

# Assessing Violence Potential: Protocol for Dealing with High-Risk Student Behaviors October, 2001

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Prepared by:

Deborah Sawyer B.Ed., M.Sc. Counselling Psychology,  
Chartered Psychologist  
Clinical Team Leader/Threat Assessment Team Leader  
Horizon School Division No. 67  
E-mail: deb.sawyer@horizon.ab.ca  
W(403) 223 – 3547

J. Kevin Cameron M.Sc. R.S.W., B.C.E.T.S., B.C.S.C.R.  
Board Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress  
Diplomate, American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress  
Canadian Threat Assessment Training Board, Lead Trainer  
Canadian Centre for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response, Director  
Website: [www.cameron-otto.com](http://www.cameron-otto.com)  
E-mail: kevin@cameron-otto.com  
W(403) 394 - 9468

## **PURPOSE**

High profile school shootings in Canada and the United States as well as the recent terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., have understandably increased anxiety among many students, staff, parents and others. Without formal procedures in schools and communities to assess threats that are common in the aftermath of high profile traumatic events, the likelihood of over-reacting or under-reacting to threat behavior is now increased. The general purpose of a student threat/risk assessment team in school jurisdictions is to assist in creating and maintaining an environment where students, staff, parents and others feel safe. The primary purpose of the team is to identify indicators that suggest a student may be engaging in attack related behaviors against some target and intervene to decrease the risk, prevent injury to self or others, and assist the student to receive the help he or she needs to address the issues contributing to the high-risk student behavior.

### **Important**

This protocol is not a substitute for training in the field of threat assessment and should not be used until adequate training is received. This protocol is used as part of the "Threat Assessment Training" program (2001) developed by J. Kevin Cameron and Superintendent Glenn P. Woods who is the OIC Behavioural Sciences Branch, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Canada. The training guide and program is part of a collaborative initiative led by the Canadian Threat Assessment Training Board to train multidisciplinary Threat/Risk Assessment Teams. This protocol is to be used by multidisciplinary teams who are adequately trained in the theory and practice of student threat/risk assessment through this initiative or some other suitable training program.

## Student Threat/Risk Assessment (TAT) Team Membership

### Multi-disciplinary Team (Initial Response)

Team Leader (eg. psychologist, therapist or counselor skilled in risk assessment)

School Principal and/or their designate

Police of jurisdiction (eg. school resource officer, local police, R.C.M.P.)

Other (As appointed by the SRA Team Leader)

### Multi-disciplinary Team – continued (Comprehensive Assessment)

Physicians (General Practitioners)

Social Workers (Child Protection)

Psychiatrists

### **Additional Resources**

Criminal Profilers (RCMP)

Forensic Psychologists

Other

## **Definition of High-Risk Behaviors (Violence Potential)**

The high-risk behaviors addressed in this protocol include but are not limited to:

Possession of weapons  
Bomb Threats  
Verbal/written threats to kill or injure others  
Internet website threats to kill or injure others

Threats may be written, verbal, drawn, posted on the Internet or made by gesture only and, as noted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, may be direct, indirect, conditional or veiled.

### Reporting

Any person in a school having knowledge of high-risk student behavior or having reasonable grounds to believe there is a potential for high-risk behavior shall promptly report the information to the school principal and/or their designates. No action shall be taken against a person who makes a report unless the report is made maliciously and without reasonable grounds. In such cases the person shall be dealt with according to school division policy and law, where applicable.

### Issues to be Considered

1. There is no profile or check list for the high-risk student. Some students who actually pose a threat display very few traits of the traditional high-risk students while others seem to meet the general criteria. In reality, students who commit serious acts of school violence can function anywhere on the High-Risk Student Continuum (traditional and nontraditional). The key point is that multidisciplinary teams should not be deceived by stereotypes of the traditional high-risk student while failing to take seriously the threats of those who appear non-traditional.
2. Fluidity between homicidal and suicidal domains is common in many youth who commit serious acts of violence. Many threat makers do not pose a risk to others but may be thinking of killing themselves. However, it is not the role of the risk assessment team to assess suicidal students unless the student has engaged in other high-risk behaviour that has resulted in the team being called in the first place. General suicide risk assessment, independent of threats towards others, is outside of the specialized role of the TAT team: counselors or others trained in suicide prevention would continue to handle these

cases independent of the team. Where the TAT team may become involved is when factors contributing to the suicidal behaviour of the student are identified and related to school dynamics (eg. the student is the recipient of violence or threats of violence at school).

