

Violence Institute

*Identifying and
responding to
adolescents who
may harm others*

- WHAT TO LOOK FOR
- WHAT TO DO

■ The Violence Institute of New Jersey at the
University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey
<http://www.umdnj.edu/vinjweb>

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The behavioral indicators described below are useful in identifying adolescents who may physically harm their fellow students, their teachers, (or may harm themselves). Still, we cannot predict exactly who will harm others and in what circumstances they will do so. Students who exhibit these behavioral patterns, however, nearly always need some sort of assistance.

Remember:

- you are looking for patterns of behavior or emotional responses, not isolated behaviors or single emotional outbursts, and
- these guidelines have been developed to help students, not stigmatize or punish them.

- 1 **Social Isolation:** few or no friends, hardly ever speaks to peers during breaks.
- 2 **Despair:** lack of enjoyment or fun in life and/or hopelessness about the possibility of life getting better.
- 3 **Anger:** nearly always seems angry and/or feels persecuted.
- 4 **Threats:** angrily threatens to harm others, particularly if specific plans to harm someone are articulated.
- 5 **Poor Impulse Control:** emotionally impatient and tends to respond aggressively before thinking or talking.
- 6 **Defiance of Authority:** repeated pattern of not listening to authority figures; believes rules do not apply to him/her.
- 7 **Extreme Self-Centeredness:** repeatedly ignores the feelings or rights of others.
- 8 **Obsession with Weapons:** fascinated with guns, knives, bombs, or other weapons or brings a weapon to school, or is known to carry a weapon.
- 9 **Obsession with Violence and Death:** regularly talks or writes about violence and death.
- 10 **Exposure to Violence:** has witnessed serious interpersonal violence, has been physically victimized, or has experienced the recent death of a family member, friend, or classmate.
- 11 **Chronic Truancy:** repeated absences from school.
- 12 **Extreme Mood Swings:** feelings shift from very happy to very angry or very sad without an obvious corresponding reason.
- 13 **Drug Use:** possession or use of drugs/alcohol or clear signs of drunkenness or drug-induced behavior.

WHAT TO DO

In most instances, adolescents behave problematically because something is not right in their lives. Typically, what they need most is to speak with a caring and empathic adult – or peer – about their problems. It is important to strike an appropriate balance between the need to punish and restrain violent behavior (and send a message that violence is an unacceptable form of behavior) and the need to take preventive action in response to the behavioral indicators described on the previous page. In most cases, early therapeutic interventions can prevent future outbursts.

- 1 Establish School Policies and Procedures for Addressing Violence:** Establish a planning team that includes teachers, counselors, school administrators, school safety personnel, students, local police, parents, and representatives from neighborhood-based programs. The planning team should establish policies and procedures for preventing violence and for intervening when it occurs, including post-crisis counseling. See the Student Codes of Conduct published by the NJ Department of Education. Rules and consequences of rule violations should be clearly posted.
- 2 Identify and Assess Troubled Youth:** Establish a procedure to identify troubled youth, refer them for assessments, provide or refer them to appropriate services, and monitor their progress. In many schools, crisis response teams or other established teams provide this service.
- 3 Adult Confidantes:** Identify at least two adult resource people in your school to whom students can speak about their fears or concerns regarding their own safety or their own confusion, anger, or sadness. These adults can also serve as confidantes with whom adolescents can anonymously reveal threats made by other students. Establish procedures to follow-up on such revelations. Make sure everyone knows about these resource people. These individuals should be members of the crisis response team or other core response team established by the school.
- 4 Peer Listeners/Mediators:** Establish a peer training program in which youth can serve as “listeners” or mediators for other students. In addition to training in listening and mediation techniques, the students need to be trained in identifying problems that require referral to a professional. Such programs can fruitfully be supplemented by peer support groups – with topics suggested by the students – that are facilitated by an adult staff member.
- 5 School-Based Programs:** Make sure that all personnel are aware of violence/drug prevention, social competency training, and mental health programs offered in their school, including the purpose, eligibility criteria, and referral procedures. The range of programs should be evaluated for effectiveness and comprehensiveness. It is also important to secure feedback from the students enrolled in these programs, including their level of satisfaction with the programs and ways in which they think the programs can be improved.
- 6 Neighborhood-Based Programs:** Create and regularly update a directory of neighborhood resources and programs. The directories should specify what kinds of issues each program is designed to address and include information on hours of operation, as well as the name and telephone number of a contact person with whom to discuss potential referrals.
- 7 Parental Involvement:** Engage parents in addressing teen violence concerns, provide resources to parents/guardians, and establish regularly scheduled meetings in which parents can discuss school safety issues. Provide opportunities for parents to privately discuss concerns about the safety of their child.