THREAT ASSESSMENT EVALUATION & RESPONSE PROTOCOL

School based mental health professionals and other school professionals with specialized knowledge, training, and experience are accustomed to assessing risk. School based threat assessment includes a myriad of developmental and psychological factors, psychosocial events, and violence-risk factors in children’s lives needing assessment. These include pediatric and adolescent mental illness, substance abuse, suicide, peer pressure, sexting and social media, bullying and peer victimization, conduct-based disorders associated with violence, and more. School based threat assessment is a shift from assessing clinical risk factors to a forensic assessment model that encompasses a research-informed structured methodology of violence risk assessment. This requires a procedure that examines the relationship between research-informed violence risk factors and threats to school safety.

Threat assessment is a specific type of forensic evaluation that includes structured professional judgment (SPJ) procedures for assessing threats of violence and conducting risk management at the time a threat is made. Violence risk management includes the identification of violence risk factors and protective factors, and using that information to plan and execute a series of recommendations and interventions to manage the risk associated with a threat, and to maintain safety to the student and student body at large. Currently, we have preliminary guidelines and research for violence risk assessment procedures in school-based settings. This places front-line school professionals (school psychologists, guidance counselors, school social workers, and administrators) involved with identifying the needs of at-risk children with new responsibilities.

ASSESSMENT STEPS

A. Primary threat investigation by fact gathering of available information. Threats are initially assessed as being Transient or Substantive. In this determination, the Dimension of Threat Harm Severity is assessed and the Dimension of Threat Over Time is assessed.
B. Determination if the threat is transient or substantive.

- This determination should ideally be made by at least two trained professionals in threat assessment and violence risk management. One model that can be adopted relies on one professional serving as the investigator/evaluator. Both collaborate and review the data findings to make a determination of a threat as being transient or substantive. They then determine which risk management procedures and recommendations are indicated. The second professional serves as a peer consultant. Another model that can be adopted uses two professionals to share the responsibilities of the investigation/evaluation. They share data, and jointly make a determination of a threat as being transient or substantive, and the risk management procedures and recommendations that will follow.

- Transient threats are usually reactive, of smaller scope, and not of intent for causing serious harm. They can also be quickly resolved. Transient threats can be resolved through interventions like mediation, brief counseling, or resolution of a disagreement between peers with staff and parent support. On the Dimension of Threat Severity, they can be of low or high severity. An example of low severity is a threatening statement of physical attack that is non-lethal. An example of high severity is a threat of physical attack that can be lethal. On the Dimension of Threat Over Time, Transient Threats are brief, and resolved over a matter of hours, or a few days.
• Transient threats are given brief interventions and ongoing support services. Brief interventions include the following:
  • Mediation or another dispute resolution method facilitated by a faculty member. [Low Severity]
  • Faculty communication with parents. [Low Severity]
  • Calling the Police  [High Severity]

Supportive services in response to a transient threat can include the following:
  • Brief Counseling at the school or in the community.
  • Time limited follow-up by a guidance counselor or school psychologist.
  • A referral for family-based services in the community.

• Substantive threats are threats that are serious and are not immediately brought to satisfactory safety resolution. On the Dimension of Threat Over Time, they continue as active threats. On the Dimension of Threat Severity, there is information to believe there is an underlying intent of harm towards others and a capacity to act on that threat. Substantive threats are fully investigated by the threat assessment team (two or more designated professionals). A decision is often made for a temporary out-of-school suspension during the assessment process.

• Substantive threats undergo an evaluation whose purpose is to identify the nature of the threat and identify risk management interventions and services for safety of the student and school community.

• Assessing threat content and threat context are essential to inform the investigative process. Threat context is of greater importance than content. The content refers to what was said by the aggressor. The context refers factors including the following (and more):
  • The historical relationship between the aggressor and target of the threat.
  • The capacity of the aggressor to fulfill the act.
  • The etiology of the conflict that led to the threat being made. (situational or not).
  • The general capacity for threat resolution with professional treatment and monitoring.

I. IDENTIFYING INFORMATION & REASON FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT:

Describe as much specific threat information in this section as possible. Follow-up on missing information with later interviews or collateral data as it becomes available.
II. THE EVALUATION CONSISTED OF:

Include the student of concern interviewed, victim(s) interview, collateral interviews of school faculty, administration, parents, students, and any other interview sources. List records reviewed. List any psychological tests or instruments administered.

III. LIMITS OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Describe the purpose of the evaluation as an investigation in response to an allegation of a threat. Inform the student that there is no confidentiality with the evaluation since it pertains to an alleged threat of violence.

IV. PSYCHOSOCIAL BACKGROUND:

This section offers the opportunity to obtain relevant information pertaining to developmental history, family functioning, and other domains of general clinical and psychosocial risk factors. Pursue any broad domains with further inquiry if the information suggests concern. Information provided by the student should be corroborated and enhanced with information from a caregiver/guardian, and ideally both parents.

