School Threat Assessment to Help Distressed Students and Prevent Violence
Keynote for World Anti-Bullying Forum on 1 Nov 2021

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Virginia Research Team

Topics

1. Bullying case example
2. School threat assessment
3. CSTAG research evidence

Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D.
- Holds the Virgil Ward Chair as Professor of Education in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia.
- Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project

Dr. Cornell became interested in the prevention of youth violence and bullying based on his experiences as a forensic clinical psychologist evaluating and treating violent offenders in the 1980s. He led the development of threat assessment guidelines for schools in 2001. Dr. Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest in the CSTAG manual and training programs.

Middle School Bullying
- Gossip column in school newspaper says he and his best friend John have “feelings for one another”
- Called “gay boy”
- Shoved, spit upon
- Pants pulled down

High School Bullying
- Teasing continues in high school, food taken at lunch, lab work ruined in class
- Band teacher permits further harassment as traditional “initiation”
- Gym teacher makes him play basketball with the girls

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Deterioration under Stress of Bullying

- He becomes depressed and suicidal, cuts himself
- Becomes paranoid, hears voices taunting him and urging him to take revenge
- Joins an outcast group known as “the freaks,” who protected him and wanted to take revenge on the bullies.

How can we prevent school shootings?

- Anti-bullying interventions
- Mental health services
- School threat assessment

Shootings are averted when students report threats.
Threat assessment is a violence prevention strategy.

1. **Identification**: friends, family members, or others seek help when concerned about someone in distress/threatening violence.
2. **Evaluation**: Threat assessment team evaluates the seriousness of the threat.
3. **Intervention**: The team initiates assistance to address the underlying problem, conflict or need. In the most serious cases, protective action is taken.

Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...

1. **Over-reaction**

School Suspends Second Grader for Eating His Pop-Tart Into the Shape of a Gun

2. **Under-Reaction**

Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...

- Developed 2001 at University of Virginia
- School-based teams gather information
- Follow decision tree to determine whether threat is transient or substantive
- Take protective action if substantive
- Attempt to resolve the problem underlying the threat

Forms Freely Available https://www.schoolta.com/

Continuum of Threats

- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate or frighten
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech

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Step 1. Evaluate the threat.
- Students should receive the threat, assess the threat for either verbal, written, or any other communication. If the threat is assessed as oral, written, or any other communication, the threat should be evaluated as possible.

Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transcribed.
- The threat is resolved as transcribed.

Step 3. Respond to a substantiated threat.
- The threat is resolved as transcribed.

Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantiated threat.
- The threat is resolved as transcribed.

Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.
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250+ CSTAG Workshops in 37 states

Training information: www.schoololta.com

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Research on Threat Assessment

1. Field-test
   What happens when you try the model?

2. Controlled studies
   Cross-sectional, retrospective study:
   How do schools using the model compare to other schools?
   Prospective study:
   How do schools change after adopting the model?
   Randomized controlled trials:
   What happens when students in schools randomly chosen to use the model?

3. Large-scale implementation
   What happens when the whole state adopts the model?

Research on Threat Assessment

1. 99% of threats not carried out.
2. Only 1% expelled, 1% arrested.
3. Suspension rates decreased.
4. Counseling used more often.
5. Less bullying!

Routine Practice Study

- Everyday practice results
- 339 Virginia schools
- 884 threat cases
- Descriptive results

Threat Classification (%)

- Very Serious Substantive
- Serious Substantive
- Transient

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Conclusions

1. Bullying is an ongoing problem linked to school shootings.
2. School threat assessment can help schools resolve threats without over-reacting or under-reacting.