Another Pile of Rotting Teddy Bears

We don't like authentic tragedy. We don't want to think about Columbine, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook or the latest obscene event. We see the television news reports, form our opinions and then try to convince ourselves that it won't happen here.

Sandy Hook, 2012

But deep down, we know that it could, and we don't really have an actionable plan to prevent it. There will be another pile of teddy bears left to rot in the sun. We **can**, however, **do something about it**.

How big is the problem? Everybody knows about Columbine, Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook, but we shy away from the total. The Brady Campaign has documented more than 175 incidents involving guns in or around schools since 1997.

Colorado, 2001

Almost twenty years ago, a newspaper could run a one-word headline - **Again** - and everyone in Denver knew what it meant. Now we all do.

The immediate tragedy can blind us to the pattern. Like the simple folks in rural Germany, we don't want to put it all together: it can only result in an admission of culpability. At a visceral level, it begins with this recognition that we've been conditioned to stand by when something awful happens. And *that* will hurt.

Confronting the Current State

First, we can ignore the party lines and the public dementia. There are no quick or easy solutions. We can't ban the guns, or the bullets. We can't control the content our children are exposed to, and we can't create a safe place for every kid to grow up in. *I wish we could, I have three daughters in public schools.*

After Columbine, I had the good fortune to work with a woman who had two children in that school. On the day it happened, she quit her professional job and spent a year working with the kids who survived. It was a simple, heroic act and we all need to learn from it. If we're serious about stopping the next attack, we have to begin by accepting the fact that **it's up to us**.

How do we begin? We can start by setting a goal: to save the life of the child who would pick up a gun in anger. If we focus on what to do after the gun enters the picture, it's too late, we have lost the battle.

It's one of the lessons the parents of Columbine learned: we have to build that village, and invite everyone to live in it if we want real safety.

Think of a local community as a functional nervous system, capable of transmitting the signals that allow us to recognize the level of pain in a child's life. If we pay attention to those signals, we may be able to react in time to save more lives. If we do not act together, we won't hear the warning signals or effectively respond to the new threats in our environment.

How do we respond to threats in our modern culture? We look at the parents and the home, we take a magnifying glass to the school, and then we wait for law enforcement to assign blame and assure us that it won't happen again - not on their watch.

Sometimes, we look at the churches, or the mass-media. Video games, the Internet, too many guns and *Natural Born Killers*. Each factor competes for our attention, and each self-proclaimed expert tries to use the disaster to advance their agenda for social or political change.

To get the ball rolling, let's start with a basic observation:

Shakespeare left us with some building blocks for understanding the human dilemma. In his plays, there is often a breach, or upset in the balance of power that sets a plot in motion. The action is driven by each character's attempt to restore a balance, or re-attach responsibility and accountability to the exercise of authority at the political or personal levels. The resolution of the play occurs when the players create a balance that restores a normative state.

As we examine the major influences in a child's life, remember the human tendency is to disassociate authority from responsibility and accountability. Likewise, we over-estimate the power of any given player in the human drama when we're holding them accountable for their actions. Like Solomon, we need to keep the scales balanced: using rigged weights or picking up a sledgehammer doesn't help.

Who Are the Players?

The protagonists need no introduction. We all know the profile: a disaffected adolescent, usually an upper-middle-class white male with no clear aspirations or intimate connections with peers, especially of the opposite sex. Escalating sociopathic attitudes and behaviors. Some sort of previous run-in with the law or the therapeutic industry, which are converging in our time. The lethally angry young man. Presentable on the surface, but seething with rage and resentment on the inside.

For the armchair Nancy Reagans, he's not a heavy doper. He doesn't wear gang colors. The music he is listening to is not exerting a Svengali-type influence. He is the kid-next-door: clean cut, nice clothes and polite, when it suits his purpose. Like everyone else his age, he plays video games, watches a lot of TV, gets a part-time job in the summer and all the rest. But he does spend a lot of time alone - latchkeys, private rooms and parents who are simply normal.

