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See page 117 for information about Downloadable Resources.

Introduction

Taylor is so excited to be back at school! She can feel the excitement in the air as there is some sense of hope that normalcy will return after months of alternating between in-person and virtual instruction. She senses an energy that she has not felt in months as excitement builds for the basketball game on Friday. But there is one exception. Jordan is typically a quiet yet friendly student, well-liked by others. While not the most popular, Jordan is certainly not considered an outcast. Lately, Jordan has been posting concerning social media posts that show increased anger and frustration with the division and fighting going on in our country, increased discontent with school, and themes of hopelessness and helplessness that things will never get back to normal. Today, Jordan is making little eye contact. Taylor tries to engage Jordan in a conversation about the basketball game and asks if Jordan will be going. Jordan's reply is, "I'm thinking about it, but there's stuff I need to take care of. People need to pay for hurting others." When Taylor asks what Jordan means, Jordan replies, "You'll find out soon enough. You're cool, but other people need to watch their back." At first, Taylor thinks nothing of these statements as kids "blow off steam" all the time. Yet, Taylor also remembers their advisory group discussion that talked about noticing when someone is struggling and the importance of telling a trusted adult and getting help. Is this one of those times? Something doesn't feel right...

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Targeted acts of violence at school are rare, but the impact is tremendous. While schools are supposed to be institutions focused on education, they are required to do so much more in regard to physical and psychological safety. The stress levels of our youth (and society in general) are at an all-time high. A recent study surveyed youth indicators of well-being. It showed that concerns about their present and future have increased, and upwards of 30 percent of young people say they have been feeling unhappy or depressed more often than not. They revealed more concern than

usual about having their basic needs met. More than one-quarter of students (29 percent) reported not feeling connected at all to school adults, classmates, and/or their school community.¹

In 2018, suicide was the second leading cause of death for individuals ages ten to twenty-four in the United States.² While there was a period of stability in the suicide rate from 2000 to 2007, the rate for this age group increased over 57 percent from 2007 to 2018!³ Current research is also showing the added effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a survey done during April–June of 2020, symptoms of anxiety disorder and depressive disorder increased considerably when compared with the same period in 2019.⁴ And during a one-week period in June 2020, almost 11 percent of adults said they seriously considered suicide in the preceding thirty days.⁵ The emotional stability of the caregiver/parent, or lack thereof, can also directly impact a child’s feeling of emotional and physical security.

While many think threats to schools would decrease with virtual instruction, that is not necessarily the case. The accumulation of stressors, many times coupled with feelings of discontent and physical and social isolation, can lead an individual to want to harm self and/or others as a way to cope. Schools, unfortunately, have been the target for acts of violence. Prior research conducted of active shooter incidences in the United States has shown that most perpetrators had significant difficulty coping with losses or failures, were feeling desperation or were despondent, and 78 percent of targeted mass attackers exhibited a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts⁶, with many attempting and 40 percent succeeding at suicide or “suicide by cop” at the conclusion of their targeted act of violence.⁷ Thus homicidal and suicidal ideation can be closely linked.

In addition, while serious mental illness is often a substantial risk factor that is present in targeted acts of violence, it is important to note that it is not necessarily *the driving force* behind the decision to offend. *Most with a mental health diagnosis or illness will never be violent.* But serious mental health challenges are

often co-occurring with other risk factor vulnerabilities (trauma history, substance abuse, environmental stressors, etc.), which can increase risk for harm to self and/or others and impact the ability to adaptively cope. In addition, research and analyses of completed acts of targeted school violence show that before a student committed an act of targeted violence on a school campus, warning signs were usually evident. Research also indicates that if appropriate action is taken when warning signs are recognized, the risk of violence can be mitigated.

This book will highlight the interrelated factors that play a role in a person's decision to plan and carry out an act of violence. Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) focuses on the behaviors of concern *and* also identifying resiliency and supports to help mitigate risk. Once these are understood, BTAM teams can work with the student, caregiver/parent, and educational team to manage behaviors, mitigate risk, and help the individual onto a more positive pathway. We know how to help someone who is suicidal or despondent. We can translate those skills into helping someone who is thinking of harming others.

In schools where threat assessment teams and protocols exist, educators and staff are more likely to engage in collaborative efforts to assess and appropriately manage (intervene with) a student who may pose danger to themselves or others. The goal of BTAM is to engage supports and help the student of concern onto a more positive pathway. *The goal is not punishment, as punishment alone does not change behaviors.* Rather, the timely response to a concern can enhance the safety of all students, including the individual of concern. The lives saved may include your own.

This book is intended to introduce school-based threat assessment to administrators, school mental health professionals, law enforcement/safety/security officers who serve schools, and other school and community-based professionals and support staff who are responsible for the safety and security of students and school communities. For those who already have a BTAM team and/or

process in place, this book can help to refine and enhance already existing systems. For those who do not have a process in place, this book will provide good foundational knowledge to establish a quality BTAM process. In addition, the primary focus of this book is student(s) who make a threat and are the subject of concern. While chapter 3 briefly addresses workplace violence (when adults are the subject of concern) and many of the concepts in this book can be generalized to adults, additional knowledge is necessary to establish BTAM teams to assess adults of concern.

It also is important to note that reading this book does NOT replace receiving high quality training for team members by an expert who has worked actual K-12 cases. (See chapter 11 for training resources.) However, this book is a great resource to help establish, refine, and enhance your school/district's BTAM process.

Lastly, threats can still occur even if instruction is virtual. Additional guidance on how to conduct threat assessments in the virtual environment can be found in the downloadable resources.



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What Is Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM)?

Behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) is a fact-based, systematic process designed to identify, assess, and manage potentially dangerous or violent situations. BTAM focuses on “targeted acts of violence,” which is defined as any “incident of violence where a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to their violent attack.”⁸ The primary goal of school-based BTAM is to prevent the immediate risk of harm to others *and* engage resources and supports for the individual of concern. The United States Departments of Education, Justice, Secret Service, and Federal Bureau of Investigation, school safety experts, and law enforcement officials, have all cited research indicating that warning signs are usually evident before a student commits an act of violence on a school campus.^{9,10} When threat assessment teams are established and well-trained, implement the process with fidelity, and act responsibly regarding the concern, students are more likely to receive counseling services and a parent conference, and they are less likely to receive long-term suspension or an alternative placement.¹¹

There have been concerns that threat assessment leads to more students being placed into special education or the “school-to-prison” pipeline. This can occur when a threat assessment process is not used or when teams are not well trained. Research by Cornell

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Establish the Multi-Disciplinary Team

Step 1

Prior to conducting threat assessments, a multi-disciplinary BTAM team must be selected carefully and receive appropriate training. The size and resources of the school/district will impact which structure is best. The graphic below demonstrates the three main team structures that support a BTAM process.

