



Strategies to Promote Safe Schools: Identifying Students at Higher Risk for Violence

John D. Jochem, Psy.D.
Licensed Clinical Psychologist

Thank you for participating in this discussion concerning school violence and strategies to promote safety in the school setting. We will be following the outline below, but feel free to bring up any related questions or comments during the course of the presentation.

Scope of the Problem

- Any discussion of school violence needs to recognize broader societal changes. Survey results of a polls conducted in 1940 & 1990 indicated the following (US News & World Reports):

Most Serious Discipline Problems: 1940

- Talking out of turn
- Chewing gum
- Making noise
- Running in the hall
- Cutting in line
- Dress code violations
- Littering

Most Serious Discipline Problems: 1990

- Drug abuse
- Alcohol abuse
- Pregnancy
- Suicide
- Rape
- Robbery
- Assault

- Violence in the school setting is not a new phenomenon: to date the greatest number of fatalities resulting from a single act of school-based violence occurred on May 18, 1927 in Bath Michigan, where 45 deaths (38 of whom were children) occurred as a result of a bombing by a member of the school board.
- Statistics concerning juvenile violence and criminal behavior actually do not support impression that juvenile crime or school violence is an ever-increasing threat (US Dept Justice):
 - While juvenile crime did increase in the early part of the 1990's, a downward trend followed, bringing juvenile crime rates, for certain offenses, to their lowest levels in many years.
 - Studies have indicated that 56% of the country's juvenile homicide arrests were made in just six states and that 4 large metropolitan areas containing only 5.3% of the country's juvenile population accounted for 30% of such arrests
 - In fact, there are indications that students and faculty appreciate efforts being made to improve school climate. Recent survey results include:
 - 78% of students report worrying "somewhat, not very much or not at all" about being safe at school
 - 81% of students surveyed agree that their school is "doing enough" to keep them safe and secure during the school day
 - When asked about areas in which they would like to see their schools do more to keep them safe, students most often cite keeping drugs out of school, stopping bullies from picking on other students and screening students for weapons.
 - 82% of students surveyed felt that students are able to work out problems with out violence.

General Contributing Factors to School Violence (US Dept of Justice)

- Public opinion/media coverage
- Violence in the community
- Bullying
- Exposure to models of violence
- Gangs
- Availability of weapons
- Substance abuse
- Psychiatric illness

Focus on the Individual Student: Five Broad Predictors of Greater Risk Youth Violence

(US Dept of Justice)

- Factors internal to the individual:
 - Pregnancy/delivery complications
 - Internalizing disorders
 - Hyperactivity, concentration problems, risk taking
 - History of aggressiveness
 - Early initiation of violent behavior
 - Involvement in other forms of antisocial behavior
 - Beliefs/attitudes favorable to antisocial behavior
- Family factors
 - Parental criminality
 - Child maltreatment
 - Low levels of parental involvement
 - Poor family bonding and family conflict
 - Parental attitudes favorable to substance abuse/violence
 - Parent child separation
- School factors
 - Academic failure
 - Low bonding to school
 - Truancy/drop-out
 - Frequent school transitions
- Peer-related factors
 - Delinquent siblings
 - Delinquent peers
 - Gang membership
- Community/neighborhood factors
 - Poverty
 - Community disorganization
 - Availability of drugs/firearms
 - Neighborhood adults involved in crime
 - Exposure to violence and racial prejudice

Checklist of Characteristics of Youths Who Have Caused School-Associated Violent Deaths (National School Safety Center; see caveats concerning "profiling" below)

- Has a history of tantrums and uncontrollable angry outbursts
- Characteristically resorts to name calling, cursing or abusive language
- Habitually makes violent threats when angry
- Has previously brought a weapon to school
- Has a background of serious disciplinary problems at school and in the community
- Has a background of drug, alcohol or other substance abuse or dependency
- Is on the fringe of his/her peer group with few or no close friends
- Is preoccupied with weapons, explosives or other incendiary devices
- Has previously been truant, suspended or expelled from school
- Displays cruelty to animals
- Has little or no supervision and support from parents or a caring adult
- Has witnessed or been a victim of abuse, neglect in the home
- Has been bullied and/or bullies or intimidates peers or younger children
- Tends to blame others for difficulties and problems he or she causes
- Consistently prefers TV shows, movies or music expressing violent themes and acts
- Prefers reading materials dealing with violent themes, rituals and abuse
- Reflects anger, frustration and the dark side of life in school essays or writing projects

- ☐ Is involved in a gang or an antisocial group on the fringe of peer acceptance
- ☐ Is often depressed and/or has significant mood swings
- ☐ Has threatened or attempted suicide

Strategies to Promote Increased Safety in the School Setting

(Center for the Prevention of School Violence)

☐ “Safe Schools Pyramid”

- Focuses upon school culture
- Emphasis upon conflict resolution strategies
- Involvement with law enforcement
- Focuses upon physical plant improvements
- De-emphasizes perpetrator profiling and “zero tolerance” approaches



