

## Violence Prevention in Schools

The violence that occurs in U.S. neighborhoods and communities has found its way inside the schoolhouse doors. While we can take solace in knowing that schools are among the safest places for young people, school officials, administrators and teachers must do more to prevent violence, as it is a preventable danger to children. Education and training is the first step in preventing school violence, and a safe school plan is among the many solutions that will assist in curbing this national epidemic.

These plans address behavioral and property protection, and foster an environment where children can learn and teachers can educate without fear. As with all violence prevention initiatives, the best plans involve the entire school and the community at large.

### Early Warning Signs of Violence

There are many early warning signs in most cases of violence – behavioral or emotional signs that, when taken in context, can signal a troubled child. Such signs may not indicate a serious problem or may not necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward themselves or others; however, they can provide school officials with the cue to check on the child further and address his or her needs. Early warning signs can also allow for school officials to assist a child before a situation becomes problematic.

Teachers, administrators and other school staff members are not always trained to professionally analyze a child's feelings and motives. Yet, these individuals are on the front lines when it comes to observing troublesome behavior and making referrals to the appropriate

professionals. Therefore, it is not a surprise that effective schools take special care in training their entire staff on understanding and identifying early warning signs of violent behavior.

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### Principles for Identifying the Early Warning Signs of School Violence

Educators and families can increase their ability to recognize early warning signs by establishing a close, caring and supportive relationship with students. This involves getting to know them well enough to be aware of their needs, feelings, attitudes and behavioral patterns. Then, educators and parents can review school records for patterns of behavior or sudden changes in behavior that may lead to violence. They can also ensure that early warning signs are not misinterpreted. The U.S. Department of Education recommends the following when analyzing early warning signs:

- Understand violence and aggression within its context. These are expressions of emotions that may exist within the school, home or larger social environment only. For those children who are at risk for aggression and violence, certain environments

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and situations may set them off, but they may normally be very calm, non-aggressive individuals.

- Avoid stereotypes. Be aware of false indications of violence – including race, socio-economic status, cognitive or academic ability or physical appearance. Such stereotypes can unfairly harm children, especially when the school community acts upon them.
- View warning signs within a developmental context. Children at different levels of development have varying social and emotional capabilities, and may express themselves differently based on that. You must know what developmentally typical behavior looks like so that actions are not misinterpreted.
- Understand that children typically exhibit multiple warning signs. Most children who are troubled and at risk for aggression exhibit more than one warning sign, repeatedly, and for an increasing intensity over time. Therefore, it is important not to overreact to single signs, words or actions.

## Indications of Violence

All of the following early warning signs are not sufficient on their own to predict aggression and violence. In addition, these signs should only serve to aid and identify children who may need assistance by a professional. However, school officials should take action when they notice a conjunction of the following displayed by a child:

- Social withdrawal
- Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone
- Feelings of rejection
- Being a victim of violence
- Feelings of being picked on and persecuted
- Low school interest and poor academic performance
- Expression of violence in writing and drawings

- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating and bullying
- History of disciplinary problems
- Past history of violence and aggressive behavior
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- Drug and/or alcohol use
- Affiliation with gangs
- Inappropriate access to or possession of a firearm
- Making serious threats of violence

Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs may indicate that a child is very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to themselves and/or others. Imminent warning signs require an immediate response, and include:

- 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 or other weapons
- Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide
- A detailed plan to harm others, particularly if the child has a history of aggression or has attempted to carry out threats in the past

## Safe School Plan

Effective schools create a violence prevention and response plan and form a team that can ensure that it is implemented properly. A sound violence prevention program reflects the common and unique needs of

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educators, students, families and the community that it serves. It also outlines how the school community (administrators, teachers, parents, students, bus drivers, support staff, etc.) can be prepared to spot the behavioral and emotional signs indicating that a child is troubled. The plan should detail how school and community resources can be used to create safe environments and to manage responses to incidents ranging from acute threats to violent situations.

An effective plan includes the following:

- Descriptions of the early warning signs of potentially violent behavior (listed above) and procedures for identifying children who exhibit these signs
- Descriptions of effective prevention practices to build a foundation for the program and enhances the effectiveness of its interventions
- Descriptions of intervention strategies that the school community can use to help troubled children. This includes early interventions and resources for students with mild to severe behavioral problems or mental health needs
- Compliance with federal, state and local laws, and also supports families and the local school board
- Training and support initiatives executed on a regular basis
- Assessment tools for analyzing and monitoring the violence prevention efforts

## Creating a Prevention and Response Team

Establishing a school-based team to oversee the preparation and implementation of the prevention and response plan can be very helpful. This core team should ensure that every member of the larger school community accepts and adopts the violence prevention and response plan. Typically the team includes the building administrator, general and special education teachers, parents and pupil support service representatives (school psychologist, social worker or

counselor).

In addition, crisis response planning can be greatly enhanced with the presence of a central office administrator, security officer and youth officer or community police department member. The core team should coordinate with any school advisory boards that are already in place.

## Responding to a Crisis

Crisis response is an important component of a violence prevention and response plan. Effective schools provide adequate preparation for their core violence prevention and response team, by not only planning what to do when violence strikes, but also ensuring that staff and students know how to behave when violent situations arise.

The first thing to remember is that weapons, bomb threats or explosions, fights, natural disasters, accidents and suicides call for immediate, planned action and long-term, post-crisis intervention. Planning for such contingencies reduces chaos and trauma during the incident. Thus, the plan must include contingency provisions, including:

- Evacuation procedures to protect students and staff from harm. Schools must identify safe areas where students and staff should go during a crisis. Drills should be performed regularly so that all individuals in the school know how to proceed in a violent situation.
- An effective communication system must be established so that individuals have designated roles and responsibilities to reduce and eliminate confusion.
- A process for securing immediate external support from law enforcement and other relevant community resources.

Crises involving sudden violence in schools are traumatic because they are generally rare and unexpected. In the

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wake of such a crisis, members of the school community are asked – and ask themselves – what could have been done to prevent the incident? Yet, by being prepared, schools can take solace in knowing that they took actions to reduce the risk of violence and protect those within their walls.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Special Education and Rehabilitative Services