

How to Deal with Potentially Violent Students

School violence is a serious issue that affects everyone in a school community. For students, the risk of engaging in physical violence is greatest during mid-adolescence. In 2005, approximately 12% of Canadian high school students engaged in violent behaviour at least once during a 12-month period. A summary of research findings is provided at the end of this handout.

Recognizing violence warning signs

If you notice any of the following, talk to an Academic Dean. The best approach is to work as a team to develop a plan of action to handle the situation and ensure the student does not feel targeted or attacked. By sharing this information with others, a collaborative approach can be taken to further inquire about the student's situation in order to gain a comprehensive perspective.

Imminent warning signs

- Loss of temper on a daily basis
- Significant vandalism or property damage
- Frequent physical fighting
- Increased risk-taking behaviour
- Detailed plans to commit violent acts
- Announcing threats or violent acts
- Enjoying hurting animals
- Violent or disturbing written communication or images
- Changes deviating from student's usual behaviour
- Comments or observations made by other students

Longer-term warning signs

- History of violent or aggressive behaviour
- Serious drug or alcohol abuse
- Gang membership
- Access to weapons
- Threatening others regularly
- Difficulty controlling anger
- Feeling rejected, disrespected, bullied
- Poor school performance
- History of discipline problems
- Failing to acknowledge feelings of others

Scenario #1: Jamie is an 18-year old student. He shared some of his disturbing thoughts with a classmate stating that he wanted to wipe out all of his teachers so that people would finally notice him. He expressed that he hated the world and felt useless. The classmate approached you due to the serious nature of Jamie's comments. You have already noted that Jamie is isolated, refrains from participating in class and has limited peer contact.

What to do:

- Let the student know that you appreciate her/his courage for sharing this information with you and that you will help him/her deal with the situation.
- Ask the student if she/he has told anyone else about Jamie's behaviour. Document any information that the student may provide.
- Suggest to the student that sharing these observations with the Academic Dean will enable people to work together and come up with the best way to handle the situation and provide help as needed. Discuss with this student whether she/he would like to speak to the Academic Dean alone, together or you will meet on your own. Reassure that discretion will be exercised.

Scenario #2: Joelle is an 18-year old female. You are correcting exams and notice violent drawings and text on the back of her exam. The images and text are very disturbing and alarming.

What to do:

- Consult with the Academic Dean.

Research on students engaging in violent acts has demonstrated that:

- **There is no specific profile that fits students responsible for school violence.** They come from a range of ethnic, racial, socioeconomic and family backgrounds. Academic performance may range from poor to strong.
- Numerous factors may contribute to students engaging in violent acts including individual (mental illness, history of aggression or substance abuse, declining respect for life), family (distressed parent-child relations, history of child abuse or neglect), social (alienation, bullying) and environmental (media, access to weapons) factors. **It is important to be aware of the student's behaviour and communications.** It is often an interaction of several factors which contribute to violent behaviour. The more risk factors present, the greater likelihood that a person will become violent.
- Though research indicates that there is no specific profile that fits students responsible for school violence, Bender (1999) identified *invisible kids* as those committing random school shootings. They are generally unknown to most people, quiet, reserved, bullied, labeled as geeks or nerds, alienated from family and friends, male, possess average or above average intelligence, underachievers (high intelligence, low motivation), are not known to school administration, generally do not misbehave, do not belong to the *in* crowd and have acceptable academic performance.
- Many students responsible for school violence also live with mental illness such as depression, schizophrenia, stress disorders and personality disorders. Suicidal thinking is also a common feature.
- There is a prominent sense of hopelessness, difficulty coping with personal failure and feeling rejected, alienated, bullied, attacked, humiliated and threatened. It has been documented that students may commit violent acts as a result "of being shunned and emotionally wounded by peers and essentially ignored by adults in their school" (Windham, Hooper & Hansen, 2005).
- Violent acts are usually planned a few days prior to the event. Perpetrators may share their plan with others. **They are likely to talk to peers: classmates, friends, or siblings so it is important to be aware and report any information that you come across to an Academic Dean. It is less likely that they will talk to an adult.** However, students may not share their plans with others and still pose a threat. Perpetrators are likely to have engaged in behaviours that were alarming prior to an incident.
- Most documented school shooters are male.

Sources: APA Help Center (1999). *Warning signs of teen violence. Recognizing violent warning signs in others.* Retrieved January 2008 from <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=38>

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