☐ Strategies to promote nonviolent conflict resolution

- Ant-bullying programs
 - Rules against bullying
 - Student/adult mentors
 - Buddy system for students
 - Anger management classes
 - Behavioral contracts
- Student-led initiatives to promote non-violence:
 - Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.)
 - Established by North Carolina high school students in 1989 following the death of a classmate. Today there are over 600 chapters with an estimated 70,000 members organizing antiviolence activities such as:
 - Guest speakers
 - Conflict management/peer mediation
 - S.A.D.D. activities
 - Winning Against Violent Environments (WAVE)
 - Another conflict-resolution program, one of the oldest such programs in the country

- Friendship groups for victims
- Close monitoring of cafeterias, etc.
- Classroom activities to promote respect
- Disciplinary actions

☐ Strategies to combat influence of gangs

- Inservice training for faculty
- Leadership training for students on cultural diversity, tolerance, peer pressure, values clarification
- Dress codes or uniforms
- Reducing length of time between classes
- Instituting victim/offender programs to make restitution
- Promote ownership of school by students through inclusion in activities, planning
- Campus graffiti clean-up events
- Supporting transportation or “safe walking routes” for students to and from school
- Supporting after-school activities
- Recruitment of school resource officer

☐ Strategies to address problems associated with weapons in the school setting

- Passage of state and local gun-free zones acts
- Passage of the Guns-Free Schools Act
- Public awareness campaigns re: gun violence
- Hotlines for the reporting of gun ownership, bullying, drug possession
- Emphasis on “telling is not tattling” training within the school
- Handheld or permanent weapons/metal detectors
- See-through book bags to prevent weapons concealment

- Removal of permanent locking hall lockers
- Physical plant improvements
 - Upgrade locking systems
 - Change locks that get compromised and secure keys appropriately
 - Equipment protection
 - Label equipment, keep up-to-date logs
 - Police/security facilities
 - Metal detectors, security cameras
- Interventions with individual students of concern
 - Consider development of threat assessment team, similar to workplace setting, which would include:
 - School administrators
 - School resource officer
 - Social service personnel
 - Faculty familiar with student of concern
 - Understand the limits of perpetrator profiling
 - The National Association of Secondary School Principals has issued a position statement opposing profiling of students based upon characteristics/traits associated with higher risk of violence:
 - Limited utility, lack of specificity
 - Risk of unfairly labeling students as either “dangerous” or “safe”
 - Creation of atmosphere within school that is overly fearful, distrustful, not conducive to teaching and learning
 - Risk of stigmatizing students, designating some students as “normal” and others as “different”
 - Ensure that the faculty is aware of “warning signs” of heightened risk for violence and to promote a culture in which anyone who becomes aware of students manifesting warning signs, especially specific threats of violence, feels comfortable in bringing this to the attention of appropriate personnel. Warning signs include:
 - Specific threats
 - Behavioral volatility
 - Known past history of violence
 - Deterioration in functioning
 - Psychiatric acuity, especially exacerbation of mood disorder
 - Recent triggers in absence of inhibiting factors
 - Efforts should be made to develop a relationship with students who are deemed to be at greater risk for violence, as well as their families
 - Develop and make full use of in-school psychiatric emergency evaluation capabilities
 - The in-school social service providers (e.g., school social workers, psychologists, counselors) need to be visible and accessible. An atmosphere of trust between the faculty and the school social services personnel can offset reluctance on teachers’ parts to refer students. The provision of depression recognition, violence recognition and suicide prevention training promotes the development of collaborative relationships between faculty and social service personnel.
 - Immediate on-site evaluations for high-risk behaviors need to be available, either offered by school social service staff or by local agency
 - It is important to know community resources and to establish linkage to local agencies which can manage the more acutely agitated student
- Recruitment of school resource officer
- Visibility
 - Keep vehicle and pedestrian routes clear of overgrowth, debris, etc.)
 - Use security lighting
- Communication systems
 - Provide key staff with wireless handsets equipped with 911 buttons

- Develop a plan for the non-emergency assessment of students of concern
 - Identify mental health practitioners who can provide violence risk assessments
 - Consider development of policy which includes the use of fitness evaluations for clearance to return to school
- Develop post-vention plans for working with students/faculty in the aftermath of violence
- Pro's and con's of "zero tolerance" policies
 - The National Association of Secondary School Principals has issued a position statement supporting "zero tolerance" policies, but urging caution in their use. Such policies should:
 - Consider age and grade level of the student involved
 - Apply consequences commensurate with the problematic behavior
 - Assure that educational services are uninterrupted
 - Recognize mistakes and correct for over-reaction, if it occurs
 - Be careful not to over-extend the range of behaviors which fall under the "zero tolerance" policy
- Consider alternatives to short-term suspension for conduct problems within the school:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supervised completion of coursework ▪ Counseling services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Workshops dealing with relevant issues ▪ Parental involvement
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Dr. John Jochem is a clinical psychologist with many years experience working with adults, adolescents, couples and families. Should you have any questions about this presentation, or wish to learn more about the range of services available through Dr. Jochem's practice, Hawthorn Counseling Group, feel free to call Dr. Jochem at (847) 680-0755 or contact him via email at jjochem@aol.com .