But then again, there's always something off-kilter. Each case is a little different, but we sense a common theme. A journal entry exposed in the Columbine case offers a clue: one of the killers wrote *"The lonely man strikes with absolute rage."* Isolation, exclusion, and social alienation with deep psycho-sexual roots. Some days they feel like a nut, and some days they don't. But before we dig into all that, let's acknowledge that these kids are not trying to "get away" with anything.

Nature or Nurture?

So far, no one has identified the monster gene. In *Descarte's Error*, Antonio Damasio points out that the human genome cannot account for all the variations in the form and expression of the human soul. Our DNA provides a pattern, but experience and environment direct how the pattern is manifested or suppressed in a given person. In other words, it only makes sense to talk about nature **AND** nurture - viewing one in isolation from the other will lead us to some strange and misguided conclusions.

Let us also stipulate that there is a biological, electro-chemical and hormonal basis for behavioral and psychic phenomenon. In some cases, the environment triggers various responses; in others, a person self-induces a given state or seeks out the stimuli that drives a particular dementia. Either way, we can discuss the environmental influences if we bear in mind that some kids may be genetically disposed to react violently to a given situation while others are not.

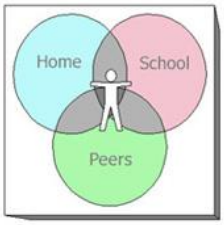
Given the complexity of the human mind, we should take a queue from Dr. Skinner and focus on the behavior we **can** observe instead of trying to identify any universal trigger or define a theory of psychopathic action.

Maps, Models and the Quad Rule

Understanding a human life is a monumental challenge. The greatest names in literary history have created some stunning artifacts that come close to capturing the inner conflicts of the soul in action. But these artifacts are not the territory itself; they are models and maps that present enough detail for us to fill in the blanks and perceive a human character on the page. If, in a holographic sense, there are enough elements in front of us, we can achieve some level of understanding. Or at least gain some insight into the nature of a person and the forces that drive or buffet them through life.

As we look at some of the elements in a child's life, we'll use some maps and models, diagrams and other verbal tools to shed some light. Which brings us to the "Quad Rule." This one states that "if it's worth looking at, it's on the corner of four different maps." Defined by USGS quadrangle map users, and confirmed by countless others, it reminds us of the overlapping and intersecting nature of our maps, and the complex variety of influences that shape a person.

We've mapped three influences in a child's life to illustrate the Quad Rule. By locating a child at the center of these domains, we can reflect on how the home and school overlap and intersect in their effects. Parents reinforce or contradict the lessons of the classroom. Teachers give feedback and direction to parents. Both interact with a child's peers, who impact what happens in the school and the home.



Embrace the complexity or stick your head in the sand. Parsing it out may be useful at times, but a kid can't move out of the center and live an *abstract* life.

The Post-Nuclear Family

The family structure, as Ward and June Cleaver knew it, has imploded. The nuclear form has proven far too unstable - backyard Chernobyls are now commonplace. Amidst the meltdowns, we try to re-establish the extended family, the tribe, or some group that we can *belong* to. In the chaos, every family has become a little unhappy in its own way. Or a lot.

People drift in and out: brothers, sisters, step-parents and tangled family trees. The only thing for certain is that no one's domestic status is truly *permanent*. We can protest the facts all we want, but chances are few kids will have the same familial bonds that occurred in previous eras. Statistically, at least 50% of American children will experience divorce, followed by single-parent or step-family dynamics.

Everybody wants to raise diamonds. We can create the pressure and heat, but the crystalline pattern is elusive. Some find it, some create it - but mostly we just settle for lumps of well-formed coal. We look to the schools to serve as the new *agora* (or public space) where the young and old can mix and learn how to be human from each other. The real agora, unfortunately, has become a Skinner box where we learn how to be

rats. The schools, asked to serve *in loco parentis*, are told to respect the diversity of hundreds or thousands of parenting strategies. All trying to form diamonds in their own way. And it's not working.