3. High-risk behaviours are assessed using dispositional and contextual data. Teams are not just interested in the disposition or personality of the threat maker; they are also interested in the context within which threats occur. Contextual variables (e.g., a student loses a friend from the basketball team who was just killed in a car accident; parents just separated and his girlfriend broke up their relationship and the student has just threatened to kill a classmate who has been bullying him for years) are examples of factors that may contribute to threat making behavior at a certain point in time. The implication is that someone could be high-risk under certain circumstances that when addressed may result in eliminating the risk.

### Procedures

Prior to any risk assessment protocol being implemented all students, staff, and parents should be provided with information about the protocol and procedures so that **“fair notice”** is given that threat behavior will not be tolerated. The TAT Team Leader and other appropriate school division personnel should take the lead in presenting the protocol to ensure that students, parents and staff are all aware that the new protocol is a division policy and that a consistent message is given regarding the use of the protocol. The authors believe that standard “zero tolerance” policies are too difficult to apply to the endless complexities confronting school systems. As noted earlier, under-reacting and over-reacting to threats is a concern. An alternative standard then is that schools have **“zero tolerance for not responding to threat-related behaviours”**. In other words, all high-risk behaviours will be taken seriously and high-risk students assessed accordingly.

Four categories for action:

1. Immediate Risk Situations
2. High-Risk Student Behaviors
3. Worrisome Behaviors
4. Exceptional Cases: High Profile Threat-related Behaviour

## **Immediate Risk Situations**

When immediate risk is identified, the principal will contact the police and take steps to ensure the safety of all school members, as denoted in established protocols (e.g., the student has a weapon in their possession and poses a serious threat to others). In these cases a threat is posed and the matter is one of immediate police intervention; not risk assessment. TAT teams do not have an immediate role here but may be utilized following the immediate crisis to assist with a follow-up inquiry and recommendations.

## **High-Risk Student Behaviors**

All high-risk student behaviors, as defined above, shall be reported to the principal (and/or their designate) who will then activate the protocol for the initial response of the TAT team (principal, team leader and police) to assess the threat behavior. In general, high-risk behaviors are those of students age twelve or older who are believed to have contravened Section 264.1 (1) of the Criminal Code of Canada which states that students “who in any manner, knowingly utters, conveys or causes any person to receive a threat...to cause death or bodily harm” has committed an offense.

In these cases, the police officer assigned to the TAT team has the “first call” as to whether or not charges will be laid. If the law enforcement team member chooses to not proceed legally at the time then the initial response of the team will continue by conducting a risk assessment and determining follow-up recommendations. \*It is understood that collaboration with team members will be ongoing, notwithstanding the fact that each team member has their own “jurisdiction”. When the protocol is activated, parents will be notified at the earliest opportunity by one of the initial TAT team members. \* Inasmuch as possible, parents should be an integral part of the initial risk assessment process.

When data is obtained that suggests a student who has made a threat actually poses a threat, other members of the larger team may become involved in the “comprehensive assessment” phase that can draw on the expertise and/or jurisdictional authority of the physicians, child welfare workers, criminal profilers, forensic psychologists, or psychiatrists (see attachment A for a general risk assessment framework). In some cases students will be suspended from school during an assessment period to protect others from potential harm; to protect the threat maker, or both.

## **Pre-suspension and Pre-expulsion Assessments and Interventions**

Pre-suspension assessments are critical as this period is often viewed as the “last straw” for the high-risk student. It is in this stage that many threat makers

decide to finalize a plan to terrorize their school. The suspension does not “cause” the violence to occur but creates the necessary “context” for the high-risk student who is already struggling with suicidal and homicidal ideation. School Administration is responsible to determine whether suspension or expulsion is warranted. However, when suspension occurs a key question beyond “when to suspend” is “where to suspend to”. The isolation and disconnection felt by high-risk students during a suspension may be exacerbated if steps are not taken to keep the child connected to healthy supports.

