

Ripon Area School District



Violence Risk Assessment Procedures For Responding to Violent Behavior or Serious Threats

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Introduction

School-based attacks are rare compared to the other types of violence and crime children face both in and outside of school; however, highly publicized school shootings have created uncertainty about the safety and security in schools. Increased national attention to the problem of school violence has prompted educators and law enforcement officials to develop procedures for assessing violent behavior and threats.

It is important that threat assessment must occur in the larger context of school safety. A climate of safety, respect, and emotional support can help reduce the possibility of targeted violence in schools. Environments in which students, teachers and administrators pay attention to students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs will have fewer situations that require formal threat assessments. In an educational setting where there is a climate of safety, adults and students respect each other. This climate is defined and fostered by students having a positive connection to at least one adult in authority. In such a climate, students develop the capacity to talk and openly share their concerns without fear of shame and reprisal. They attempt to help friends and fellow students who are in distress and bring serious concerns to the attention of adults. When this climate of safety is created, students experience a sense of emotional belonging and of respect. Problems are raised and addressed before they become serious. As a result, the potential for school violence diminishes.

The major components and tasks for creating a safe school climate include:

- Assessment of the school's emotional climate;
- Emphasis on the importance of listening in schools;
- Adoption of a strong, but caring stance against the code of silence;
- Prevention of, and intervention in, bullying;
- Involvement of all members of the school community in planning, creating, and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect
- Development of trusting relationships between each student and at least one adult at school; and
- Creation of mechanisms for developing and sustaining safe school climates.

The findings of the *Safe School Initiative* (2000) suggest that there are actions that educators, law enforcement officials, and others can use in response to the problem of targeted school violence. Specifically, the findings suggest that officials may wish to focus their efforts to formulate strategies for preventing these attacks in two principal areas:

- Developing the capacity to pick up on and evaluate available or knowable information that might indicate that there is a risk of a targeted school attack; and,
- Employing the results of these risk evaluations, or "threat assessments," in developing strategies to prevent potential school attacks from occurring.

Support for these suggestions is found in the 10 key findings of the *Safe School Initiative*:

- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engage in targeted school violence.

- Most attackers engage in some behavior, prior to the incident that caused concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers were known to have difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

The primary purpose of a threat assessment is to prevent targeted violence. The threat assessment process is centered upon an analysis of the facts and evidence of behavior in a given situation.

Six principles form the foundation of the threat assessment process. These principles are the following:

- Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and oftentimes discernible, process of thinking and behavior.
- Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.
- An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.
- Effective threat assessment is based upon facts, rather than on characteristics or “traits.”
- An “integrated systems approach” should guide threat assessment inquiries and investigations.

The primary question in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation is whether a student poses a threat, not whether the student has *made* a threat.

As the Ripon Area School District moves forward in its determination of a threat assessment protocol, focused efforts to inservice staff and to provide ongoing bullying prevention and school climate training.

Threat Assessment

The goals of threat assessment are twofold: (1) to maintain a safe school environment by preventing an act of violence from taking place, and (2) to resolve student conflicts or problems that underlie threatening behavior. Violence prevention is always the first goal of threat assessment, but it is also important to determine why a student made a threat and to address whatever conflict or problem motivated the threat. Ultimately, successful resolution of the student’s conflict or problem will contribute to the first goal of maintaining a safe school environment.

A threat assessment is conducted when a person (or persons) threatens to commit a violent act or engages in behavior that appears to threaten an act of violence. This kind of threatened violence is termed “targeted violence.” Threat assessment is a process of evaluating the threat and the circumstances surrounding it in order to uncover any evidence that indicates the threat is likely to be carried out.

“Threat assessment” is more than a generic term for investigation of a potentially dangerous situation. Threat assessment in schools is predicated on six principles, which were articulated by the U.S. Secret Service and the Department of Education (Fein et al., 2002).

1. *Prevention is possible.* Targeted violence is not a spontaneous, unpredictable event but is the result of a deliberate and detectable process.
2. *Consider the context.* Threat assessment must consider not only the student who makes the threat, but also the total context of the threat. This includes the situation in which the threat was made and that the student intended by making the threat. Many times a student will make a transient threatening statement as a joke, insult, or rhetorical remark without substantial intent to harm anyone. The context of the student's behavior makes it apparent that the threat is not serious.
3. *Adopt an investigative mind-set.* School authorities investigating a threat must adopt a critical and skeptical mindset that strives to accumulate reliable evidence and verify all claimed facts about the situation. Their approach must be fair, and they must be willing to accept or reject hypotheses based on a careful analysis of all available information.
4. *Rely on facts, not profiles.* Conclusions must be based on objective facts and behaviors rather than inferred traits or characteristics of the student making the threat.
5. *Gather information from multiple sources.* In serious cases, information should be gathered from multiple sources within and outside the school system.
6. *Does the student pose a threat?* Threat assessment is ultimately concerned with whether the student *poses* a threat, not whether the student has *made* a threat.

