

# Violence Prevention in Our Schools

The following comes from  
"Gloucester County Safe School Program"

## Guidelines for Early Warning Signs

**Do No Harm** – Intent should be to get help for a child early, not to exclude, isolate, or punish a child, not used as a checklist for formally identifying a child.

**Rule of Thumb** – Assume that these warning signs, especially when presented in combination, indicate a need for further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention. Understand that most children who are troubled and at risk for aggression typically exhibit multiple warning signs – more than one sign, repeatedly and with increasing intensity over time. It is important not to overreact to single signs, words, or actions.

## Early Warning Signs

**Social Withdrawal** – In some situations, gradual and eventually complete withdrawal from social contacts can be an important indicator of a troubled child. The withdrawal often stems from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness, and lack of confidence.

**Excessive Feelings of Isolation and Being Alone** – Research has shown that the majority of children who are isolated and appear to be friendless are not violent. In fact, these feelings are sometimes characteristic of children and youth who may be troubled, withdrawn, or have internal issues that hinder development of social affiliations. However, research also has shown that in some cases feelings of isolation and not having friends are associated with children who behave aggressively and violently.

**Excessive Feelings of Rejection** – In the process of growing up, and in the course of adolescent development, many young people experience emotionally painful rejection. Children who are troubled often are isolated from their mentally healthy peers. Their responses to rejection will depend on many background factors. Without support, they may be at risk of expressing their emotional distress in negative ways-including violence. Some aggressive children who are rejected by non-aggressive peers seek out aggressive friends who, in turn, reinforce their violent tendencies.

**Being a Victim of Violence** – Children who are victims of violence-including physical or sexual abuse-in the community, at school, or at home are sometimes at risk themselves of becoming violent toward themselves or others.

**Feelings of Being Picked on and Persecuted** – The youth who feels constantly picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule, and humiliated at home or at school may initially

withdraw socially. If not given adequate support in addressing these feelings, some children may vent them in inappropriate ways-including possible aggression or violence.

**Low School Interest and Poor Academic Performance** – Poor school achievement can be the result of many factors. It is important to consider whether there is a drastic change in performance and/or poor performance becomes a chronic condition that limits the child's capacity to learn. In some situations-such as when the low achiever feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and denigrated-acting out and aggressive behaviors may occur. It is important to assess the emotional and cognitive reasons for the academic performance change to determine the true nature of the problem.

**Expression of Violence in Writings and Drawings** – Children and youth often express their thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions in their drawings and in stories, poetry, and other written expressive forms. Many children produce work about violent themes that for the most part is harmless when taken in context. However, an overrepresentation of violence in writings and drawings that is directed at specific individuals (family members, peers, other adults) consistently over time, may signal emotional problems and the potential for violence. Because there is a real danger in misdiagnosing such a sign, it is important to seek the guidance of a qualified professional-such as a school psychologist, counselor, or other mental health specialist-to determine its meaning.

**Uncontrolled Anger** - Everyone gets angry; anger is a natural emotion. However, anger that is expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior toward self or others.

**Patterns of Impulsive and Chronic Hitting, Intimidating, and Bullying Behaviors** - Children often engage in acts of shoving and mild aggression. However, some mildly aggressive behaviors such a constant hitting and bullying of others that occur early in children's lives, if left unattended, might later escalate into more serious behaviors.

**History of Discipline Problems** – Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems both in school and at home may suggest that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These unmet needs may be manifested in acting out and aggressive behaviors. These problems may set the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school, and engage in aggressive behaviors with other children and adults.

**Past History of Violent and Aggressive Behavior** – Unless provided with support and counseling, a youth who has a history of aggressive or violent behavior is likely to repeat those behaviors. Aggressive and violent acts may be directed toward other individuals, be expressed in cruelty to animals, or include fire setting. Youth who show an early pattern of antisocial behavior frequently and across multiple settings are particularly at risk for future aggressive and antisocial behavior. Similarly, youth who engage in overt behaviors such as bullying, generalized aggression and defiance, and covert behaviors such as stealing, vandalism, lying, cheating, and fire setting also are at risk for more serious aggressive behavior. Research suggests that age of onset may be a key factor in interpreting early warning signs. For example, children who engage in aggression and drug abuse at an early age (before age 12) are more likely to show violence

later on than are children who begin such behavior at an older age. In the presence of such signs it is important to review the child's history with behavioral experts and seek parents' observations and insights.

**Intolerance for Differences and Prejudicial Attitudes** - All children have likes and dislikes. However, an intense prejudice toward others based on racial, ethnic, religious, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and physical appearance – when coupled with other factors – may lead to violent assaults against those who are perceived to be different. Membership in hate groups or the willingness to victimize individuals with disabilities or health problems also should be treated as early warning signs.

**Drug Use and Alcohol Use** – Apart from being unhealthy behaviors, drug use and alcohol use reduces self-control and exposes children and youth to violence, either as perpetrators, as victims, or both.

**Affiliation with Gangs** – Gangs that support anti-social values and behaviors – including extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence toward other students – cause fear and stress among other students. Youth who are influenced by these groups – those who emulate and copy their behavior, as well as those who become affiliated with them – may adopt these values and act in violent or aggressive ways in certain situations. Gang-related violence and turf battles are common occurrences tied to the use of drugs that often result in injury and/or death.

**Inappropriate Access to, Possession of, and Use of Firearms** – Children and youth who inappropriately possess or have access to firearms can have an increased risk for violence. Research shows that such youngsters also have a higher probability of becoming victims. Families can reduce inappropriate access and use by restricting, monitoring, and supervising children's access to firearms and other weapons. Children who have a history of aggression, impulsiveness, or other emotional problems should not have access to firearms and other weapons.

**Serious Threats of Violence** – Idle threats are a common response to frustration. Alternatively, one of the most reliable indicators that a youth is likely to commit a dangerous act toward self or others is a detailed and specific threat to use violence. Recent incidents across the country clearly indicate that threats to commit violence against oneself or others should be taken very seriously. Steps must be taken to understand the nature of these threats and to prevent them from being carried out.

This material was reproduced from: Dwyer, K., Osher, D., and Wagner, C. (1998). Early Warning Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

**The following links will provide more information on spotting and preventing School Violence.**

- School Violence  
[http://cecp.air.org/school\\_violence.asp](http://cecp.air.org/school_violence.asp)

- APA Help Center  
<http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=38>
- Melissa Institute  
<http://www.melissainstitute.org>
- Stop Bullying Now  
<http://www.stopbullying.gov/>
- Safe youth  
<http://www.safeyouth.org/scrips/topics/parenting.asp>