
Violence Prevention

Creating safer schools in New York State

New York State is responding to rising concerns about school violence with informative tools designed to help school personnel manage the problem. This booklet is not intended to be used as a stand-alone training document, but rather as a starting point to begin thinking about your own school district's needs and the measures that are currently employed to prevent violence and to promote a safe and positive learning environment.



**State of New York,
George E. Pataki, Governor**

**Office of Mental Health,
James L. Stone, MSW, CSW, Commissioner**

This booklet is the result of a collaborative partnership between: the Council on Children and Families, the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, the New York State Education Department, the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, the New York State Office of Mental Health and the New York State Police.

Assessing Risk and Red Flags

While most threats that youths make are not acted upon, all threats whether written, verbal, or physical must be addressed and responded to.

What threats from youths should make you worry?

- Threats or warnings about killing or hurting themselves or others
- Threats to do something dangerous or potentially harmful
- Possession of or access to a weapon

When a youth makes a threat, you must assess:

1. How serious is the threat that was made?
2. What do you know about the youth who made the threat?
3. Has the youth specified a plan to carry out the threat?
4. Does the youth have the means to carry out the threat?

To help assess questions one and two, consider the “red flags” that research has found to be most associated with violence in youth.

- Past violent or aggressive behavior
- Bringing a weapon to school
- A pattern of violent threats when angry
- Alcohol or substance abuse
- Past destruction of property or criminal behavior
- Past cruelty to animals
- Past fire-setting
- History of family conflict or problems
- Gang involvement

Evaluation of any threat must be done in the context of the individual youth’s past behavior, personality, and current stressors. To help assess this, evaluate whether the threat or plan is realistic or could be accomplished; a 6-year-old threatening to blow up the school with an atomic bomb will probably present less risk than a 14-year-old threatening to kill a teacher with a gun. Access to guns or other weapons raises a threat to a potentially lethal level. Determining if there are guns present in a youth’s home or whether the youth is part of a gang that may have access to weapons will help to assess the risk of violence.

Risk Factors

There are known risk factors associated with potential violence toward self and others. It is important to keep in mind that none of these risk factors alone is sufficient for predicting violence, and it may be inappropriate or potentially harmful to use them simply as a checklist for an individual youth. *This list should not be used to stereotype or stigmatize individual youths because they appear to fit a set of risk factors.*

School risk factors

- Previously brought a weapon at school
- Aggressiveness in grades K-3, social isolation or hyperactivity
- Truancy, getting into fights or misbehaving in class
- Serious disciplinary problems
- Past suspension or expulsion for aggressive behavior
- Anger or frustration present in school essays or artwork
- Academic failure beginning in grade school (experience of failure escalates risk rather than ability)

Personal risk factors

- History of tantrums or uncontrollable angry outbursts
- Past violent behavior
- Characteristically resorts to name calling or cursing
- Bullying of peers or younger youths
- History of being bullied
- A pattern of violent threats when angry
- Cruelty to animals
- Fire-setting
- Use and abuse of alcohol or drugs
- Past suicide attempts
- Often depressed or has significant mood swings
- Tends to blame others for personal problems
- Recent experience of humiliation, loss, or rejection
- Preoccupation with weapons or explosives
- Poor peer relations, is on the fringe of peer group with few or no close friends

- Involvement with cults or gangs
- Unstructured time

Community and environmental risk factors

- Extreme economic deprivation
- Low neighborhood attachment and community disorganization
- Access to guns or other weapons
- Past destruction of property or vandalism
- Few organized activities in community for youths

Family risk factors

- History of family violence
- History of weapon possession or use by family
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs by family members
- Family conflict
- Youth has history of being abused
- Severe or inconsistent punishment
- Absence of clear expectations or standards for behavior
- Lack of supervision or support from parents or caring adults

Managing Situations

What if a youth makes a threat that puts him or her or others in imminent danger? For instance a weapon may be present.

Treat this as an emergency. To diffuse the situation you should:

- Alert the administration to activate your school's Incident Management Plan to contact:
 - Police.
 - School psychologist or counselor.
 - Local mental health agencies or resources.
 - Parents or guardians.
- Keep your distance. Try to create barriers between you and the person or weapon.
- Avoid aggressive body movements.
- Ask open-ended questions to keep the youth talking.

- Realize that you are not in control of the situation. Avoid projecting authority.
- Do not negotiate with the youth. You have nothing to negotiate with. Do not lie about helping.
- Time is your friend. Try to diffuse the situation until Police or a school psychologist arrives.

You should familiarize yourself with your school's Incident Management Plan, asking four questions:

- What exactly is the "plan"?
- Is there a crisis team in place?
- What is my role in the plan likely to be?
- What happens after an incident?

Knowing the answer to each question *before* a crisis happens will better prepare you and your school to act effectively. For more information or training on handling violent or potentially violent situations, contact the New York State Police or your local law enforcement agencies and ask about programs for schools in your community.

What if a youth who has exhibited some of the red flags makes a threat that may be carried out but does not pose imminent danger?

- Do not dismiss the threat as idle talk.
- Immediately talk with the youth.
- If the youth refuses to talk, is argumentative, responds defensively, or continues to express violent or dangerous thoughts or plans, arrange for an immediate evaluation by a qualified mental health professional.
- Do not leave the youth alone.
- Contact:
 - School administration.
 - School psychologist or counselor.
 - Parents or guardians.
 - Local mental health agency.
 - Police, if warranted.

