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## Making School a Safe Place

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# Making School a Safe Place

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# REFINING School Threat ASSESSMENTS

*Max, a 13-year-old growing up in a single-parent family, often loses his temper and has a history of impulsivity, as well as a past psychiatric hospitalization for threatening to harm his sister. He has frequent outbursts when he's redirected at school, such as from one activity to another. The assistant principal has met with Max's mother a few times already this school year about Max being defiant and disrespectful to teachers. His mother is frustrated that the teachers are unable to help Max since he is now "fine" at home. Max has trouble making friends and often avoids collaborative projects; however, today he was showing another student something on his phone and talking loudly. His teacher overheard Max say, "You'd have to use real guns if you want to get any attention." She confiscated Max's phone and was alarmed to see images of guns on the screen.*

**T**his situation in which school personnel must determine how to respond to a possible threat by a student is all too familiar. School professionals confronted with this dilemma must address many critical questions, including, Is this threat credible? and How can I best ensure the school's safety? While some threats—such as a stated plan to do a shooting or attack a specific peer—clearly indicate imminent danger, more often, threats don't merit direct intervention by law enforcement, only extensive further assessment. Without the threat of imminent danger to trigger the involvement of law enforcement, schools themselves are faced with the unenviable challenge of determining how to both evaluate and address a student's concerning behavior.

In such situations, a school counselor, social worker, or psychologist (or outside consultant) can help understand the context of the threat by talking to family and school staff members and performing a safety assessment, also called a threat assessment. This process often includes a detailed review of the precipitating incident, the student's current mental status, questions about involvement in bullying or substance abuse, an inquiry about any stressors facing both the student and family, and the student's educational history.

## **What Kind of Threat Is This?**

To assist schools with this process, several organizations have tried to clarify and standardize the safety-assessment procedure. The Safe School Initiative (SSI), while not

## Both students and parents felt that the discipline process—usually involving a suspension along with the referral for the safety assessment—was not transparent.

establishing a formal model of assessment, has stressed the need to focus on specific risk factors for violence, including access to means of committing violence and intent to act on a threat (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Based upon the SSI's recommendations, in 2006, Cornell and Sheras developed and piloted a manualized approach, the Virginia Student Model for Threat Assessment Guidelines, which school staff can use to evaluate threats a student makes. (See Cornell, 2018 for updated guidelines.) Threat assessment teams typically consist of a principal or assistant principal and a school's resource officer, psychologist, and counselors. A member of this team interviews the student and the family to help everyone understand the context of the behavior and develop a plan. The interviewer asks questions like "I know you must have had reasons for your behavior. What happened?"; "How do you feel now?"; and "What do you think you might do if you had a gun?"

This approach emphasizes the need to distinguish between *substantive* and *transient* threats as part of a safety assessment. Substantive threats involve repeated threats of violence with sustained intent and detailed planning. However, the vast majority of student threats can be considered *transient*; such a threat is only made once or infrequently, doesn't include detailed plans, and is usually retracted shortly after. The team leader, often the principal, makes the crucial triage decision about whether the student's threat is transient (meaning it can

be handled with routine and often minimal school intervention) or substantive (it indicates a risk of danger to the threat-maker or others, requires immediate action, and might warrant consulting with mental health or law enforcement professionals).

### Looking at Unintended Consequences

Despite the development of these guidelines and a national focus on school shootings and school safety, however, little data exist on the outcomes of safety assessments—particularly for students who undergo the process. Throughout 19 years of conducting and supervising school safety assessments, authors Lois and Nancy have observed that many of the students who undergo these assessments have complex social and psychological problems, including impulsivity with untreated ADHD and family trauma (Rappaport et al., 2015). Moreover, these students' guardians often felt "attacked" by the school in terms of how the assessment unfolded. Despite being referred to various mental health services, families often didn't end up accessing the intensive services necessary to ameliorate the complex problems that seemed to be at the root of their child's behavior.

Responding to both this lack of data and the troubling realities we'd observed connected to safety assessments, we obtained permission from a school district that Nancy had worked with for many years to do follow-up interviews with students whose threats at school had

prompted a safety assessment, as well as the students' guardians. Between 2013 and 2015, we interviewed 12 students and 13 family members.<sup>1</sup> We hoped to gain insight into how to improve a school's capacity to support students who exhibit troubling behavior but aren't imminently dangerous (Rappaport et al., 2019). Students answered open-ended questions about their perspective on their school and the safety assessment. They reflected on the event that led to the assessment, what was happening in their families at the time of that event, and what had happened to them since the evaluation. Below we share some key things we learned and discuss the implications for addressing students' threatening words or behaviors.