Threat assessment should be undertaken anytime a student threat is reported to school authorities. Therefore, school staff must understand the purpose and goals of threat assessment and be prepared to assist the school principal and threat assessment team in identifying and responding to threats. Threat assessment requires a shared commitment among school staff to work cooperatively and constructively to maintain school safety. Threat assessment also requires student cooperation, because many threats are observed only by students and must be reported to school authorities before they can be investigated. All students should be taught that seeking help from an adult in order to prevent an act of violence is not the same as "snitching" or "tattling" on a classmate in order to get the classmate in trouble.

Threat assessment is not designed to *predict* violence but to identify potentially violent situations and resolve them. A student may be at low risk to carry out a threat when supervised at home or at school but at high risk if permitted to roam the streets at night with a group of peers.

Ripon Area School District is committed to recognizing and responding to threats or potentially dangerous situations.

Beginning the Threat Assessment

The First Step

The first step in threat assessment is for the principal or assistant principal—to interview the student who made the threat as well as witnesses to the threat. In some cases, it is better to interview one or more witnesses before interviewing the student, so that the interviewer is well informed to evaluate the student's statements. The student interview is conducted to assess the student's intention for the purpose of making a determination whether the threat is transient or substantive. The content of the threat is less important than what the student meant and intended by making the threat. In all cases, the administrator should attempt to base decisions on information gathered from multiple sources, including one or more school

staff members who have direct knowledge of the threat or relevant knowledge of the student. Administrators are advised to consult with one or more team members in classifying threats and making important safety decisions. In complex cases, the administrator might enlist the direct involvement of other team members early in the assessment.

Interview as soon as possible.

As soon as the threat has been reported, the administrator should attempt to interview the student who made the threat. Ideally, this interview should be conducted right away so that, if the threat is substantive, prompt action can be taken promptly to prevent the threat from being carried out. However, in some cases, it may not be possible to conduct an immediate interview, for example, if the threat was not reported until hours or days after it occurred or if the student is no longer on school premises. If it is not possible to interview the student right away, the administrator should gather information that is immediately available (perhaps by interviewing witnesses to the threat) and decide on a reasonable, provisional course of action that emphasizes the safety of anyone targeted by the threat. For example, the administrator might decide to warn a potential victim of a threat based on the reports of several witnesses that a student truly intended to assault a classmate later the same day. However, the administrator will interview the student at the first opportunity in order to conduct a more complete threat assessment. Suggested interview questions can be found in the Threat Assessment Documentation form in Appendix A.

Consider student and witness credibility.

Experienced school personnel know that students do not always tell the truth and that students confronted with allegations of misbehavior may deny what they are accused of doing. It is also possible for students to be falsely accused. In ambiguous circumstances, there is no substitute for the judgment of the school staff member. Judgments of a student's credibility should be based on consideration of the student's demeanor and cooperativeness and on a history of any previous misbehavior or dishonesty. The administrator must be sure to compare the student's account with witness accounts although the credibility of witnesses should also be considered. Unfortunately, there is no foolproof method for determining whether a student is being truthful; even sophisticated polygraph machines are not considered reliable indicators of lying. When in doubt, the team should err on the side of safety and take those protective actions that would be appropriate if the threat were substantive.

Transient Threats

Transient threats are defined as statements that do not express a lasting intent to harm someone. Transient threats either are intended as figures of speech or reflect feelings that dissipate in a short period when the student thinks about the meaning of what he or she has said. *All transient threats ending an apology or explanation that makes it clear the threat is over.*

Examples of Transient Threats:

1. "I'm gonna kill you"—said as a joke.
2. "I'm gonna kill you"—said in the heat of competition during a basketball game.
3. Two students use their fingers to "shoot" one another while playing cops and robbers.
4. "I'm gonna bust you up"—said in anger but then retracted after the student calms down.
5. "I could break you in half"—said to intimidate someone but retracted after the student calms down.
6. "I'll get you next time"—said after a fight but retracted after the two students reconcile.
7. "Watch out or I'll hurt you"—said to intimidate someone but retracted after the student calms down.
8. "I oughta shoot that teacher"—said in anger but retracted after the student calms down.

9. “There’s a bomb in the building”—said in a phone call for the purpose of disrupting school, but there being no actual bomb.
10. A student is found with a pocketknife that he accidentally left in his backpack.

By definition, transient threats do not require protective action because there is no sustained intent to carry out the threat. Based on the field-test findings in 35 schools, approximately 70% (or more) of student threats will be transient threats.

Response to a Transient Threat

There is no single, automatic response to a transient threat. The response to a transient threat depends on the context of the threat, whether the threat involved a disciplinary violation, and what is required to resolve the situation.

A transient threat often indicates a conflict or dispute between the student and the threat recipient. In such cases, there should be a dispute resolution effort, such as referral to conflict mediation or some other counseling designed to resolve the underlying problem.