Perhaps it's time to invoke the Quad Rule: where parenting and teaching overlap, we find a large variety of parenting strategies interacting with a relatively limited number of teaching methods. It's not that every teacher doesn't bring something unique to the job; rather, most are operating from a common theoretical foundation. If every parent were to pick up a used **Educational Psychology** text from a college bookstore, we would all have a better chance of working with our teachers and integrating our efforts.

In other words, it's up to the **parents** to take the first step and learn something about how schools function. I'm not suggesting that every parent needs therapy or that we should all enroll in night classes. What I am advocating is that we should be informed and engaged. The average Ed. Psych textbook is written for a college freshman who reads at the 10th grade level. Accessible to the layman and reasonably comprehensive, they're widely available and older, used ones are nearly free.

Here's a quick point to consider: John Dewey, a major figure in American education back in the 1920s, thought that one of our school's most important goals was to prepare children to be competent citizens of a democratic republic. That's a tall order, and it provides a meaningful goal that parents, kids and teachers can work toward.

Getting Out of the School Daze

The kids are marching along in order, but we're a long way from Dewey's ideal. The focus on multiple-choice tests such as the CSAP and the SAT has sadly distorted the educational process. Faced with a Scantron form and a number two pencil, the urge to just fill in the dots at random must be overwhelming. But the kids have internalized the lesson plans of the uninspired; they don't expect to do anything more challenging than to play a quick game of true/false/fill-in-the-blank.

Viewed from a historical perspective, the current testing and college prep focus in high schools is just a surface detail of the larger trend of delaying a person's entry into the adult world. The last line of defense, as it were, keeps moving forward until we have not simply arrested adolescence, we've made a permanent lifestyle out of it. Biology meets sociology and macro-economics, and we have young adults who are, in effect, not allowed to mature until it's handy for corporate America.

But this doesn't mean that biology stops. It's time we stopped recoiling in horror at the thought of teen pregnancy - after all, it was normal up until a hundred years ago. It's the denial of this physical reality, the desire to "re-engineer" the human condition that creates the damage. Defiantly, teenagers grasp for adulthood any way they can.

Forcing the issue, some leave the holding pen and set out on their own. Or, if we're lucky, they slide through in a daze waiting for permission to begin their lives. And when our luck runs out, they might pick up a gun. They're slipping through the cracks and entering the world without citizenship skills (after all, that's for adults, right?). Everybody points fingers, nobody wants to get in front of the oncoming train wreck, and the body politic degenerates while our kids try to teach themselves how to be adults in an increasingly childish world.

So how do we avoid leaving every child behind? There are no easy answers. The first step is to acknowledge that a number two pencil and a Scantron have limited value in preparing children to become adults. If we can look beyond the simple measures and the corporate drive to standardize, we can open the door to meaningful reform.

For example, if we are to measure the performance of our schools, let us create a scoring system that tracks each student's personal, social, academic and financial success or failure *over the long term* and then use the data to evaluate the effectiveness of the system.

Helping well-adjusted kids stay that way isn't much of a challenge; elevating the more difficult ones to social, academic and professional success can provide a more meaningful goal for our teachers.

The data is out there, but we may have to reach an agreement in order to use it. Perhaps we can suggest amending the Patriot Act to open the door between the school districts, the IRS and the penal system. And while we're at it, perhaps we should clarify the definition of terrorist to avoid the embarrassment of convicting our own children under the current terms of the act (as occurred in a 2005 case in Michigan).

Life in the Age of Zero Tolerance

Many of our efforts to address social problems just aren't working. Faced with the difficulty of maintaining a complex institution, the temptation to achieve clarity by reducing problems and potential solutions to **black and white** terms is irresistible.

The two-valued orientation has produced one of the grimmer insults to the human spirit, the "zero tolerance" policy. Conceived in one of those legislative bubbles where the air becomes a little too rarified for coherent thought, this notion that we can simply prohibit our problems sounds like we've made a step forward. And we have, right off the cliff. Once we tumble far enough down this slippery slope, we may get enough oxygen to recognize the need for shades of gray, for humane discretion and due process.