### Guidelines for Re-entry into School

When data suggests a student poses a threat to others they may be suspended from school until a more comprehensive assessment can be conducted. TAT teams guide the process from initial assessment, to planning interventions to decrease risk, to plans for re-entry into a school where a suspension has occurred. This is best accomplished when the TAT team outlines, in writing, steps the student, family, school, and others need to follow to ensure an appropriate assessment(s) is conducted prior to re-entry into the school. Following the completion of necessary assessments, the initial TAT team members may work with the student and their parent(s) (caregiver) to develop a plan for re-entry that becomes a signed contract by all participants including the student and parent(s), if circumstances warrant.

### Students Under Twelve Years of Age

For Students under the age of twelve who engage in threat-related behaviors, developmental issues need to be taken into consideration. Just because a student is ten or eleven years of age does not mean they cannot pose a risk. Students who are even younger may benefit from police involvement as a way for the law enforcement team member to provide a “teaching moment” for the child. Generally speaking, most threat-related behavior exhibited by elementary aged students would fall into the third category of “worrisome behaviors”.

### **Worrisome Behaviors**

The majority of high-risk behavior, from Kindergarten to Grade 12, falls into this category. In keeping with zero tolerance for not responding to high-risk behavior, all worrisome behaviors will be communicated to the risk assessment team leader for consultation. Worrisome behaviors are those that cause concern for members of the school system that may indicate that a student is moving toward a greater risk of violent behavior. This would include instances where a student may be engaging in behaviors such as drawing pictures, writing stories in class, or making vague statements that do not, of themselves, constitute “uttering threats” as defined by law but are causing concern for some members of the school community because of their violent content. In these cases the team is not activated formally. The principal consults with the team leader as to whether

or not there needs to be some formal action (assessment). The police may be consulted with but it is not done as a formal “complaint” because there is not sufficient data/evidence to warrant that action. If data is obtained that suggests the student has uttered threats to kill or injure then the team is formally activated to deal with the new data.

To restate, when students exhibit early warning signs or when generalized threats are uttered with no specific target (e.g., “I could kill somebody today!”), the administrator shall contact the TAT team leader for consultation to determine if the information or incident warrants an activation of the Protocol for Dealing with High-Risk Student Behaviors. This allows the administrator to consult confidentially on cases without needing to activate the formal team for what may be minor incidents.

### **Exceptional Cases: High Profile Threat-related Behavior**

Canadian schools are within the impact zones of two high profile school shootings (Littleton, Colorado and Taber, Alberta). Elevated sensitivity by some students, staff, and parents to high-risk student behaviors and worrisome behaviors in the aftermath of these school shootings is typical. As such, there are situations where students engage in threat-related behavior that would be assessed as “worrisome behavior” but, due to the context of the threat, formal activation of the TAT team may be required (e.g., during lunch hour a fifteen year old student posts a picture he drew on the cafeteria wall depicting a boy shooting students in a school cafeteria). In these exceptional cases, the “worrisome behavior” occurs in a setting where, by circumstance or design, there is an audience that may be traumatized and their reactions to the incident may trigger a broader trauma response in the school and community system. In these cases, failure to recognize the traumatizing impact of high profile “worrisome behavior” (under-reacting) may result in dramatic over-reacting by members of the school and community system. To avoid over-reactions we recommend a formal activation of the TAT team.

### **Further Steps to be Considered**

As the TAT leader is also a clinician (psychologist, therapist, counselor) they shall be responsible to ensure that the recipient(s)/victim(s) of the student threats/behaviors shall be assessed and services provided as necessary. As the threat may be directed towards one or two students, an entire class, or the school population in general, the circumstances will dictate how far reaching an intervention may be. The TAT leader and the administrator shall determine if crisis counseling or a crisis response team is needed to re-establish calm.

Key Point: There may be cases where the recipient of a threat has been engaged in high-risk behaviours themselves that lead to the threat(s) in the first instance. In those situations the recipient of the threat(s) may need to be assessed for high-risk behaviour as well.

The TAT team leader shall be responsible to complete an TAT incident report and keep records on file (See Attachment "B") according to their governing professional standards.

The administrator shall notify all school staff, within a reasonable time period, when the protocol has been activated as a result of high-risk student behavior.

## Attachment: A

### The Interview (Guiding Questions):

The following eleven questions are courtesy of the excellent work done by Robert Fein, Bryan Vossekuil, William Pollack, Randy Borum, Bill Moadzeleski, and Marissa Reddy who developed *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Safe and Drug-Free Schools program and U.S. Secret Service, national Threat Assessment Center, Washington, D.C., 2002.

