



PEN Notes: Fact Sheet #7

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Safe Schools



America's schools are among the safest places to be on a day-to-day basis, due to the strong commitment of educators, parents, and communities to their children. But, as we have witnessed, the violence that occurs in our neighborhoods and communities has found its way through the schoolhouse doors. However, if we understand (1) what leads to violence and (2) the types of support that research has shown are effective in preventing violence, we can keep our schools safe. These problems can be addressed only when everyone—at school, at home, and in our communities—works together.

Safe Schools:

- ❑ **Create ways for students to share their concerns and make them feel safe expressing their feelings.** Peers are most likely to know about possible violence in advance.
- ❑ **Listen to** students and parents who express concerns; **believe** that they know what is going on.
- ❑ **Focus on individual strengths.** All children can achieve and learn and be valued for their individual differences.
- ❑ **Involve families in meaningful ways.** Students whose families are involved in their growth both in and out of school are more likely to experience success and less likely to become involved in antisocial activities.
- ❑ **Develop strong links to the community.** Close ties must be made to families, support services, police and church groups.
- ❑ **Develop positive relationships between students and staff:** Students look to adults for guidance, support and direction.
- ❑ **Discuss safety issues openly.** Involve both parents and students.
- ❑ **Treat students with equal respect.** No discrimination toward ethnicity, gender, race, social class, religion, disability, nationally, sexual orientation or physical appearance.
- ❑ **Have referrals in place for neglected or abused children.** Referrals must reflect federal and state guidelines.
- ❑ **Offer before and after school programs for children,** i.e. counseling, tutoring, mentoring, cultural arts, community service, access to computers, and help with homework.
- ❑ **Promote good citizenship and character,** i.e. in working with civic and moral values, parents should be the primary moral educators and the schools should work in partnership with them.
- ❑ **Identify potentially dangerous problems.** Collect information and work toward solutions; share knowledge with students, families, and community.
- ❑ **Support students making the transition to adult life and the workplace,** i.e. community service opportunities, work-study programs and internships to foster a sense of hope and security.

Crises involving sudden violence are traumatic because they are rare and unexpected and we are left asking ourselves---**what could have been done to prevent it?** School safety is the job of teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and students. We must all commit to meeting the challenge of getting help for students who show signs of being troubled.

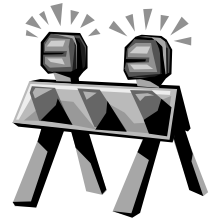
Early Warning Signs

- **Social withdrawal**--gradual or complete, stemming from depression, rejection, persecution, feelings of unworthiness and lack of confidence.
- **Isolation**--and not having friends are associated with children who behave aggressively and violently.
- **Rejection**--Troubled children without support may express their emotional distress in negative ways such as violence.
- **Victim of violence**--Children who have experienced physical or sexual abuse can be violent to themselves and/or others.
- **Picked on and persecuted**--Children may “vent” in inappropriate ways such as violence or aggression.
- **Low school interest/poor academic performance**--may cause the frustrated, scolded and teased child to act out aggressively.
- **Expressing violence in writing and art** repeatedly directed at specific individuals may signal emotional problems and a potential for violence.
- **Uncontrolled anger**--that is expressed frequently and intensely over minor irritations.
- **Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating and bullying**--if left untreated might later escalate into violence.
- **History of discipline problems**--both at home and school suggest emotional needs are not met causing aggressive behavior.
- **Past history of violent behavior**--that has gone untreated cannot be ignored.
- **Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitude**--Membership in hate groups or willingness to victimize individuals with disabilities can lead to violence.
- **Drug and alcohol use**--reduces self-control and exposes children and youth to violence.
- **Gang affiliation**--that supports anti-social values and behaviors may influence youth to adopt these values especially with the confidence and support of the gang.
- **Inappropriate access to firearms**--can have an increased risk for violence especially if the child shows aggression, impulsiveness or other emotional problems.

There is a danger that early warning signs will be misinterpreted. Establish close, caring and supportive relationships with children and be aware of their needs, feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns so that early warning signs can be recognized.

Imminent Warning Signs

- Serious physical fighting with peers or family members
- Severe destruction of property
- Severe rage for minor reasons
- Detailed threats of lethal violence
- Possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons
- Other self-inflicted behaviors or threats of suicide



Students want—and are entitled to—a safe, orderly school environment in which to learn.

Intervention:

1. Share responsibilities by establishing partnerships among parents, children, school and community.
2. Inform each other and listen to all partners when early warning signs are observed.
3. Maintain confidentiality and everyone’s right to privacy.
4. Develop the capacity for staff, students and families to step in.
5. Support students in being responsible for their actions.
6. Simplify staff requests for urgent assistance.
7. Make interventions available as early as possible and use all resources.
8. Analyze the setting in which violent behavior occurs considering the child’s age, cultural background, family experiences and values.
9. Coordinate with existing school resources such as special education, drug free school, pupil services, and Title I.