

Early Warning Signs of Violent Behavior by Students

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There are early warning signs in most cases of violence to self and others, certain behavioral and emotional signs that, when viewed in context, can signal a troubled student. Early warning signs are a signal that a student needs help—now!

Psychologists emphasize several important principles to observe when early warning signs appear evident:

- (1) *Do no harm*—early warning signs should not be used as a rationale to exclude, isolate, or punish a student
- (2) *Understand violence and aggression within a context*—there may be many antecedent factors, in the home and/or school, for students at risk of committing violent acts
- (3) *Avoid stereotypes*—it is important to be aware of false cues, including race, socioeconomic status, learning difficulties, or physical appearance
- (4) *View warning signs within a developmental context*—know what developmentally appropriate behavior is so that supposed warning signs are not misinterpreted
- (5) *Understand that students typically exhibit multiple warning signs*—research confirms that most students at risk of aggression exhibit more than one warning sign repeatedly and with increasing intensity over time.

Warning Signs

A good rule of thumb is to assume that warning signs, especially when exhibited in combination, indicate a need for further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention for the student.

- *Social withdrawal*. Withdrawal often stems from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness, and lack of confidence.
- *Excessive feelings of isolation*. The majority of students who appear isolated or friendless are *not* violent and may be in need of other types of specialized help. However, research also shows that such feelings can be associated with violent behavior and should not be ignored.

- *Excessive feelings of rejection.* Some aggressive students who are rejected by non-aggressive peers may seek out aggressive friends who, in turn, reinforce violent tendencies.
- *Being a victim of violence.* Research shows that students who have been victimized by others are sometimes at risk of becoming violent toward themselves or others.
- *Feelings of being picked on or persecuted.* Students who feel constantly teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule, or humiliated at home or school may, if not given adequate support, vent their emotions in possible aggressive behavior.
- *Low school interest and poor academic performance.* In some situations, such as those in which the low-achiever feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and denigrated at home or at school, acting out behavior in aggressive ways may occur. It is important to assess the emotional and cognitive reasons behind poor performance in school to determine the true nature of the problem.
- *Expression of violence in writings and drawings.* Many students express themselves through drawings, stories, diaries, journals, poetry, and other expressive forms. Most are essentially harmless. However, an overrepresentation of violence that is focused on depictions of family members, peers, teachers, administrators, or others consistently over time may signal emotional problems and potential violence.
- *Uncontrolled anger.* Everyone gets angry. It's a basic human emotion. However, anger that is expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior toward self or others.
- *Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behavior.* Students often engage in acts of shoving and mild aggression. However, some mildly aggressive behaviors, such as constant hitting or bullying of others, if left unattended, may escalate into more serious problems.
- *History of discipline problems.* Students with a history of chronic behavior problems both in school and at home indicate unmet needs. These problems may set the stage for more deliberate violations of norms and rules, defiance of authority, disengagement from school, and involvement in aggressive behavior directed toward peers and adults.
- *Past history of violent and aggressive behavior.* Unless provided with emotional support and professional help, students who have previously committed violent or aggressive acts are at significant risk of repeating such behavior. Prior aggressive behavior may have been directed at persons or expressed through cruelty to animals, firesetting, lying, vandalism, or other antisocial acts. *Research suggests that age of onset may be a key factor in interpreting early warning signs. Students who engage in aggression and drug abuse at an early age—before age twelve—are more likely to show violence later on than are students who begin such behavior at a later age.* In the presence of such signs it is important to review the student's history with behavioral experts and to seek parents' observations and insights in planning help.

- *Drug and alcohol use.* Apart from being unhealthy behaviors, drug use and alcohol use reduce self-control and expose students to violence . . . as perpetrators, as victims, or both.
- *Affiliation with gangs.* Gangs that support antisocial values and behaviors, including extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence toward other students, cause fear and stress among other students. Youth who are influenced by gangs, who emulate their behavior and values, as well as those who actually join a gang, may act in violent and aggressive ways in certain situations. Gang-related violence and turf battles are common occurrences in some communities and often lead to injury and death, frequently including innocent victims.
- *Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms.* Families can reduce inappropriate access to and use of firearms by their children through careful monitoring and supervision. Students with a history of aggressive, impulsive, or other emotional problems should not have access to firearms or other weapons.
- *Serious threats of violence.* Idle threats are a common response to frustration. *Alternatively, one of the most reliable indicators that a student is about to commit a violent act toward self or others is a detailed, specific threat to use violence.* Such threats must always be taken with utmost seriousness. Steps must be taken to understand and address the reasons for the threats and to prevent them from being carried out.

Responses to Warning Signs

Imminent warning signs of violent behavior require immediate response! *Physical aggression, destruction of property, rage, detailed threats of lethal behavior, possession of firearms and other weapons, or self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide are each sufficient cause for immediate action.*

When warning signs or overt behavior indicate imminent danger, safety must always be the first and foremost consideration. *Immediate intervention by school authorities and possibly law enforcement agencies is needed when a student:*

- Has presented a detailed plan—time, place, method—to harm others
- Is carrying a gun or other lethal weapon

In situations where students exhibit threatening behavior, parents should be notified immediately after the safety of students and faculty members has been assured.

School personnel, parents, and other concerned citizens have the responsibility to seek assistance for troubled youth from appropriate agencies, such as child and family services and community mental health agencies.

School boards should also have policies in place which set forth a comprehensive violence prevention and response plan. These policies should provide clear direction for principals and teachers regarding:

- Identification of warning signs
- Reporting of warning signs
- Responses to imminent danger
- Provision of prevention and intervention strategies in close collaboration with parents and appropriate community services and agencies