U.S. Secret Service, Protective Intelligence and Assessment Division, National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC): Enhancing School Safety Using A Threat Assessment Model

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Where we started:

- Following the tragedy of Columbine in April of 1999 the Secret Service partnered with the Department of Education to conduct research which led to the Safe School Initiative (SSI), which was the impetus for establishing threat assessment programs in schools. The goal of the study was to: gather and analyze information about the thinking, planning and behaviors a student engages in who carried out violent acts; and identify pre-attack behaviors and communication that might lead to prevention of future attacks.

- In 2008 the agencies collaborated again releasing the findings of the Bystander Study. This documented that prior to most attacks, other students had information about the attackers plan but ***did not*** report it to adults. The study focused on creating a safe school climate to increase the likelihood that students would speak up.

- Following the tragic events of the 2018 shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, NTAC along with many other partners, launched an initiative to provide updated research to prevent school based violence.

- In July of 2018, the U.S. Secret Service NTAC created an Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence.

- NASP (National Association of School Psychologists) adopted the threat assessment model.

The goal of Threat Assessment is to keep schools safe utilizing a prevention strategy that involves:

(a) identifying student threats to commit a violent act;
(b) determining the seriousness of the threat; and
(c) developing intervention plans that protect potential victims and address the underlying problem or conflict that initiated the threatening behaviors (NASP, 2017)

NTAC - Identify students of concern; assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities; and identify intervention strategies to manage that risk.

Creating a Comprehensive Targeted Violence Prevention Plan developed by the the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center

1. **Establish a multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Team** - this team will direct, manage and document the threat assessment process. A variety of disciplines (i.e., teacher, Admin [Superintendent, Exec. Director, Principal, Special Education Manager], guidance/child study, resource officer, and/or a relationship with local law enforcement) is necessary, designated leader, protocol and procedures, regular meeting dates.

1. **Define prohibited and concerning behaviors** - policies defining prohibited behavior that warrant immediate intervention and to think on a continuum (i.e., bringing a weapon, bullying, harassment, harm to self, dramatic change in behavior or appearance, decline in academics, social/emotional symptoms, etc). The threshold for intervention should be relatively low so that you can intervene before behaviors escalate.

3. **Create a central reporting mechanism** - Concerning statements can be made in person, online, text, or via an assignment. Establish reporting mechanisms (email, phone, app, online form); provide training and guidance on recognizing behaviors of concern; roles and responsibilities and how to report the information; respond immediately; there should be an option for anonymity. The Team must handle reports appropriately, immediately, and confidentiality.

4. **Determine the threshold for law enforcement intervention** - The vast majority of incidents or concerns are likely to be handled by school personnel; however, reports including weapons, threats of violence and safety concerns should immediately be reported to local law enforcement. Law enforcement will support and take over the assessment.

Creating A Comprehensive Targeted Violence Prevention Plan (continued)

5. Establish assessment procedures - maintain documentation (who, when, where and how), use a community systems approach (identify the sources that may have information on the students actions/circumstances), examine online social media pages, conduct interviews/possible searches/review records, build rapport with student and parent/guardian by being supportive, evaluate behaviors from a developmental and social emotional perspective, investigate themes (page 12).

6. Develop risk management options - After a thorough assessment, the TEAM is evaluating the presence of factors that indicate violence as a possibility. Develop risk management strategies that reduce risk of engaging in violence. Develop an individualized management plan, monitoring/guidance, identify resources, possible removal from school but stay connected because this does not eliminate risk, notification of law enforcement, make efforts to address the safety of any potential target, remove motive, and reduce the effects of stressors.

7. Create and promote safe school climates - share concerns, encourage positive trusting relationships with students, break down the "code of silence", helps students feel connected to their school and classmates, help students identity clubs or teams to join at school. Think: "safety, respect, and social and emotional support".

8. **Conduct training for all stakeholders** - school safety is everyone's responsibility: students, faculty, all staff, parents, community, transportation drivers and monitors, school resource officer, and law enforcement. When developing the training consider how frequently each stakeholder will receive training, goals and steps of an assessment, types of information that should be brought forward, and how to report concerns

Juvenile Risk Assessment is Developmental and Contextual

• Juvenile development and behavior are greatly influenced by family dynamics, peer groups, connection to school, involvement in prosocial activities and community factors. - Caldwell & Dickinson, 2009.

• Risk factors emerge from and are embedded in these interconnected systems.

• When we consider juveniles from this perspective, it provides a contextual nature to how we understand their behavior, the foundation of their behavior, and the future of their behavior.

• This is the basis for a school based Risk Assessment.

Juvenile Risk Assessment is Developmental and Contextual (continued)

- Throughout adolescence there is significant neurological, biological, psychological, and social change occurring.

- Recognizing these developmental factors needs to shape our approach to assessment.

- This means the juveniles are not only different from adults they are different than other juveniles at different developmental stages!

Assessment Procedures

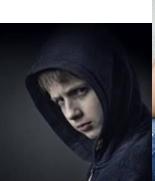When conducting a Threat Assessment identify the following themes:

1. The students' motives and goals.
2. Concerning, unusual, or threatening communications.
3. Inappropriate interests in weapons, school shooters, mass attacks, or other types of violence.
4. Access to weapons.
5. Stressful events: such as setbacks, challenges, or losses.
6. Impact of emotional and developmental issues.
7. Evidence of desperation, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and gestures
8. Whether the student views violence as an option to solve problems

Assessment Procedures (continued)

9. Whether others are concerned about the student's statements or behaviors.
10. Capacity to carry out an attack.
11. Evidence of planning for an attack.
12. Consistency between the student's statements and actions.
13. Protective factors (positive or prosocial influence or events).