### **Schools Need a Plan, and Families Need a Point Person**

Both students and parents in our study felt that the discipline process—usually involving a suspension along with the referral for the safety assessment—was unfair and not transparent. Parents often viewed school disciplinary procedures as generally unjust. They sometimes felt that the school had decided their child was guilty until proven innocent. One parent stated, “There should be, perhaps, a process, you know, instead of everyone going full DEFCON 4.” Another commented that she felt “stabbed in the back by the school” as if the school was “intentionally trying to ruin” her child's life.

Students and parents also worried that if the student was falsely identified as a danger to others, this could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. “The last thing I really want to hear is everybody talking so negative about him, when I know him—both the good and bad sides,” one mother said. This perception is a critical finding because families who feel criticized or unfairly labeled may be more likely to reject important mental health services and therapeutic school placements recommended by school personnel. If parents perceive that the school has made no effort to understand their child, why would they assume the school's suggestions would be of any use?

A standardized, publicly available school protocol for when a safety assessment should happen may help a family feel less defensive and vulnerable throughout the assessment process. This could lessen parents' perception that the school is singling out their child as opposed to following a predetermined protocol. (One protocol that is available free online, developed by Dewey Cornell, can be



found at [www.schoolta.com/manual](http://www.schoolta.com/manual).)

The method we use for safety assessments, which Nancy developed, is consistent with guidelines developed by Cornell, Sheras, and colleagues. It involves a review of school records (including, but not limited to, the incident report, academic transcript, and, if applicable, any psychological testing or Individualized Education Program); discussions with school personnel and other involved mental

## The guardians of students referred for a threat assessment often felt “attacked” by the school.

health professionals; a psychiatric interview with the referred student; and a separate interview with his or her family or guardians. The emphasis is on understanding the context of the identified student’s behavior, evaluating risk factors, determining if the student is safe to return to school, and mobilizing resources to address the needs of the student and family.

It would also be helpful for schools to provide families with a “point person” to walk them through the steps involved in preparing for and carrying out the assessment. Tensions may exist between the school and the family of a student with behavior problems even before an assessment begins. Proactively assigning a person to clarify steps for the family—and hear their views—may reduce misperceptions and negative feelings and lessen overreactions on both sides.

A more concerning consequence of the lack of a “standardized assessment process” is that the assessment technique a school uses may not be sufficient to ensure safety. Sarah Goodrum

and her colleagues (2017) reviewed lessons learned from a 2013 school shooting where a student shot and killed a classmate. They made the point that, without sufficient training, schools sometimes create their own assessment templates loosely based on the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education’s guidelines. These guidelines aren’t an empirically tested model for safety assessments including multiple informants, whereas there is evidence for the effectiveness of the Virginia guidelines (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015). By using a tested, systematic approach to safety assessments and appointing a liaison to the family whose child is being evaluated, on the other hand, a school can be more confident in its approach.

### Try to Avoid Power Struggles

Unquestionably, dealing with defiant or threatening students is challenging. Teachers are often on the front lines of these altercations. When tensions are high, it can be hard to avoid responding reactively, especially when being confronted by a potentially hostile student. The teacher’s natural instinct might be to regain control by asserting one’s authority. However, just as it’s better to “steer into a skid” when driving over ice (which seems counterintuitive), teachers should actively move away from the natural urge to assert their dominance.

One student in our study, reflecting on the manner in which teachers react to behavior from a youth that seems threatening, suggested a teacher “should be like a comedian who doesn’t get derailed by hecklers.” Instead of responding with anger, a directive, or even a counter-threat, a teacher might respond with humor or another “laid-back” response. Not only might such a response be disarming, it might also help a student recognize his or her own role in the altercation. When students we interviewed focused on the “excessive” reaction of school staff, they tended to minimize how their own behavior may have been intimidating. Finally, avoiding a power struggle gives both the teacher and the student a chance to cool off and prevent further escalation.

### Follow-Through Makes the Difference

To ensure this process truly leads to a lessening of tension around—and within—the student assessed, the safety assessment must not be the end of outreach to a hurting student. Students in our study appreciated supportive relationships with school staff that helped them to navigate the crisis. One shared that it was crucial to have a school adult who was “by your side regardless.” Another student who had a long history of power struggles with teachers was suspended for disrespecting her favorite teacher. She was grateful that this teacher did not abandon the relationship following the suspension:

When I did come back in school [following suspension], I didn't talk to [the teacher] for about a week. . . . She finally came up to me and she just confronted me and she was like, “I know what happened. You're probably mad at me.” And we just kind of settled it from there. I realized [the teacher] really did want the best for me, too.

