people may not thoroughly understand the situation. A problem with threat assessment is the fact that we all have the capability to be violent, given sufficient pressure. According to Gavin DeBecker, humiliation and rejection are two big triggers, but people can slowly break down under chronic stress, too.

For reasons such as these, I have advocated that schools slightly change the focus of the threat assessment team. In addition to a prudent attempt to judge the risk of near term danger to self or others, the team collects additional data that would help them to build a safety plan. The safety plan lists specific factors that are salient and necessary to understanding the student, as well as actions that assigned people will take at certain times to: a) create an environment that will prevent possible violent actions by the student, b) teach the student alternative ways to deal with whatever pressures lead to the idea that a violent solution might be the best way, and c) keep all concerned parties informed of the student's status while maintaining confidentiality. Keeping all parties communicating with each other is important because students rarely leak more than one hint about their plans a single person.

One mention may not seem important, but when we find out a half dozen folks have been told portions of the plan, it paints a different picture!

I think that placing the emphasis on ‘what do we need to do to support the student?’ rather than quickly making a dangerous/not dangerous judgement and then going back to the status quo more completely describes the tasks of the risk assessment team. ‘Doing nothing differently’ is not an option in my mind because the student has already done something to cause the team to be formed. This makes her/him different from a student who has never raised such a concern. Thus, some preventative and follow-up actions need to be taken."

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## **F**eatured Center Resource

**Info on grant opportunities for school/district/community**

Rather than list all the small grants being offered, our website lists major grants currently available that might be leveraged or at least contribute in fundamental ways to building a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. We update the list regularly as such grants are announced. *Access at the bottom of our home page (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>).*

Here’s a good example:

The Obama Administration invites a new round of eligible applicants to apply for a Promise Zone designation.\* The Promise Zones initiative seeks to revitalize high-poverty communities across the country by creating jobs, increasing economic activity, improving educational opportunities, reducing serious and violent crime, leveraging private capital, and assisting local leaders in navigating federal programs and cutting through red tape. All communities can apply that meet the eligibility criteria, and demonstrate high need, a strong local commitment and a compelling strategy. HUD intends to designate six urban communities and the USDA intends to designate at least one rural and at least one tribal community.

For communities selected, the federal government will partner to help the Promise Zones access the resources and expertise they need. To date, there are twelve federal agencies working in close collaboration to provide resources and expertise to urban, rural, and tribal Promise Zones to expand economic mobility and opportunity in their communities. A list of the federal agencies along with the programs affiliated with the Promise Zone initiative is available on HUD's Promise Zones page.

\*In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama announced that he would designate 20 Promise Zones nationwide: urban, rural, and tribal communities where the Administration would partner with local leaders to create jobs, increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, and reduce violent crime.

Submit completed applications via [www.Max.Gov](http://www.Max.Gov) on Nov. 21, 2014 by 5:00pm EST.

*Remember, even if you don't get the grant, the collaborative planning that goes into the application can lead to stronger school-community partnerships and connections.*

*Please share relevant resources ideas, requests,  
comments, and experiences!*

Send to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

**Note: Responses come only to the  
Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA for  
possible inclusion in the next week's message.**

**We also post a broad range of issues and responses to the  
*Net Exchange* on our website at**

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm>

**and to *Facebook* (access from the Center's home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>**

**For Recent Previous Postings, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>**