Although many school administrators are reluctant to contact the parents of a student who has been threatened, most parents would insist on being informed and would complain if they were not. If a threat is transient, there is no duty to warn the parents as a protective action, but the school should contact the parents in order to offer reassurances that the threat has been addressed and their child is not in danger from the threat.

Parents should be informed how the threat was investigated, what was determined, how the threat was resolved, and what steps are being taken to address the underlying problem that stimulated the threat.

The Threat Assessment Team

School principal or assistant principal. The school principal leads the team and makes final decisions about what to do in response to the student’s threat.

Police school liaison officer. Police officers with special training to work in schools are termed police school liaison officers, and their work has preventive as well as enforcement functions.

School psychologist. The school psychologist brings to the team expertise in psychological assessment and intervention that can be useful in responding to a student’s aggressive behavior and in addressing the social and emotional difficulties that frequently underlie threatening behavior. In the case of a very serious substantive threat (defined in the following chapters), the school psychologist should conduct a mental health assessment of the student.

School counselor. The school counselor also brings to the team expertise in working with troubled students and helping them to resolve conflicts and problems in their relationships with others. The counselor might lead an effort to resolve a conflict or dispute within a group of students or provide individual counseling to deal with a student’s anger or problems in making friends.

Substantive Threats

Substantive threats are defined as statements that express a continuing intent to harm someone. Substantive threats may express emotion like transient threats, but they also

indicate a desire to harm someone that extends beyond the immediate incident or argument when the threat was made. If there is doubt or uncertainty about whether or not a threat is substantive, it should be treated as substantive and evaluated further. Again, we emphasize that the context and meaning of the threat are more important than the verbal content of the threat.

Examples of Substantive Threats:

1. “I’m gonna kill you”—said with an intent to injure.
2. “I’m gonna kill you”—said while holding a weapon and not jokingly.
3. Two students exchange threats and then throw rocks at each other.
4. “I’m gonna bust you up”—said in anger and not retracted later.
5. “I could break you in half”—said in an intimidating manner, followed by stony silence.
6. “I’ll get you next time”—said after a fight and the student refuses mediation.
7. “Watch out or I’ll hurt you”—said by a student with a history of bullying.
8. “I oughta shoot that teacher”—said by a student who later denies making the statement.
9. “There’s a bomb in the building”—said in a phone call made by a student who later is found to have bomb-making materials and plans at home.
10. A student who threatened to stab a classmate is found to have a pocketknife in his backpack.

There are some presumptive indicators of a substantive threat. This means that, if any of these factors are present, the administrator should presume that the student has made a substantive threat unless there is clear and convincing evidence to the contrary.

Presumptive Indicators of a Substantive Threat:

- The threat contains specific, plausible details. (“I am going to shoot Mr. Smith with my shotgun,” rather than “I am going to set off an atomic bomb” or “I’ll get you for that.”)
- The threat has been repeated over time or the student has told multiple parties of the threat.
- The threat is reported to others as a plan, or there are suggestions that violent action has been planned. (“Wait and see what happens next Tuesday in the cafeteria!”)
- There are accomplices, or the student has sought out accomplices in order to carry out the threat.
- The student has invited peers to observe the threat being carried out (“Come and watch.”)
- There is physical evidence of intent to carry out the threat. Such evidence could include written plans, lists of victims, drawings, weapons, bomb materials, or literature encouraging or describing how to carry out acts of violence.

Response to Substantive Threats

Responding to a Serious Substantive Threat

Serious substantive threats may include the following examples:

Serious

- A student threatens to hit or strike a classmate with his fist.
- A student says she is going to beat someone up after school.
- A student sends a note saying, “I’m going to punch you out tomorrow at the bus stop.”
- A student tells a classmate, “Rob is gonna get jumped at lunchtime.”
- Two students say, “We’re gonna get him alone and rough him up today.”

A serious substantive threat usually involves a fight or a threat to hit someone or to beat someone up without the use of a weapon. The full team need not be involved in a serious substantive threat. Depending upon the circumstances of the threat, the team leader will choose which team members are needed and are available to assist in preventing the threat from being carried out and then to plan an intervention designed to remedy the conflict or problem that led to the threat. The administrator will document the threat assessment, including protective actions, on the Threat Assessment Document form.

- A. *Take immediate precautions to protect potential victims.* In responding to a serious substantive threat, the administrator should take appropriate precautions to protect potential victims.

Typical immediate protective actions include:

- Cautioning the student who made the threat about the consequences of carrying it out;
- Providing direct supervision so that the student cannot carry out the threat while at school;
- Contacting the student's parents to assume responsibility for supervising the student after he or she is returned to parental control (usually the parents will be required to come for the student so that he or she will not be released from school without parental supervision).

1. **Notify the intended victim and his or her parents.** Victims should be fully informed about the content of the threat and the identity of the student who made the threat. If the victim of the threat is a student, then the student's parents should be notified as well.

Victims and their parents often feel angry in response to a threat, so it may be appropriate to reassure them that the school is taking action on their behalf and to caution them not to retaliate.

