THREAT ASSESSMENT AND RESPONSE PROTOCOL©

Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines

OVERVIEW

A threat is a communication of intent to harm someone that may be spoken, written, gestured, or expressed in some other form, such as via text messaging, email, or other digital means. An expression of intent to harm someone is considered a threat regardless of whether it is communicated to the intended target(s) and regardless of whether the intended target is aware of the threat. Threats may be implied by behavior that an observer would reasonably regard as threatening, planning, or preparing to commit a violent act. When in doubt, treat the communication or behavior as a threat and conduct a threat assessment. Threats that are not easily recognized as harmless (e.g., an obvious joke that worries no one) should be reported to the school administrator or other team members. The administrator or another team member makes a preliminary determination of the seriousness of the threat. The student, targets of the threat, and other witnesses should be interviewed to obtain information using this protocol. A *transient* threat means there is no sustained intent to harm and a *substantive* threat means the intent is present (or not clear) and therefore requires protective action. This form is a guide for conducting a threat assessment, but each case may have unique features that require some modification.

A threat assessment is not a crisis response. If there is indication that violence is imminent (e.g., person has a firearm at school or is on the way to school to attack someone), a crisis response is appropriate. Take immediate action such as calling 911 and follow the school crisis response plan.

School Threat Assessment Decision Tree*

Step 1. Evaluate the threat.

Obtain a detailed account of the threat, usually by interviewing the person who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses. Write the exact content of the threat and key observations by each party. Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student's intentions. Is there communication of intent to harm someone or behavior suggesting intent to harm?

No → Not a threat. Might be an expression of anger that merits attention.

Yes ↓

Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transient.

Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be easily resolved so that there is no intent to harm? Does the person retract the threat or offer an explanation and/or apology that indicates no future intent to harm anyone?

Yes → Case resolved as transient; add services as needed.

No ↓

Step 3. Respond to a substantive threat.

For all substantive threats:

a. Take precautions to protect potential victims.
b. Warn intended victim and parents.
c. Look for ways to resolve conflict.
d. Discipline student, when appropriate.

Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up whereas very serious means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon.

Serious → Case resolved as serious substantive threat; add services as needed.

Very Serious ↓

Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantive threat.

In addition to a-d above, the student may be briefly placed elsewhere or suspended pending completion of the following:

e. Screen student for mental health services and counseling; refer as needed.
f. Law enforcement investigation for evidence of planning and preparation, criminal activity.
g. Develop safety plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs. Plan should include review of Individual Educational Plan if already receiving special education services and further assessment if possible disability.

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Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.

Document the plan.
Maintain contact with the student.
Monitor whether plan is working and revise as needed.

*This 5-step decision tree is a revision of the original 7-step decision tree for the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines that retains the same information and procedures in a more condensed format. 12-23-2024 revision.