Threats may be

(a) direct or indirect
(b) specific and detailed or general
(c) well thought out or impulsive
(d) veiled, conditional or implied

Transient Threats:
- non-genuine expression
- non-enduring intent to harm
- temporary feeling of anger
- A tactic in an argument
- Intended as a joke or figure of speech
- resolved on scene or in office (time limited)
- ends with apology, retraction, or clarification

Threats may be (continued)

Substantive Threats:
- Specific and plausible details such as a specific victim, time, place and method.
- Repeated over time or conveyed to different individuals.
- Involves planning, substantial thought, or preparatory steps (premeditation).
- Recruitment or involvement of accomplices.
- Invitation for an audience to observe threat being carried out.
- Physical evidence of intent to carry out threat (e.g., lists, drawings, written plan).

What to consider.....

1. Regarding a Comprehensive Targeted Prevention Plan - which of the 8 guidelines does my District/School do well? What additional guidelines/strategies need development? How is our plan implemented? Who trains our staff, students and community members? Does my District/School have a regular training schedule?
2. Regarding the actual assessment of the student - Who completes this assessment in my District/School? How are the professional personnel trained in my District/School? Has my District/School included the most recent information regarding assessment?
3. Regarding Interventions - what does my Districts'/Schools' strategies and forms look like (e.g., behavior intervention plan, safety plan, management plan)? Should threat assessment strategies be included?
4. What services/supports does my District/School provide to students with social/emotional needs {both short and long term}? How is my District/School attempting to include marginalized students? How are my staff creating/building relationships with these students?

Legal Legal Issues Relative to Threat Assessment

1. Access to and sharing of information

2. Searches of a student's person or property

3. Obtaining the Risk Assessment

Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

- This federal law restricts the sharing of student educational records

- Pursuant to this law, student educational records can only be disclosed:
  - With prior written consent
  - Exceptions:
    - To a school in which the student intends to enroll
    - To school officials with a legitimate educational interest
    - **<u>For a health or safety emergency</u>**

FERPA – HEALTH OR SAFETY EMERGENCY

- Under FERPA, a "Health or Safety Emergency" includes the following:

  - An actual, imminent or impending emergency

- Even in these circumstances, <u>limitations</u> apply to the disclosure:
  - Purpose of the disclosure must be to protect the health and safety of staff, students or others
  - Disclosure must be to appropriate parties only
  - Disclosure must be noted in the student record

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA)

- HIPAA is a federal law protecting the privacy of health records and identifiable health information, which includes:

  - Information regarding a past, present or future health condition – physical or mental

  - Treatment or care provided to the individual

  - Payment for care or treatment provided

- Like FERPA, HIPAA only permits disclosure with consent or under specific exceptions

Exceptions to HIPAA

- Threat to Health or Safety
  - The purpose of the disclosure must be to prevent or mitigate an imminent or serious threat to person or the public welfare
  - The disclosure must be made to a person or party capable of preventing or mitigating this threat

- For the Purpose of Law Enforcement
  - When necessary to comply with the law, e.g. in response to a lawfully issued subpoena or court order
  - To assist in the identification or location of a missing person or criminal suspect
  - To provide evidence of a crime committed

Searches of Student Person or Property

New Jersey v. T.L.O., 469 U.S. 325 (1985)

- Students have a lowered expectation of privacy while they are in school
  - Reasonable suspicion instead of probable cause
- Pursuant to this lowered expectation of privacy, school officials may conduct searches of student property if the search is:
  - Justified at its inception
  - Reasonable in scope

Obtaining A Risk Assessment

▪ Consent of Parent/Guardian

▪ As a condition of re-entry after a discipline event

▪ Through order of the BSEA for substitute consent

       -subsequent to initial evaluation/placement

       -following procedures to seek parental consent

       -if lack of consent results in denial of FAPE

       -can include extended evaluations

In Assessing Risk, DO NOT RELY UPON:

- Parents to obtain a risk assessment from their own provider;

- Using a one-sentence discharge summary from a hospital;

- Using school-based staff who do not have targeted training or experience in risk assessment

- Suspending student for a few days

DO RELY UPON:

- Communication with outside agencies;

- Risk Assessment by outside expert;

- Supports from the community – mobile crisis

IEP Considerations

- Specific goals and accommodations addressing social/emotional/behaviors

- Be careful of language that could establish an unintended manifestation of the student's disability

- Implement the IEP with fidelity - particularly with supports to address behaviors

- Re-convene to address bullying/harassment/threats/behaviors

Returning The Student to the School Community

- Written Safety or Support Plan

- Re-entry conditions

- Pro-active check-ins by staff – with documentation!

- Concerted effort to re-engage the student - academic and co-curricular

- Re-convening of the Team if Special Education; if not, SST process

- Communication plan for parents/guardians

Questions and Resources

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Resources:

https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf

Resources:

Borum, R,., Bartel, P., & Forth, A. (2002). *Manual for the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY).* Tampa: FLA.: University of South Florida..

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Resources:

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2002). D*igest of Education Statistics 2000*: Washington D.C.:Authors

U.S. Government, U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). *Secret Service School Shooting Reports: Making Schools Safer, Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence*.

*Additional resources can be found on the Secret Service National Threat Assessment Centers website at www.secretservice.gov/ntac.htm