



Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools

FACT SHEET

FS-SC06

2000

Early Warning Signs

How to Identify Troubled Students and Act on Warning Signs for Violence

Schools remain among the safest places for our young people. However, there are steps schools can take to improve potentially violent situations. Creating a safe school requires many preventive measures for mental and emotional problems as well as early identification of warning signs for such conditions. Before making recommendations for treatment or intervention for at-risk behaviors, students needing help must be identified and referred appropriately. Typically, there are behavioral and emotional warning signs that may indicate a troubled child. Identifying early warning signs provides us with a tool to address a student's needs, and should **NOT** be used to:

- determine if a student is necessarily prone to violence
- label a student
- jump to conclusions

School teachers, administrators and staff are not trained and cannot be expected to analyze students' feelings or behaviors. Professionals such as school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and community mental and public health workers, as well as law enforcement professionals should be made aware of alleged warning signs in an effort to appropriately diagnose a situation or condition. Those on the front line—school teachers, administrators and staff—should make referrals to appropriate professionals, such as the Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools Social Support Team.

Principles for Identifying the Early Warning Signs of School Violence

- Develop caring, supportive relationships with students
- DO NO HARM
- Understand violence and aggression within a context
- Avoid stereotypes such as race, socioeconomic status, academic ability, appearance
- View warning signs within a developmental context
- Understand that children typically exhibit multiple signs (do not over react to one sole sign)

When observing a child's behavior it is imperative that the examiner look for multiple signs and consider the appropriate context. The signs must be presented in combination and indicate a need for further analysis to determine the appropriate intervention.

- Social withdrawal
- Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone
- Excessive 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 writings and drawings
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating and bullying behaviors
- History of discipline problems
- Past history of violent and aggressive behavior
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- Drug use and alcohol use
- Affiliation with gangs
- Inappropriate access to, possession, of and use of firearms
- Serious threats of violence

Imminent warning signs indicate a student is very close or has a very high potential of being violent. Usually these signs are apparent to both staff and parents. When these signs are evident safety is the first and foremost consideration.

- 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 and other weapons
- Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide

The early warning signs can be used to help develop intervention practices. The following three strategies can be used to establish effective intervention practices.

- School board policies that support training and ongoing consultation, so that the entire community, parents and staff can recognize the early warning signs.
- School leaders who encourage appropriate reporting of observed early warning signs and immediately report all observations of imminent warning signs.
- Easy access to a team of specialists trained in evaluating and addressing serious behavioral and academic concerns. (Such as the Safe Communities~Safe Schools Social Support team)

Principles for Intervention: Getting Help for Troubled Children

- Share responsibility by establishing a partnership with the child, school, home and community
- Inform parents and listen to them when early warning signs are observed
- Maintain confidentiality and parents' rights to privacy
- Develop the capacity of staff, students, and families to intervene
- Support students in being responsible for their actions
- Simplify staff requests for urgent assistance

Intervention practices for students who are at risk for behavioral problems, involve implementing a social support system and positive reinforcement.

- Teaching positive interaction skills
- Providing comprehensive services
- Referring the child for special education evaluation
- Providing intensive, individualized interventions for students with severe behavioral problems
- Providing a foundation to prevent and reduce violent behavior

The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV) has developed a model for the social support team and how it can serve the function of effectively intervening for at risk youth. In an effort to address the needs of students at risk of violence, CSPV suggests establishing a group of professionals (Social Support Team) to receive referrals from school staff, parents and others who work with children.

The purpose of the Social Support Team is to:

- Improve the social climate of the community and school by addressing the needs of students at risk, while "doing no harm" in the process.
- Identify potentially risky behaviors in an effort to avoid more serious events.
- Make informed decisions about a student based on all the information available to a variety of community and school professionals.

The goals of the Social Support Team are accomplished by:

- Creating a team of school and community professionals, such as a school administrator, community-based mental health professional, school counselor or psychologist, social worker, local law enforcement official, school resource officer, social services provider, public healthcare worker, and legal advisor.
- Making information available to the Social Support Team through several means, such as a school/community anonymous hotline, or referral system.
- Establishing scheduled meetings as well as holding emergency meetings when necessary.
- Identifying and managing individual student cases.
- Gathering additional information when warranted through interviews, and police, school discipline and mental health records.
- Making assessments and recommendations for intervention and/or treatment within the school, the district or the community.

References:

Dwyer, K. P., Osher, D., & Warger, C. (1998). *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Elliott, D.S., Grady, J.M., Shaw, T.E., Aultman-Bettridge, T., & Beaulieu, M.T. (2000). *Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools Planning Guide: A Tool for Community Violence Prevention Efforts* (SCSS-001). Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.