V. CLINICAL FINDINGS:

Complete typical behavioral observations and mini mental status assessment data. If historical cognitive or clinical test data is available, insert that information so cognitive and clinical benchmarks are available.

With respect to psychological testing, the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY) is the recommended structured professional judgment (SPJ) instrument for quantifying violence risk and protective factors.

Regarding the Personality Assessment Inventory-Adolescent Version, this instrument can provide additional clinical data and clinical risk factors if there appears to be value in adding this instrument to the evaluation. The purpose of adding this instrument would include assistance with diagnosis of a clinical disorder based on clinical scale results, and treatment implications that ascertain information pertaining to aggression, suicide, stress, treatment compliance, and perceptions of support. The instrument also has separate scales tapping interpersonal functioning which may be useful in understanding the child’s perception of relatedness with others.

Both instruments are for youth ages 12-18. Proper knowledge and formal training for these instruments is necessary prior to their administration, scoring, and interpretation.
VI. VIOLENCE RISK:

This section includes research informed factors, traits, and behaviors in various domains of violence risk.

A. Texts, Social Media Posts, Handwritten Diaries: This assessment procedure is recommended based on research showing that many individuals who acted violently posted information on social media pages or accounts or in a hand-written diary. This information can be ascertained by asking the student to log-into their account and show it, by asking parents for their knowledge of a diary/journal, and if necessary by alerting law enforcement for investigation into digital data.

B. Typology Risk Factors: This assessment procedure is based on research that identified specific typology risk factors of school shooters. In general, a history of trauma, demonstration of paranoid psychotic features, psychopathic personality traits, and poor anger management and emotional regulation were noted. The information can be gathered from direct clinical interview of the student, and from other collateral interview sources.

C. Threat Assessment Interview Questions: These were unique questions developed by Carl Patrasso, Psy.D. that were derived from school violence research he reviewed. The questions tap risk factors identified in both US Secret Service/Department of Education research and other social science.

D. Mass Murder Related Inquiries: These questions were developed mainly by Reid Meloy, Ph.D. and Robert A. Fein, Ph.D. in their collaborative research on school shooters. The questions are anchored in trends of school shooters/murderers from their involvement in historical cases of this type of school violence.

E. Typology Of Warning Behaviors: The procedure of assessing various types of warning behaviors comes from various behavioral trends that collectively can signal an imminent threat of harm. The Meloy et al. (2012 & 2017) article should be read and relied upon for a thorough understanding of these behaviors and how to query the student.

F. Social Media & Sexting: The procedure for assessing sexting is to make a determination if it was Experimental Sexting: [Trying out for the first time, not done with mal-intent, intended to be discreet] vs. Aggravated Sexting: [Done with bad intent, a behavior of humiliation, an attempt for control]
G. School Shooter Factors: This procedure includes the specific factors identified in school shooters as identified in the research reports published by the US Secret Service and US Department of Education. The assessor should be familiar with these research publications, and have them on hand for qualifying the determination if the factor is present or absent.


H. Exposure To Violence: Violent adolescents in school have been found to have significantly greater exposure to violence in their home and community and in their own conduct. In this procedure list all events of violence exposure both as a witness and as a participant. Ascertaining their views about each violent event can help make a determination about their beliefs pertaining to using violence for solving problems.

I. Weapon Access and Use: This procedure is used to determine and access and prior weapon use. The final questions include hypothetical questions to gain understanding of beliefs about weapon use.

VII. SUICIDE RISK:

The presence of these risk factors is considered to raise the likelihood of suicidal behavior. Some of the risk factors are gender specific in “B”. The factors in A and B should be considered in the context of the more general suicide risk questions in factors under C.

VIII. THREAT ASSESSMENT SUMMARY:

This section identifies the risk and protective factors present. Next a synopsis of the overall data including those risk factors, protective factors, psychological test data, collateral interviews and records align towards a classification of the threat. Characterization of the threat can be considered low, moderate, or high. The classification of the threat should be supported by the presence and absence of both risk and protective factors.

IX. THREAT MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:

This section outlines specific interventions to manage the threat identified in Section VIII. The interventions and services should be commensurate with the threat identified and the available real-world resources. The interventions should be specific with a pre-screened agreement for the utilization of available resources or a pending referral that has already been pre-approved and agreed
upon. Interventions should not be hypothetical recommendations, but rather strategy-oriented available resources and services.

XI. THREAT MANAGEMENT OVERSIGHT:

Threat assessment emphasizes the management of threat as a solution. Once a threat assessment has been completed and recommendations have been implemented, a member of the threat assessment team should be assigned to monitor service implementation and adherence to the recommendations by the student and engaged parties. The threat assessment team should determine a frequency for status report meetings of students actively involved in threat management services.