What if I still have concerns about a youth?

Work with your school's administration to obtain an examination by a qualified mental health professional whenever you are concerned about threats a youth makes. While there is no foolproof method of identifying potentially dangerous youths, it is best to bring your concerns to the attention of people who can professionally assess the risk for violence.

Violence Prevention Strategies

These strategies may be helpful in mediating the risk factors for violence.

Encourage “protective” factors

Protective factors that can counter the negative impact of some risk factors associated with violence include:

Individual characteristics

- High IQ, resilient temperament, good natured, enjoys social interactions. With similar risk factors girls are less likely than boys to become violent.

Bonding

- Strong, positive relationships with family members, teachers or other adults can make a youth feel that someone takes an interest in them and cares about them.

Adults with healthy beliefs and clear standards

- Adults can act as role models and demonstrate to youths that people can succeed in life without being violent.

Interventions at the individual level

- Reach out to students and take a positive interest in them.
- Provide tutors or mentors from within the school or from local businesses, service organizations, colleges, or churches.
- Provide part time employment or volunteer work.
- Encourage students to get involved in school or community sponsored youth recreation activities or anti-violence youth collaborations.

School-wide strategies

Safe school environments require an atmosphere that demonstrates respect for, communication with, and responsibility to one another on a day-to-day basis. A positive school environment provides youths with tools to handle conflict in nonviolent ways. Here are some ways to facilitate such an environment:

- Anger management and counseling programs.
- Mediation and conflict resolution programs.
- A confidential reporting system for youth to alert school personnel with concerns regarding peers. Stress the differences between “ratting” and being safe.
- Alcohol and drug interventions for youths and their families.
- Links with youth serving and law enforcement agencies in the community.
- Extended school hours for organized recreation activities, childcare, etc.
- Classes for parenting skills.
- In-school crisis centers, staffed by professionals to work with violent youths and to be used as a “cooling off” space.
- A crisis team consisting of teachers, administration, and other school personnel.
- Training on managing violent youths for all school personnel.
- Monitoring by staff and guards.
- Parents as monitors or teachers aids.
- Discipline and dress codes.
- Zero tolerance policies
- A Post Incident Response Plan as part of the Incident Management Plan.
 - Mental Health staff available to provide consultation and counseling to students, school personnel, and the community immediately after a crisis and on its anniversary dates.
 - Self-help networks for students and their families who have survived a crisis.

District-wide strategies

Discipline codes should be reviewed periodically and comply with federal, state, and local education laws. Be sure consequences are commensurate with the violation, for example, employ a “graduated sanctions” approach to discipline. Detention, suspension, and

expulsion policies should be reviewed and clearly defined so that the discipline code can be enforced consistently, firmly, and fairly.

Community Programs

Many resources are available in the community to help schools prevent, prepare for, and manage school emergencies. In addition to your local law enforcement and mental health agencies, they can include youth bureaus, private foundations and not-for-profit agencies. Many offer speakers or training to school personnel and youths. Local businesses or churches may provide volunteering or employment opportunities, mentoring or structured recreational activities for youths.

State Resources

For more information about violence prevention and safe school planning you may contact the following:

- **New York State Police**518-457-2180
Programs for schools and communities
- **New York State Education Department**518-486-6090
Comprehensive Health and Pupil Services Team
- **Upstate Center for School Safety**914-255-8989
- **Downstate United Way**212-973-3894
New York City Technical Assistance Center
- **New York State Office of Mental Health**518-474-8394
School-based program and county mental health services
- **New York State Office of Children & Family Services**
Public Information:518-473-7793
Aggression Replacement Training (ART)
Getting Kid Smart
- **Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services**800-522-5353
School and community-based prevention, intervention and treatment programs
- **New York State Department of Health**
Public Information518-474-5422
- **New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services**518-457-8462
Office of Funding & Program Assistance
- **Council on Children and Families**518-474-6294
Resource guides from child serving state agencies

National Resources

- **United States Department of Education**
Safe and Drug Free Schools
202-260-3954 Online: www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS
- **Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office**
Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action
916-323-2183
Online: www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/safety/safetyhome.html
- **Safe Schools, Safe Students (manual)**
A guide to Violence Prevention Strategies
202-663-6090 Online: www.drugstrategies.org
- **Center for Safe Schools**
Toolkit for School Safety Planning
Online: www.center-school.org
- **Crisis Prevention Institute, Inc.**
Non Violent Crisis Intervention Training Programs
800-558-8976 Online: www.crisisprevention.com
- **Youth Crime Watch America**
Peer programs to reduce crime and drugs in schools
305-670-2409 Online: www.ycwa.org
- **National PTA**
800-307-4782 Online: www.pta.org
- **National School Safety Center**
805-373-9977 Online: www.nssc1.org
- **National Institute for Dispute Resolution
and National Association for Mediation in Education**
202-466-4764 Online: www.crenet.org
- **National Crime Prevention Council**
202-466-6272 Online: www.ncpc.org
- **American Association of School Administrators**
703-528-0700 Online: www.aasa.org
- **Big Brothers Big Sisters of America**
215-567-7000 Online: www.bbbsa.org
- **Boys and Girls Clubs of America**
404-815-5700 Online: www.bgca.org
- **Center for the Prevention of School Violence**
800-299-6054 Online: www2.ncsu.edu/ncsu/cep/PreViolence

Note: Online addresses are case sensitive

Managing situations

Steps for threat assessment and resolution