Humanists, psychologists and those who study General Semantics identify the two-valued orientation as a defining characteristic of an immature or emotionally disturbed person. It is a warning sign for the individual and the culture. When we are tempted to address an issue with an absolute policy, it should serve as a signal that our reaction is juvenile, rushed, or to some degree, ***inhumane***. Cultures can be psychopathic, too. And kids know it - how do we expect them to react when we tell them we have *zero tolerance* for those who break a rule? Expulsion from the community and the cold ring of steel bars: we need to ask if this is the best response we can manage.

By adopting two-valued, zero tolerance policies, we're teaching our children that authority is blind, and the response to infractions against the norm should be uniform and absolute. It's a lesson the Columbine shooters learned all too well: *the lonely man strikes with absolute rage*. Historically, the formal operations of a multi-valued orientation have been reserved for college, when students are more apt to succeed in the effort. Pass or fail, it may be time to introduce the concept to our adolescents. As for our legislators and judges, they should be removed from office if they aren't willing to move past the bipolar orientation and replace zero tolerance policies with the hard work of administering justice on a case-by-case basis.

Threat Assessment and Response Strategies

The National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (**NCAVC**), a team sponsored by the FBI, offered a useful threat assessment model in a report drafted in 1999. This model describes some of the signals a shooter may "broadcast" before acting and offers direction for drafting a response plan. The report acknowledges that there are no easy answers, and directs us to respond to the circumstance, setting and the options we have when we're faced with a student who is considering violence.

The NCAVC team also offers an important **warning** about the difficulty of predicting violence. They point out that the incidence of school shootings is very low, and a very large number of students may "fit the profile" or present risk factors. This means that anyone using the model will generate many **"false positives"** and must set aside any zero-tolerance policies before responding. As the report notes, "some threats can herald a clear and present danger of a tragedy on the scale of Columbine High School. Others represent little or no real threat to anyone's safety. Neither should be ignored, but reacting to both in the same manner is ineffective and self-defeating."

Threat assessment, for those who are unfamiliar with the term, is the attempt to determine the credibility of a threat and whether a person has the means, motivation or intent, and the opportunity to carry it out. Because we live in an open society, we must accept that an opportunity will exist on any given school day: we cannot place our children behind razor wire. Therefore, it is up to us to pay attention, to identify that child who is contemplating violence (a threat) and determine whether or not they have the **means, motive and intent** to carry it out so we may do something about it before it is too late.

What Constitutes a Threat?

Formally, a threat is "an expression of intent to do harm or act out violently." This expression may be spoken, written, or symbolic: examples include verbal statements, notes or online postings, and making a shooting gesture with a hand. While all threats must be evaluated, there are two critical principles to follow: first, all threats and those who make them are **not equal**; and second, most of the people who issue threats are **not likely** to carry them out. Be prepared to **delay your reaction** to a threat if the level of risk is low or moderate.

The NCAVC team found that most threats are made anonymously or under a false name. To evaluate a threat, first attempt to identify the person who made it and examine their background, personality and resources. This information will help to assess the level of risk, as well as the individual's motive and capacity to carry out the threat.

Threats can be classed in four categories: direct, indirect, veiled, or conditional.

1. A **direct threat** identifies a specific **act** against a specific **target** and is delivered in a very **explicit** manner: "I am going to shoot Jim, that bastard, in the gym on Friday after the game, and then set off a bomb."

2. An **indirect threat** is **vague, unclear or ambiguous**. The plan, victim and motive are masked: "If I'm pushed much farther, everyone will pay for it." While violence is implied, the threat is phrased tentatively and suggests that an act COULD occur, not that it WILL occur.

3. A **veiled threat** strongly implies, but does not explicitly threaten violence. "Those dudes will get it someday" hints at a possible violent act, but leaves it to others to interpret the message and give a definite meaning to the threat.

4. A **conditional threat** is often used in extortion cases. It warns that a violent act will happen unless specific demands are met: "If you don't pay me one million dollars, I will place a bomb in the school."

