

6 Strategies to address risk factors for school violence

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School shootings engender the deepest of public concern. They violate strongly held cross-culture beliefs about the sanctity of childhood and the obligation to protect children from harm.

Prevention and intervention approaches to school shootings have emerged (1) in the literature, from case studies, and (2) from discourse among experts.¹ Approaches include:

- bolstering security at schools
- reducing the facilities' vulnerability to intrusion
- increasing the capacity to respond at the moment of threat
- transforming the school climate
- increasing attachment and bonding.^{1,2}

Psychiatrists often are consulted by school districts to provide expertise for the latter 2 approaches. Using the following strategies, you can help address risk factors for school violence.

Strengthen school attachment. Develop curricular and extracurricular programs for students that create, and contribute to, a sense of belonging. This, in turn, decreases alienation and reduces hostility. Unaddressed hostility can lead to depression, anger, and, subsequently, violence.

Reduce social aggression. Social aggression, such as teasing, taunting, humiliating, and bullying, is an important predictor of developmental outcomes in victims and perpetrators.³ Social aggression has been linked to peer victimization and low school attachment. Implement social skills programs, such as Making Choices, which have yielded positive effects on social aggression in elementary school students.⁴

Break codes of silence. This can involve encouraging schools to:

- develop an anonymous mechanism of voicing concerns
- take diligent action based on students' concerns
- treat disclosures discreetly.

Establish resources for troubled and rejected students. Develop routine emergency modes of communication, such as a protocol for high-priority referral to mental health resources. These could reduce the likelihood of students acting out against the school.

Recommend that security be enhanced. Establishing the position of school resource officer might increase confidence and decrease feelings of vulnerability among teachers, students, and parents. This can increase the perception of school security, potentially helps school attachment, and promotes breaking down codes of silence.⁵

Increase communication within the school, and between the school and law enforcement agencies. Effective communication can help identify the location of an attacker and disrupt a developing event. Create an alert system to notify students, faculty, and parents with an automated text message or phone call during an emergency. Increased accessibility of the students by the school alert system might be a quicker way to reach the school community. Work with security agencies to develop a protocol for communicating and assessing threat potential. Also, develop guidelines to outline referral and assessing procedures for students

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School violence has been significantly associated with mental health problems

Table

Threat assessment: Predictors of school violence

Acceptance of violence as a problem-solving strategy
Access to, or fascination with, firearms
Aggressive behavior
Expression of concern from other of the student's capacity for violence
Expression of hopelessness, despair, anger, or rejection
Expression of themes of violence in drawing or writing
History of abuse or victimization through violence
Poor social skills/social isolation
Psychosis or thought disorder
Risk of suicide

whose writings may present indication for possible attack or whose class behavior may be alienating or intimidating to either faculty or other students. Behavior that can lead to school violence is outlined in the *Table*.

You also can educate school administrators about the following:

- **School violence has been significantly associated with mental health problems**, such as depression and inability to form age appropriate social connections,⁶ which in combination with extreme social rejection and specific personality-related issues (eg, antisocial personality disorder) can culminate in violent outbreaks.⁷ Work closely with school nurses and counselors to identify and treat vulnerable students.

- **In most multiple-victim incidents, more than 1 person had information about the attack before it occurred** that was not communicated to an authority figure. Educate school officials about being sensitive to warnings or threats about possible attack, and help develop ways get counseling for potential attackers.²

- **Zero-tolerance policies are ineffective at preventing school shootings**, mostly because of literal interpretation and inconsistent implementation of such policies.⁸ Help circumvent a more stringent zero-tolerance policy with adequate availability of mental health care for students who are identified as being at risk of perpetrating an attack.

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