
Assessing Whether a Student Might Commit a Violent Act

(<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/shootings.pdf>)

After every school shooting, we are asked about how schools should assess students who may be a threat. Here's a response drawn from the Center's *Practitioner Listserv*.

Those concerned with "Threat Assessment" should take a look at the Safe School Initiative, Final Report, prepared by the U.S. Secret Service and the U. S. Department of Education. It reviews the nature and scope of violent events in schools, outlines key assessment questions, and offers basic cautions. (See <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS>.)

Also visit the National Threat Assessment Center at <http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac.shtml> and link to an article entitled "Evaluating Risk for Targeted Violence in Schools." The work stems from the Safe School Initiative and outlines *Guiding Principles of Threat Assessment*. A brief excerpt is offered below:

"...The threat assessment approach asks the person conducting the inquiry to gather information, and answer key questions about the instant case, to determine whether there is evidence to suggest movement toward violent action. The questions focus on: 1) motivation for the behavior that brought the person being evaluated to official attention; 2) communication about ideas and intentions; 3) unusual interest in targeted violence; 4) evidence of attack-related behaviors and planning; 5) mental condition; 6) level of cognitive sophistication or organization to formulate and execute an attack plan; 7) recent losses (including losses of status); 8) consistency between communications and behaviors; 9) concern by others about the individual's potential for harm; and 10) factors in the individual's life and/or environment or situation that might increase or decrease the likelihood of attack.

Taken together, the information learned from these questions – as gathered from the student and from corroborating sources (family members, friends, teachers, classmates, school and mental health records, etc.) – should provide evidence to answer the question of whether the student is moving on a path toward violent action. The answer to the last set of questions in particular can inform the development of a risk management plan. For example, school officials could decide to take active steps to minimize factors that could put the student at greater risk for an attack, such as through referral to appropriate services. Or they could opt instead to monitor the student (perhaps with assistance from family and others close to the student) for changes in factors that could increase the student's targeted violence risk"

For info on crisis response, go to our Center homepage <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> and click on "Responding to a Crisis."

This was prepared by the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.
Phone: (310) 825-3634 Fax: (310) 206-8716 Toll Free: (866) 846-4843
email: smhp@ucla.edu website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

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