When a threat is issued, or overheard, or received in written form, identify the type of threat, a level of risk (see below) and begin a proper investigation. Direct threats are associated with the highest risk, while indirect or veiled threats represent a lower level of risk. Conditional threats are not, as a rule, used by school shooters: they are the product of a different sort of pathology (i.e., conditional threats are usually motivated by greed, not rage or a form of "malignant narcissism").

Levels of Risk

Following the principal that all threats are not created equally, classify a new threat according to a "level of risk" as well as by type.

Low Level: A threat which poses a **minimal risk** to the victim and public safety. The threat is vague and indirect, implausible or lacks detail.

Medium Level: A threat which could be carried out, but is **not entirely realistic**. The threat is more direct and concrete, and the wording suggests the individual has given some thought to how to follow through on it.

There may be a general mention of a place and time, but no strong indication of preparatory steps. Veiled references or inconclusive evidence may point to a possibility of action, such as a general statement about the availability of weapons. There may be a specific statement seeking to convey that the threat is not empty: "Don't doubt me" or "I really mean it!"

High Level: A threat that appears to pose an **imminent and serious danger** to the safety of others. The threat is **direct, specific and plausible**. The content suggests concrete steps are in place to carry it out: for example, statements that identify types of weapons, ammunition or products of surveillance.

Example: "After first period tomorrow, I will shoot that lousy teacher and her pets. She always talks to them in the hall before second period. I have an AR-15, and I won't miss. I won't come back this summer just for her class." This threat is direct, offers specific details about the victim, motivation, weapon, place and time, and offers reason to believe that action may be taken.

High level threats should trigger an **immediate** law enforcement action. Take care, however, not to treat every threat as "high" and inflict a felony charge on a student who is in the early stages of the process. The penal system will not address the problem; however, we have a chance to save a life ***if*** we manage our response.

In some cases, the distinction between the levels of threat may not be obvious, and there may be overlap between categories. Gather any available information about the person who has issued the threat to help clarify any confusion and inform a response.

Signposts and Leakage

In the 1992 film *Falling Down*, Michael Douglas portrays a character who slips into madness and starts shooting people.

As the late Roger Ebert noted, "there is no exhilaration in his rampage, no release. He seems weary and confused, and in his actions he unconsciously follows scripts that he may have learned from the movies, or on the news, where other frustrated misfits vent their rage on innocent bystanders."

In the film, there is an artistic compression we don't find in real life: the NCAVC team found that "people do not switch instantly from nonviolence to violence ... people do not snap or decide on the spur of the moment to resolve a problem by using violence."

They found that the path toward violence occurs in stages, and there are signposts along the way.

A threat is one observable behavior; others are associated with what the NCAVC team calls **leakage**. These are "events in which a person intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts or fantasies that signal a possible violent act." Events can take many forms, including threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums, and may be spoken or conveyed in stories, diary entries, essays, poems, letters or web page content, songs, drawings or videos.

Another form of leakage involves efforts to get friends or family members to help prepare for a violent act, at times through deception (for example, by asking friends to buy them ammunition). Leakage can be a cry for help, a sign of inner conflict, or boasts that may look empty but actually express a serious threat. Leakage is an important clue that a violent act may occur. When evaluating a direct threat, ask questions to find out if there is a history of leakage. If there is a pattern associated with a direct threat, respond in a direct manner.

Evaluate the Threat

When evaluating a threat, or an example of leakage, the presence of **specific, plausible details** is a critical factor. Examples include the identity of potential victims, a rationale, information about weapons or methods used to carry out a threat, and a defined time and place. Low-level, concrete information is a **red flag** to take some form of immediate action.

If there is evidence of serious thought, planning, and preparatory action, there is a higher risk that someone will act on a threat. Conversely, a lack of detail may indicate that someone is just blowing off steam, trying to intimidate someone, or disrupt an event at the school.

Details that are specific, but impossible indicate a less serious threat. For example, if a student threatens to detonate plutonium in the lunch room tomorrow, immediate action is not required. Such a threat is not credible. While it may be worth tracking, do not pull the alarm unless there are other actions to consider.