2. **Notify the parents of the student who made the threat.** Parents should be notified anytime a student makes a violent threat. This notification is both a disciplinary response and a protective action because the parents are expected to assume responsibility for supervising their child once he or she has left school.

The parents should be informed of the nature of the student's threat, of the student threatened, and the consequences for the student if he or she carries out the threat.

Parents need not be told who reported the threat, particularly if there is concern for protecting that person's anonymity. However, parents must be assured that the information regarding the threat is reliable.

- B. *Consider contacting law enforcement.* If the school has an on-site police school liaison officer, it would be best to involve the officer on a routine basis in serious substantive threats as part of his or her regular responsibilities in monitoring and supervising student behavior.

- C. *Refer the student for counseling, dispute mediation, or another appropriate intervention.* After taking immediate protective action and contacting all appropriate parties, the team will want to consider interventions that would remedy the underlying conflict that led to the threat. These interventions are also intended to reduce the threat of violence but may take longer to implement and take effect. Typically, the first step is to engage

the student in individual counseling to understand the reasons why the threat was made and to help the student identify more acceptable ways to communicate or seek help for a problem.

- D. *Discipline the student as appropriate to the severity and chronicity of the situation.* Threat assessment and school discipline are separate processes, so school authorities are free to apply their own disciplinary standards to threat incidents.

Responding to a Very Serious Substantive Threat

Examples of very serious threats include:

- A student tells several classmates that he has prepared a hit list of people whom he intends to shoot on the following Monday.
 - A student is found to have bomb-making materials in his home and a map of the school with marked locations for placing bombs.
 - A student says that he is tired of being bullied on the school bus and plans to bring a gun to defend himself.
 - A student brings a baseball bat to school and threatens to use it to beat up another student.
 - A male student has been stalking a female student and threatened to sexually assault her.
 - A student tells a classmate, “I’m gonna strangle him until he’s dead.”
 - A student tells a classmate, “I’m gonna let the air out of him today” (meaning stab him with a knife).
- A. *Begin a mental health assessment of the student.* The school psychologist and counselor should conduct the mental health assessment. The term “mental health assessment” is used in a generic sense to refer to the kind of assessment ordinarily undertaken by a school psychologist.

In the event of a very serious substantive threat, the principal should immediately notify the school psychologist and school counselor to conduct the mental health assessment.

The purpose of a timely interview is to assess the student’s emotional state and determine whether there are urgent mental health needs (e.g., suicide risk, psychosis, rage) that should be addressed.

At this point, the primary purpose of the assessment is to gather information about the student’s motives in making the threat, as well as to determine the presence of risk or protective factors, so that the team can identify strategies for reducing the risk of violence through an effective intervention plan (e.g., resolving a peer dispute or identifying a bully—victim relationship).

In some circumstances, it may not be possible to conduct a complete mental health assessment because the student has been arrested, is not coming back to school, or other factors. In other cases, a mental health assessment may be supplemented or shortened by the availability of other sources of information, such as a recent evaluation for special education services. However, even with ample information from other sources, it is important to assess the student’s current mental state and the circumstances surrounding the threat.

If the parent declines permission for the mental health assessment, ask about the basis of his or her objection and see whether it is possible to satisfy these concerns.

Parents should be advised that failure to cooperate with the safety evaluation prevents school authorities from preparing a plan which is necessary for the student to return to school or to continue his or her education in an alternative setting.

Mental Health Assessment of Threatening Students

Purpose of the Mental Health Assessment

The purpose of the mental health assessment is to maintain the safety of the student and potential victims. Therefore, the assessment has two objectives:

1. **Treatment and referral needs.** Assess the student's present mental state and determine whether there are urgent mental health needs that require attention, such as rage, psychosis, or risk of suicide. Beyond these immediate needs, consider whether there are other treatment, referral, or support needs.
2. **Threat reduction.** Gather information on the student's motives and intentions in making the threat. The goal of this component of the assessment is to understand why the threat was made and identify relevant strategies or interventions that have the potential to reduce the risk of violence.

(The term "mental health assessment" is used to describe activities that fall within the scope of practice for school psychologists and school counselors who work with students to assess psychological factors that affect their educational needs and ability to function at school.)

In the NJSD, a mental health assessment will be conducted by the school psychologist and counselor when a student makes a very serious substantive threat of violence. Because of the serious risk of violence, the assessment should begin as soon as possible after the threat is reported to authorities. The school psychologist and counselor may begin the assessment *without* parent permission in response to the immediate need to determine the safety of the student or others but should notify the student's parent or guardian promptly and obtain parent permission for further assessment.

Implementation of a Safety Plan

A component of the safety evaluation is to develop and implement a safety plan that has three main objectives: (1) to resolve the threat of violence so as to maintain the safety of any potential victims; (2) to address any factors in the school environment (such as bullying or peer conflict) that played a contributory role in the threat situation; and (3) to return the student to school or an alternative education program.