1. What are the student's motive(s) and goals?
  - What motivated the student to make the statements or take the actions that caused him or her to come to attention?
  - Does the situation or circumstance that led to these statements or actions still exist?
  - Does the student have a major grievance or grudge? Against whom?
  - What efforts have been made to resolve the problem and what has been the result? Does the potential attacker feel any part of the problem is resolved or see any alternatives?
2. Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack?
  - What, if anything, has the student communicated to someone else (targets, friends, other students, teachers, family, others) or written in a diary, journal or Web site concerning his/her ideas and/or intentions?
  - Have friends been alerted or "warned away"?
3. Has the student shown inappropriate interest in any of the following?
  - School attacks or attackers;
  - Weapons (including recent acquisition of any relevant weapon);
  - Incidents of mass violence (terrorism, workplace violence, mass murderers).
4. Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviours? These behaviours might include?
  - Developing an attack idea or plan;
  - Making efforts to acquire or practice with a weapons;
  - Casing, or checking out, possible sites and areas for attack;
  - Rehearsing attacks or ambushes.

5. Does the student have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?
  - How organized is the student's thinking and behaviour?
  - Does the student have the means, e.g., access to a weapon to carry out an attack?
  
6. Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation and/or despair?
  - Is there information to suggest that the student is experiencing desperation and/or despair?
  - Has the student experienced a recent failure, loss and/or loss of status?
  - Is the student known to be having difficulty coping with a stressful event?
  - Is the student now, or has the student ever been, suicidal or "accident prone"? Has the student engaged in behaviour that suggests that he or she has considered ending their life?
  
7. Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?
  - Does the student have at least one relationship with an adult where the student feels that he or she can confide in the adult and believes that the adult will listen without judging or jumping to conclusions? (Students with trusting relationships with adults may be directed away from violence and despair and toward hope.)
  - Is the student emotionally connected to-or disconnected from-other students?
  - Has the student previously come to someone's attention or raised concern in a way that suggested he or she needs intervention or support services?
  
8. Does the student see violence as acceptable-or desirable-or the only-way to solve Problems?
  - Does the setting around the student (friends, fellow students, parents, teachers, adults) explicitly or implicitly support or endorse violence as a way of resolving problems or disputes?
  - Has the student been "dared" by others to engage in an act of violence?
  
9. Is the student's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions?
  - Does information from collateral interviews and from the student's own behaviour confirm or dispute what the student says is going on?

10. Are other people concerned about the student's potential for violence?
  - Are those who know the student concerned that he or she might take action based on violent ideas or plans?
  - Are those who know the student concerned about a specific target?
  - Have those who know the student witnessed recent changes or escalations in mood and behaviour?
  
11. What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?
  - What factors in the student's life and/or environment might increase or decrease the likelihood that the student will attempt to mount an attack at school?
  - What is the response of other persons who know about the student's ideas or plan to mount an attack? (Do those who know the student's ideas actively discourage the student from acting violently, encourage the student to attack, deny the possibility of violence, passively collude with an attack, etc.?)

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**Assessment and planning for intervention** should be a concurrent process that takes into consideration the four-pronged assessment model developed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that includes:

- Personality of the Student
- Family Dynamics
- School Dynamics
- Social Dynamics

## **Attachment: B**

### **Threat/Risk Assessment Incident Report**

- Name of the threat-maker and his/her relationship to the school and to the recipient.
- Name(s) of the victims or potential victims.
- When and where the incident occurred.
- What happened immediately prior to the incident.
- The specific language of the threat.
- Physical conduct that would substantiate intent to follow through on the threat.
- How the threat-maker appeared (physically and emotionally).
- Names of others who were directly involved and any actions they took.
- How the incident ended.
- Names of witnesses.
- What happened to the threat-maker after the incident.
- What happened to the other students or employees directly involved after the incident.
- Names of any administrators, teachers, or staff and how they responded.
- What event(s) triggered the incident.
- Any history leading up to the incident.
- The steps that have been taken to ensure the threat will not be carried out.
- Suggestions for preventing school violence in the future.

Adapted from the *“Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence”*.  
Published by the International Association of Chiefs of Police.