Terminal Objective

Upon completion of this module, the participant will be able to identify key features of threat assessment and understand the basic considerations to implement a school-based threat assessment.

Enabling Objectives

- Describe key features of threat assessment
- Identify the structure of a school-based threat assessment team
- Distinguish between a transient and substantive threat
- Identify the types of information gathered in a threat assessment
- Identify the key questions for analyzing threat assessment data
What is threat assessment?

- “...Efforts to identify, assess, and manage individuals who may pose threats of targeted violence.”
- Based on analysis of facts and evidence of behavior

What is the evolution of threat assessment?

- Violence is the end result of an identified process
- Dynamic—human risk potential changes
- Integrated
- Logical
- Categorical—Descriptions of risk reflect range of lethality


What are the components of threat assessment?

- Windows of vulnerability
- Interrupt forward motion
- Feedback mechanisms
- Warning Signs
What are the components of threat assessment (cont.)?

- Risk factors
- Precipitating events
- Stabilizing factors

What were the Secret Service findings of school attacks?

- Rarely impulsive
- Targets not threatened directly prior to attack
- No useful "profile" of attackers
- Attackers had coping difficulties
- Attackers often felt victimized

What were the Secret Service findings of school attacks?

- Most attackers had prior access to weapons
- Most shooting incidents were stopped by other than law enforcement
- Other students often involved in some way
- Most attackers engaged in prior behaviors of concern or need for help
- Other people knew about idea or plan to attack
What are the school-wide implications of these findings?

- School climate predicts whether bystanders come forward
- Threat assessment occurs in a larger context of school safety
- Connections between adults and students are essential
- Breaking the “Code of Silence” is key

What are examples of poor threat assessment methods?

- Profiling
- Automated decision-making
- Clinical assessments
What is the basic tenant of threat assessment?

**NOT EVERYONE WHO THREATENS ATTACKS. NOT EVERYONE WHO ATTACKS THREATENS.**


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**Continuum of Threats**

- Figure of Speech
- Jokes
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attempts by immediate or next
- Warning of impending violence

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**Identify Student of Concern**

- Inquiry
- Substantiation
- Interview
- Follow up after intervention
- Hand over to LE

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**Investigation**

- Gather data about student and threat
- Digest & Analyze data
- Intervention or hand over to LE
- Follow-up
What are six behavior patterns on the “Pathway to Violence”?

- Grievance
- Ideation
- Research and Planning
- Preparation
- Breach
- Attack


What are some precipitating events along the Pathway to Violence?

- Loss of face or humiliation
- Relationship loss
- Significant personal rejection
- Discipline

What are some precipitating events along the Pathway to Violence?

- Job loss (school suspension) or action
- Financial loss
- Failed court or administrative proceeding
- Psychosis
What initial warning signs might cause concern?

- Direct and indirect threats
- Threatening/harassing calls, texts, emails
- Boasts of violent behavior or fantasies
- Hopelessness and statements of a depressing nature
- Recurrent suicide threats or actions

What types of bizarre thoughts should be of concern?

- Persecutory delusions with self as victim
- Delusions in general
- Command hallucinations
- Significantly deteriorated thought processes

What boundary probing warning signs should be considered?

- Telephone calls
- Emails, texts, social media posts
- Attempts to enter building
- Drive-by building
- Drive-by residence
- Approach students/employee
How are communications evaluated through the “violent action imperative?”

- Legitimate avenues exhausted and/or viewed as ineffective
- Willingness to step outside the box to deal with grievance by any means necessary

How are communications evaluated through the time imperative?

- The greater the urgency to “do something” the greater the risk
- Indicates a short-term time frame for taking matters into his/her own hands
- Demonstrates urgency for taking care of initiating a plan of action

What other criteria are used to evaluate threatening communications?

- Organized versus disorganized
- Fixed versus variable themes
- Focused versus general target identification
How do we integrate the concepts for threat assessment?

- Does person have the ability to become violent?
- Is there evidence of intent?
- Have thresholds been crossed?
- Are others concerned by observed behaviors?
- Does individual demonstrate non-compliance with risk reduction?

What is the ultimate goal of a school-based TAT?

- Process and seek appropriate information and resolution to manage a potential threat
- Bring the potential threat to a safe, logical conclusion

SBLE Responsibility

Determine if threat assessment should proceed

- Obtain account of the threat and context from the student and witnesses
- Write down exact threat
- Obtain witness perceptions of the threat’s meaning
- Obtain student’s explanation of the threat’s meaning and intentions
Inquiry vs. Investigation

**Inquiry** – Does the individual pose a threat of violence?  
- Initiated, conducted, and controlled by the school threat assessment team.

**Investigation** – Does the individual pose a threat of violence, and has individual violated law?  
- Initiated, conducted, and controlled by law enforcement agencies.

Transient vs. Substantive Threats

**Transient**  
- Rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm

**Substantive**  
- Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation

When in doubt treat a threat as substantive

Indicators of Substantive Threats

- Specific, plausible details
- Threat has been repeated over time
- Threat reported as a plan
- Accomplices or recruitment of accomplices
- Physical evidence of intent
Gather and Document Data

Types of information to document

- Facts that drew attention to student/situation
- Information about the student
- Information about “attack-related” behaviors
- Motives
- Target selection

Gather and Document Data

Facts that drew attention to the student, situation, and target(s)

- What behaviors were reported, by whom?
- What is the situation?
- Who witnessed the reported behavior?
- What is the context of the behavior?

Gather and Document Data

Information about the student

- Identifying information
- Background information
- Current life information
Gather and Document Data

- Information about attack-related behaviors
- Motives
- Target Selection

Sources

- School Information
- Collateral School Interviews
- Parent/Guardian Interviews
- Student Interview

Organize and Analyze Information: 11 Key Questions

- Potential attacker’s motives and goals
- Communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack
- Inappropriate interests
- Past attack-related behavior
- Capacity to carry out an act of violence
Organize and Analyze Information: 11 Key Questions

- Hopelessness, desperation, or despair
- Trusting relationship with at least one adult
- Violence viewed as an acceptable/desirable way to solve problems
- Statements consistent with his actions
- Others concerned or fearful
- Circumstances indicating likelihood of attack

When No Threat Present

If the threat assessment team concludes no threat is present
- Usual Code of Conduct and/or District Policies are followed
- Conduct follow-up inquiries within policy to ensure the student does pose a threat in the future

When Threat Present

- TAT refers case to the appropriate law enforcement agency
- If any doubt about the possibility of a threat the case should be handed over
Immediate Responses for Serious Substantive Threats

- Take precautions to protect potential victims
- Consult with law enforcement promptly
- Notify intended victim and victim's parents
- Notify student's parents
- Begin "Mental Health Assessment" or counseling
- Follow up to verify that threat has been resolved and interventions are in progress

Documentation

- Document! Document! Document!
- At all stages of the threat assessment, document who interviewed whom
- Document conclusions
- Document parental contacts

What are the key features of a school-based threat assessment program?

- Authority to conduct an assessment
- Capacity to conduct inquiries and investigations
- Systems relationships
What is the distinction between an inquiry and investigation?

- Inquiries—controlled by threat assessment teams (educational side)
- Investigations—controlled by law enforcement

Who should serve on the Threat Assessment Team?

- Principal
- Police officer
- Mental health specialist
- Legal advisor

What are the activities of a TAT?

- Collect and review information
- Apply specialized expertise
- Advise decision-making process
- Identify essential vs. non-essential info
- Evaluate and recommend options within bounds of safety and individual rights
- Delegate tasks logically for follow-up
- Document process
What legal issues should be considered in school-based threat assessment?

- HIPPA laws
- FERPA
- IDEA
- Local and Educational Code
- Child abuse reporting laws
- Laws regulating disclosure re/juveniles

What are possible stability factors for an individual of concern?

- Future-oriented
- Healthy self-esteem
- Empathetic, confident, takes criticism
- Available social support

What are school-based stability factors?

- Security of the school
- Control over access
- Access to mental health services
- School climate
  - Clear boundaries and expectations
  - Two-way communication
  - Fairness and options
RECAP

- Violence is end result of a dynamic process moving from thought to action
- Multiple clues are present
- Ineffective systems for managing problem behaviors contribute to problem

RECAP

- Events occur during “windows of vulnerability”
- Threat assessment is intervention
- Homicide is about making a point

References

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