- A. *Complete a written plan.* The threat assessment team should meet to share information and develop a common understanding of the threat. The team's plan should include the immediate steps taken to prevent the threat from being carried out and a plan for further action.
- B. *Maintain contact with the student.* Every safety plan should include provision for follow-up contact with the student to verify that the plan has been successfully implemented to meet the school's safety needs and the needs of the student.
- C. *Revise the plan as needed.* The team should continue to monitor the situation after the student returns to school and make any changes in the plan that seem reasonable to maintain safety. Safety plans should include provision for a follow-up review of the

student's behavior and attitude toward the intended victim of the threat. If there is indication that the student is still at risk to carry out the threat, the plan should be revised accordingly.

Conclusion

Application of a threat assessment process is guided by the facts of that situation and carried out through the analysis of information about behaviors and situational references. Instead of basing judgments of risk on student traits or on whether that student made specific threatening statements, the threat assessment process focuses upon evaluating that student's behaviors and communications and determining whether those behaviors and communications suggest that the student has the intent and capacity to carry out a school attack. Threat assessment should be viewed as one component in an overall strategy to reduce school violence. The threat assessment process by itself is unlikely to have a lasting effect on the problem of targeted school violence unless that process is implemented in the larger context of strategies to ensure that schools offer their students safe and secure learning environments. The principle objective of school violence-reduction strategies should be to create cultures and climates of safety, respect, and emotional support within educational institutions.

In educational settings that support climates of safety, adults and students respect each other. A safe school environment offers positive personal role models in its faculty. It provides a place for open discussion where diversity and differences are respected; communication between adults and students is encouraged and supported; and conflict is managed and mediated constructively. A culture of safety creates "shame free zones" in which daily teasing and bullying is not accepted as a normal part of the adolescent culture. School environments characterized by bullying and meanness can lead to student isolation and fear. Such environments allow behavior that fosters fear and that stunts the healthy development of the victims of that behavior, and may lead to psychological and physical violence. In a climate of safety, students have a positive connection to at least one adult in authority. Each student feels that there is an adult to whom he or she can turn for support and advice if things get tough, and with whom that student can share his or her concerns openly and without fear of shame or reprisal. Schools in which students feel able to talk to teachers, deans, secretaries, coaches, custodians, counselors, nurses, school safety officers, bus drivers, principals, and other staff support communication between students and adults about concerns and problems.

Appendix A

Outline for Student Interview

Review of threat

1. What happened? What exactly did you say? What did you mean by that?
2. I know you must have had reasons to say that; can you explain what led up to it?
3. How would you do it (carry out the threat)?
4. What could happen that would make you want to do it (carry out the threat)?
5. What would happen if you did do it? (Review both the effects on intended victims and consequences for the student.)
6. What do you think the school should do in a situation in which a student makes a threat like this?
7. What were you feeling then? How do you feel now?
8. How do you think [the person threatened] felt?

Relationship with intended victim(s); ask about the specific intended victim(s)

1. How long have you known this person?
2. What has happened in the past between you and this person?
3. What do you think this person deserves?
4. Do you see any way that things could be improved between you and this person?

Stress

1. What kinds of things have been going on with you lately? What sorts of things have you worried about?
2. How has your schoolwork been going lately? Are there things you have been worried about with your schoolwork? Other things at school?
3. What is the worst thing that has happened to you lately? Have any other bad things happened? Is there something you regret or wish you could change?
4. Have there been any changes in your family? Has anyone been sick, moved away, or had anything bad happen to him or her?
5. Do you have any family members in jail or prison?
6. Do you take any medications?
7. Have you been involved in any counseling?

Family support

1. Whom do you live with in your family? Are there any other family members you don't live with? Have there been any changes in the past year?
2. Who in your family are you close to?
3. How well do your parents or guardians know you?
4. Where do you go after school? Where are your parents at this time? How much do your parents keep track of where you are or what you are doing?
5. How strict are your parents? What do they do to punish you? When was the last time you got in trouble with them? What was the worst time?
6. How did your parents react (or how will they react) when they found out about this situation?

Depression

1. What has your mood been like the past few weeks? Have you felt down or depressed at times? How bad has it been? (Be alert for statements of pessimism and hopelessness that might indicate suicide risk.)
2. Have you felt nervous or anxious? Irritable or short tempered? How bad has it been?
3. Have you ever felt like life wasn't worth living? Like maybe you would kill yourself?
4. Have you ever done something to hurt yourself on purpose? Ever cut yourself on purpose?

5. Have you had any problems with your sleep? Appetite? Energy level? Concentration?
6. Have you been taking any medications to help with your mood or for any other reason?

Note that, if there are indications of suicidal thoughts or feelings, there should be a more extensive assessment of suicide risk. If necessary, develop a plan for protecting the student and making appropriate referrals.

Psychotic symptoms

Ask a few probing questions and follow up if there is any indication of delusions or hallucinations. Phrase questions appropriate to the student's age and understanding.

1. Have you had any unusual experiences lately, such as hearing things that others cannot hear or seeing things that others cannot see?
2. Have you felt like someone was out to get you or wanted to harm you? Have you had any other fears that seem strange or out of the ordinary?
3. Do you have any abilities or powers that others do not have, such as ESP or reading minds?
4. Have you felt numb or disconnected from the world or felt like you were somehow outside your body?

Weapons

Ask about any weapons mentioned in the threat. As an example, these questions concern a threat made to stab someone.

1. You said that you were going to stab [name of victim]. What were you going to stab him with?
2. Do you have a knife? What kind of a knife is it (or, how would you get a knife)?
3. Have you ever had to use a knife with someone? What happened?
4. What do you think would happen if you did use knife with [name of victim]?

Access to firearms

Ask about firearms in all cases, even if no firearm was mentioned. If the threat involved a knife, bomb, or other weapon, ask about that weapon too.

1. Do you have a gun?
2. Are there guns in your home? Have you ever used a gun for hunting or target shooting?
3. If you wanted a gun, how would you get one?
4. What do you think you might do if you had a gun?
5. Have you ever had to use a gun with someone? Have you ever thought about using a gun with someone?

Bullying

Bullying is broadly defined and may include teasing, social exclusion, or other forms of humiliation in addition to physical threats of violence. The student may not use the term "bully" and may be reluctant to admit being the victim of bullying behavior, so be prepared to rephrase questions and probe for victim experiences.

1. Is there anyone who has threatened you recently? Is there anyone who makes you feel afraid? (Ask about sexual threats if appropriate to the situation.)
2. Is there anyone who has teased you or picked on you recently? Is there anyone who has beat you up or pushed you around? How about at home?

In response to any positive answer, follow up for more information: How often does it happen? What have you tried to do about it? Did you let any adult know about this, and, if so, what happened? Be alert to statements indicating that a bullied student feels like there is no solution to the problem or is contemplating revenge.

Aggressive behavior

1. Do people treat you fairly? Who has been unfair with you lately? When people treat you unfairly, what do you do about it?
2. When you get angry, what do you do? Has your temper ever gotten you into trouble?
3. Do you get into fights? When was the last time? What happened?
4. Have you ever threatened to harm anyone before?
5. Have you thought about what it would be like to hurt someone really badly? Have you written any stories or made any drawings that are violent?
6. Have you ever set fire to things?
7. Have you damaged your own property or someone else's property?
8. Have you ever intentionally hurt an animal?

School Discipline

1. When was the last time you got into trouble in school? What happened?
2. Have you ever been suspended or expelled?
3. Have your parents ever been called to school because of your behavior?
4. Do you ever cut school or certain classes?
5. Do you feel that the rules at this school are fair? What has been unfair?

Delinquent behavior

1. Have you been in trouble with the law or with police before? What happened?
2. Have you ever gone to juvenile court? What was it about?
3. Have you done things that could have gotten you arrested or in trouble with the law? What was the worst thing? What else?
4. Do you drink beer, wine, or other alcohol? Have you ever? How often do you drink? When was the last time? Tell me about it.
5. Do you smoke marijuana? Have you ever? How often? When was the last time?
6. Have you used any other drugs? How often? When was the last time? Tell me about it.

Exposure to violence

1. Do you see or hear of violence in your neighborhood?
2. Do you know anyone who was shot, stabbed, or beaten up really badly?
3. Do people argue much at home? Does anyone get physically aggressively?
4. What kind of movies do you like? What kind of video games do you enjoy playing? What are your favorite Internet sites?

Also ask the student about his or her reactions to any recent acts of violence in the new.

Peer relations

1. What are your friends like? Have you had any trouble with your friends lately? Who is your best friend?
2. How would your friends describe you?
3. Do you have a boyfriend or girlfriend? (Keep in mind that the student might not be heterosexual, and there may be concerns in this area.) How are things going with him or her? Did you have one before? What happened in that relationship?
4. Do you have friends who get in trouble?
5. Have you ever joined a gang or been part of a group like a crew, clique, posse, or mob?
6. Do any of your friends know about [refer to threat situation]? What was said about it? Is there anyone who feels the same way you do?

Coping

1. How do you like to spend your free time?
2. What kinds of things do you do well?
3. What are your hobbies and interests? What do you enjoy doing?

4. Can you think of a problem you faced in the past that worked out okay? Can you think of a problem that you solved? Can you think of a time when you went to someone about a problem and that person was able to solve it?
5. What are your plans for the future? What would you like to do when you finish school?
6. What could we do that would help with [refer to the problem that led to the threat]?

Student Testing

The mental health assessment may include the use of psychological testing to supplement the student interview. Testing may provide information about a specific issue in the assessment, such as quantifying the degree of depression, anxiety, or anger that a student is experiencing. In most schools, parent permission is required for psychological testing.

Appendix B

Parent Interview

Understandably, parents may feel apprehensive, guilty, or defensive when being interviewed about their child's behavior. It is important that the interviewer find ways to convey respect for the parent, from initial contact to the interview's conclusion. Also, it should be evident that the interviewer is interested in understanding and helping the child; otherwise, the parent may regard the interview as an investigation designed to uncover evidence of wrongdoing by the student or incompetence by the parent. Overall, the interviewer should make every effort to engage the parent as an ally.

Parent Knowledge of the threat

1. What do you (the parent) know about the threat?
2. Have you heard your child (or use child's name) talk about things like this before?
3. Are you familiar with [the intended victim]? (Ask about the child's history with the intended victim—previous relationship and interactions.)
4. Does your child have the means to carry out the threat (such as access to firearms)?
5. What are you planning to do about the threat? (Is the parent willing to work with the school to develop a plan to ensure that the threat will not be carried out and that the student's needs are addressed?)

School adjustment

1. Has your child ever been suspended or expelled from school?
2. Have you ever met with the school (e.g., teacher, counselor, principal) about concerns in the past? What happened, what was going on, and what was the outcome?
3. Has your child ever needed special help in school? Ever been retained?
4. Has your child ever been tested in school?
5. How does your child like school?
6. How often does your child do homework?
7. What are your child's teachers like?

Family relationships and current stressors

1. Who lives in the home?
2. Are there any important events that have affected your family or child? Ask about any recent or pending changes, such as:
 - ❖ Relocation of household, divorce or separation, death in the family, or other personal loss
 - ❖ Changes in financial or parents' employment status
 - ❖ Involvement of others in the home with the courts or the law
3. Who does our child share concerns with? Who is he or she close to?
4. How well does he or she get along with you? Siblings? What are the types of conflict, what are they about, and how are they resolved?
5. How does your child show anger toward you and other family members?
6. What does your child do after school? Who supervises him or her? What time is your child supposed to be home at night?
7. What responsibilities does your child have at home?
8. Does your child follow rules? What are the consequences for not following the rules?

Peer relations and bullying

1. Has your child reported being teased, intimidated, rejected, or bullied in some other way? If so, what have you done in response?
2. Who are your child's friends? Are you pleased or displeased with your child's choice of friends?

3. How much is your child influenced by peers? Are there any examples of your child doing something to please peers that caused him or her to be in trouble?

Delinquent behavior

1. Has your child been in trouble with the law or with police before? What happened?
2. Has your child ever gone to juvenile court? What was it about?
3. Has your child done things that could have gotten him or her arrested or in trouble with the law? What was the worst thing? What else?
4. Does your child drink beer, wine, or other alcohol?
5. Does your child smoke marijuana?
6. Has your child used any other drugs?

History of aggression

1. How does your child handle frustration?
2. When your child gets angry, what does he or she do?
3. Has your child ever been involved in a fight? When, where, and with whom?
4. Has your child's temper ever gotten him or her into trouble?
5. Has your child ever hit you or other family members?
6. Has your child destroyed his or her own things or someone else's property?
7. Does your child have any pets? Has he or she ever intentionally hurt the pet or some other animal?

Access to weapons

1. Do you have a gun in your home? Does your child have access to firearms through friends, relatives, or some other source?
2. Does your child have access to weapons other than firearms, such as military knives, martial arts weapons, or some other kind of weapons?
3. Has your child ever talked about using a weapon to hurt someone? Ever been in trouble for using a weapon, carrying a weapon, or threatening someone with a weapon?
4. What can you do to restrict your child's access to weapons?

Exposure to violence

1. Has your child ever been a victim of abuse?
2. Is your child exposed to violence in the neighborhood?
3. Do people argue much at home? Has there been any physical aggression at home?
4. What kinds of movies, video games, and Internet sites does your child like? Any restrictions? How is your child supervised? What is your child's response?

History

1. How old was our child when he or she started to walk? To talk? (Ask about any delays in cognitive, motor, or language development.)
2. Has your child ever had a problem with bedwetting? When and for how long? Was anything done for this?
3. Has your child ever been hospitalized? Had any serious illnesses?
4. Has your child had any recent medical treatment? Is he or she taking any medications? (Obtain diagnoses and medications. Ask for a release.)

Mental health

1. Does your child have problems paying attention? Does your child follow directions without repetition and reminders? Does your child complete activities on his or her own? Does your child say things without thinking? Is your child surprised by the consequences of his or her actions?
2. What has your child's mood been like the past few weeks?
3. Has your child been unusually nervous or anxious? Irritable or short tempered? How bad has it been?

4. Has your child had problems with sleep? Appetite? Energy level? Concentration?
5. Has your child ever talked about hurting himself or herself? Have you ever been concerned that he or she might be suicidal?
6. Have there been any times when your child seemed to be hearing things that weren't there? Has he or she said things that didn't make sense or seemed to believe in things that weren't real?
7. Has your child ever seen a counselor or therapist? Ever taken medication for his or her behavior or mood?
8. Has your child had any involvement with other agencies or programs in the community?

Behavior rating scales or checklists may be helpful in some cases to supplement the parent interview.