The students repeatedly told us that they valued the encouragement provided by school staff, especially when staff demonstrated that they cared for the student and challenged the student to improve their behavior.

Supportive relationships with school staff are also instrumental in increasing opportunities for meaningful follow-up with a student after the assessment process. Goodrum, Woodward, and Thompson (2017) emphasize that lack of follow-up was a significant contributing mistake in the case of the school shooting they reviewed. The school had done an inadequate safety assessment—basically completing a checklist—on the student who eventually killed someone, and the boy had received no check-ins or other supports, despite teachers being aware of his worsening behavior.

Being singled out for a safety assessment may cause a student to experience shame or feel further ostracized from peers. Support from a favorite teacher may help a student reintegrate into the school community and increase the likelihood that he or she receives the services recommended by the assessment—

both of which should reduce the risk of future threats or actions.

### What Happened with Max?

Max's school did a safety assessment with him. While not rigidly adhering to the Virginia Student Model guidelines, they followed important points from the guidelines, including differentiating between a transient and substantive threat (Max's threat was deemed transient) and providing follow-up. In a key move, the team gave Max's mother a chance to express her frustrations and walked her through the assessment process. She was then able to listen receptively to the school's recommendations for additional services, and she and the school united around goals for Max.

Max was enrolled in an after-school science program, in which he excelled. His mother had him undergo testing that revealed an undiagnosed learning disorder; the school then ensured additional support with his writing and organizational skills was provided. School counselors provided regular follow-up check-ins; so did the teacher who initially confiscated his phone. Once Max was supported academically and able to identify some strengths, his defiant behavior improved. Equally important, Max's school continued to give teachers professional development in strategies to engage defiant teenagers.

### Defusing the Crisis

A school safety assessment can evaluate whether the student's threatening behavior is a



### REFLECT & DISCUSS

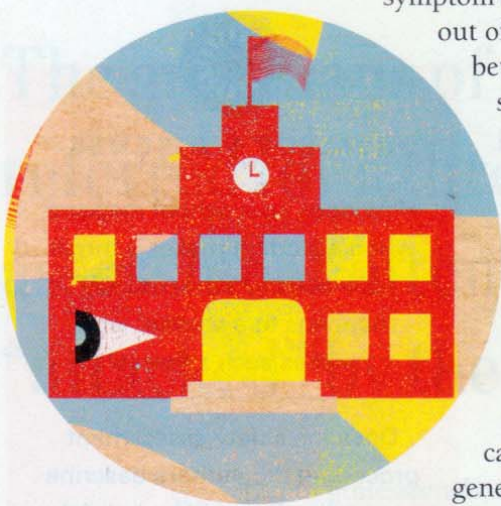
How does your school respond when a student makes a threat of violence? What usually happens to a student who makes such a threat?


Does the safety assessment procedure the authors describe seem like it would be helpful for dealing with students in your school who make threats—and their families?

Does your school have anything like this in place? If not, who might you approach to talk about putting such a procedure in place?



# When students focus on the “excessive” reaction of school staff, they tend to minimize how their own behavior may have been intimidating.



symptom of a mental illness or arises out of family factors or conflicts between the staff and the student. It can determine how school climate might be fueling the crisis and recommend interventions to improve school climate and relationships between teachers and students. Rather than resorting to immediate expulsion, educators can use the gathered data to generate a thoughtful treatment plan and follow up that considers the safety of all parties involved. 

<sup>1</sup>Participants were drawn from a pool of 61 students who were in 6th through 12th grade at the time of their original safety assessment. Our research team compared the participants with the larger pool of students with respect to threats and evaluation reports and judged the participants to be representative of the threat type and symptom severity seen in the larger pool.

*Author's note:* Max is a pseudonym. “Max’s” story is a composite of several real stories.

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**Nancy Rappaport** (nancy@nancyrappaport.com) is associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a consultant in the psychiatry department at Cambridge Health Alliance. She is the author or coauthor of several books, including *The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students* (Harvard Education Press, 2012). **Meredith Gansner** (meegansner@challiance.org) is a child psychiatry fellow at Cambridge Health Alliance and researches digital media use in adolescents. **Lois T. Flaherty** (loisflaherty@gmail.com) is a child and adolescent psychiatrist who was involved in developing school-based mental health services in Baltimore and in founding the Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland.