

# How can I identify warning signs of student violence?

For some students, different combinations of behaviors, events and emotions may lead to aggressive rage or violent behavior toward themselves or others. Teachers, parents and fellow students can learn to recognize these early warning signs to help determine if further intervention is needed.

## Early Warning Signs

Educators and families can increase their ability to recognize early warning signs by establishing close, caring and supportive relationships with children.

The following are potential early warning signs of student violence:

- Social withdrawal
- Excessive feelings of isolation, rejection and persecution
- Being a victim of violence
- Low school interest and poor academic performance
- Expression of violence in writings and drawings
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating and bullying behaviors
- History of discipline problems and violent or aggressive behavior
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- Use of drugs and alcohol
- Affiliation with gangs
- Inappropriate access to firearms
- Serious threats of violence

Keep in mind that these early warning signs are offered only as an aid to identifying children who may be at risk of school violence.

None of these signs alone is sufficient for predicting aggression and violence. Moreover, it is inappropriate and potentially harmful to use the early warning signs as a checklist against which to measure individual children.

School communities must ensure that staff and students use the early warning signs only for identification and referral purposes. Only trained professionals should make diagnoses in consultation with the child's parents or guardian.

## Imminent Warning Signs

Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs indicate that a student is very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to themselves or others.

This type of warning sign is usually presented as a sequence of overt, serious, hostile behaviors or threats directed at peers, staff or other individuals.

When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, safety must always be the first and foremost consideration. Imminent warning signs will often require an immediate response.

Imminent warning signs can include:

- Serious physical fighting with peers or family members
- Severe destruction of property
- Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons
- Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide
- Threats of lethal violence
- A detailed plan (time, place, and method) to harm or kill others, particularly if the child has a history of aggression or has attempted to carry out threats in the past
- Possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons

When a child has a detailed plan to commit violence or is carrying a weapon, immediate intervention by school authorities and possibly law enforcement officers is needed. Parents should be informed immediately when students exhibit any threatening behavior.

School communities also have the responsibility to seek assistance from child and family services providers, community mental health agencies, and other appropriate organizations. These responses should reflect school board policies and be consistent with violence prevention and response plans.

Understanding early and imminent warning signs are an essential step in ensuring a safe school.

## Principles for Identifying the Warning Signs

Unfortunately, there is a real danger that warning signs can be misinterpreted. Educators and parents (and, in some cases, students) can ensure that warning signs are not misinterpreted by applying several principles to better understand them.

These principles include:

- **Do no harm:** There are certain risks associated with using early warning signs to identify children who are troubled. First and foremost, the intent should be to get help for the student. The early warning signs should not be used as rationale to exclude, isolate or punish a child. Nor should they be used as a checklist for formally identifying, mislabeling or stereotyping children.
- **Understand violence and aggression within a context:** Violence is contextual. Violent and aggressive behavior as an expression of emotion may have many antecedent factors – factors that exist within the school, the home and the larger social environment. In fact, for those children who are at risk for aggression and violence, certain environments or situations can trigger this behavior. Some children may act out if stress becomes too great, if they lack positive coping skills and if they have learned to react with aggression.
- **Avoid stereotypes:** Stereotypes can interfere with (and even harm) the school or community’s ability to identify and help children. It is important to be aware of false cues, including race, socioeconomic status, cognitive or academic ability or physical appearance. In fact, such stereotypes can unfairly harm children, especially when the school community acts upon them.
- **View warning signs within a developmental context:** Children at different levels of development have varying social and emotional capabilities. They may express their needs differently in elementary, middle and high school. The point is to know developmentally typical behavior so that behaviors are not misinterpreted.
- **Recognize that troubled children can exhibit multiple warning signs:** Research confirms that most children who are troubled and at risk for aggression exhibit more than one warning sign, repeatedly and with increasing intensity over time. Thus, it is important not to overreact to single signs, words or actions.