Willingness to assist in action plan

Explore with the parents how willing they are to support recommendations for treatment, school placement, and other possible interventions. Will the parents encourage the student to apologize or make amends with the person who was threatened? The parents' level of cooperativeness is a legitimate factor to consider in determining the safety of the student and whether it is feasible and safe for the student to return to school.

A frequent issue is that the victim of a threat, or the parents of a student who has been threatened, will want information about the student who made the threat and how the school is handling the situation. The desire for information is a legitimate safety concern, and sharing a limited amount of information can be helpful in lessening anxiety and restoring calm. Continued conflict between the parties can increase the risk of violence, so actions that reduce conflict and promote understanding can be useful. For these reasons, it is desirable to determine if the parent is willing to sign a release so that the team can share a limited amount of information with the person who was threatened (and, if the person is a minor, with the parents of the minor). This information might be limited to basic facts about the handling of the case (e.g., the student received a mental health assessment, was interviewed by the police, and has agreed to attend counseling sessions) without disclosing more personal information. If the student is possibly going to return to school, it would be a good idea to obtain permission from his or her parents to advise the victim of the threat when the student will be returning to school and under what conditions this will take place.

Appendix C

Teacher or Staff Interview

Start by interviewing the school staff member who knows the student best. This may be a teacher, the school counselor, or any other school staff member. Interview any other staff members who have relevant information. For example, there may be a teacher from the previous year who knows more about the history of one student's conflict with another student.

The teacher or staff interview must be adapted to the individual situation and need not follow a structured format. It might be helpful to cover these topics:

Academics

1. How is this student doing academically? Has there been any change in recent weeks?
2. What are this student's verbal skills? How well can he or she express himself or herself in words?
3. Has this student been considered for special education or placed in special education? What kinds of difficulties does this student have? (If a student is receiving special education services, ask about any problem behaviors that are regarded as part of his or her disability.)

Teacher knowledge of the threat

1. What do you know about the threat?
2. Have you heard this student talk about things like this before?
3. What have other students told you about this incident?
4. Is there another teacher or staff member who might know something about this?

Student's peer relations

1. How well does this student get along with other students?
2. Who are the student's friends?
3. Are there students who do not get along with this student?
4. Have there been other conflicts or difficulties with peers?
5. Has this student ever complained of being bullied, teased, or treated unfairly by others?

Depression

1. Have there been any apparent changes in the student's mood, demeanor, or activity level? Has the student seemed withdrawn or apathetic?
2. Has the student expressed any attitudes that could imply depression, such as expressions of hopelessness or futility, inadequacy or shame, and self-criticism or worthlessness?
3. Has this student shown an increase in irritability or seemed short tempered?

Discipline

1. What kinds of discipline problems have you experienced with this student?
2. How does this student respond to being corrected by an adult?
3. What are the student's emotional responses to being disciplined?

Aggression

1. How does this student express anger?
2. Does this student seem to hold a grudge? Seem resentful?
3. Has this student done anything that expresses anger or aggression, or has the student expressed an aggressive theme in written assignments, drawings, class projects, and so on?

Parents

1. Have you had any contact with this student's parents? What happened?

Appendix D

Mental Health Assessment Report

The Mental Health Assessment Report form contains the following sections.

Identifying information. Give the student's name, gender, age, grade, school, and other relevant identifying information.

Reason for referral. State that the school principal requested this assessment because the student made a threat of violence that was judged to be a very serious substantive threat. Describe the threat, including the exact statement or threatening behavior, and where and when it took place.

Sources of information. Describe or list the sources of information used in this report, including information from the principal, interviews with the student and witnesses, any parent interviews, and any psychological tests or scales administered.

Findings. Describe how the student presented and any important aspects of his or her mental state, including any indications or markers of mental disorder requiring further assessment or referral. Identify any stresses, conflicts, or unmet needs that affect the student's functioning or bear on the threat incident.

“Review the student's understanding of the threat and its meaning from his or her perspective. Note whether the student has a history of violent or aggressive behavior, as well as any findings from the assessment that raise concerns about the student's potential for violence, such as access to firearms, gang membership, peer encouragement to fight, drug use, or inadequate home supervision.

Conclusions. In general, the mental health professional should not be expected to make a definitive statement that a student is or is not dangerous; such statements go beyond current knowledge in the field of risk assessment. The report may identify risk factors and protective factors, and it may express concerns where there may appear to be compelling risk factors.

The report should present recommendations aimed at reducing the risk of violence, and these recommendations should convey the nature and degree of concern about the potential for violence. In all cases, the goal is to reduce the risk of violence rather than to predict violence. Recommendations may include a wide range of strategies but should address both any immediate safety needs to protect potential victims and broader efforts to resolve conflicts or problems that precipitated the threat.

There are two basic types of recommendations. First are recommendations for school behavior support, which are actions to be taken at school. The report should identify any signs of disability that would indicate the need for further assessment, child study, or special education evaluation. Procedures for implementing behavior plans are described in Chapter 10. Second, if appropriate, the report may propose other recommendations for the parents to consider implementing outside of school, such as seeking community-based services for the child.