The emotional content of a threat is another clue to mental state, but may not offer a real measure of danger. It is counter-intuitive, but according to the report, there is no correlation between the emotional flavor or intensity of a threat and its validity.

If a threat does not offer signs of premeditation, identify any possible **triggers**. Adolescents encounter a variety of events that may provoke an ill-advised threat (e.g., a fight with another student or a family member). Other information about underlying factors, such as a recent loss or a history of depression may help explain why a threat was made and help direct an appropriate response.

Immediate Response

A school cannot ignore any threat of violence. The NCAVC report notes that a clear, vigorous response is essential to make sure that students, teachers, and staff are safe, and to prompt parents and others to supervise and treat the person making the threat. Each school must define roles for teachers, staff and law enforcement agencies in a comprehensive threat-response plan.

A threat response plan is similar to the disaster recovery and continuity plans defined for businesses. For example, a smaller business may have a "flat" hierarchy of people who accept multiple roles when an event occurs, while a larger enterprise will define a more complex set of roles and ask people to report status and defer decisions to those who are vested with authority. When a threat is made, teachers and staff should know who to contact, what to communicate, when to respond, and why a reaction may be delayed or immediate.

Every plan may begin with identification of a primary contact for reporting a threat. This **primary reporting contact** will initiate a threat assessment and manage any emergency actions. If it is left up to each teacher and staff member to react to a threat on their own, it is unlikely that the response will be appropriate. News reports are filled with examples of under- and over-reaction. The primary reporting contact may be the principal, another administrator, a school psychologist, resource officer, or any other staff member. This contact works from a threat response plan, which should get people to slow down enough to assess the level and nature of a threat, and then contact law enforcement if it is warranted.

If a threat is direct, and fits the definition of **high-level** (specific, plausible, imminent and serious), the primary reporting contact will trigger a response plan and manage communication with the proper authorities. If there is evidence of immediate danger, such as weapons in plain sight, evacuation plans are exercised to remove children and staff from harm's way. Teachers and staff should manage the children's egress and allow professionals to confront the perpetrator and secure the facility.

If the threat is not high-level and direct, the primary reporting contact will start the threat assessment process, which examines the individual who made the threat and the nature of their actions.

Asking the Right Questions

The NCAVC report offers a "four-pronged" model for evaluating a threat. The first prong examines the personality of the student who made the threat. The remaining prongs cover the school, family and social dynamics that shape a student's life.

Following a preliminary assessment, a primary contact should collect as much information about the student who issued a threat as they can. Details may come from

personal knowledge and from teachers, staff, other students, parents, or other sources such as law enforcement agencies and mental health specialists.

When a rapid assessment is performed, it may not be complete. The primary contact collects as much information as possible to determine if the student who issued the threat is both capable, and under enough stressors, to act on it. Areas of inquiry, based on the NCAVC report, are presented below and in the threat assessment worksheet attached to this essay.

Personality and Behavior

Personality is "the pattern of collective character, behavioral, temperamental, emotional, and mental traits of an individual." This pattern is a product of both inherited temperament and environmental influences (i.e., nature and nurture).

An adolescent's personality is not yet crystallized, and so they are more likely to engage in what others may perceive as strange behavior. Expect them to struggle with vulnerability and acceptance, and with questions of independence and authority, among other issues.

An assessor uses questions to find out how the student:

- Copes with conflicts, disappointments, failures, insults, or other stressors
- Expresses anger or rage, frustration, disappointment, humiliation or sadness
- Demonstrates resiliency after a setback, a failure or criticism
- Demonstrates how they feel or imagine they are or wish to appear to others
- Responds to rules, instruction, or authority figures
- Expresses a need for control, attention, respect, admiration or confrontation
- Demonstrates, or fails to demonstrate empathy for others

Note all relevant observations, comments and opinions from those who interact with the student.

Family Dynamics

Family dynamics include the patterns of behavior, beliefs, traditions, roles, customs and values found in the student's home. When a student has made a threat, knowledge of the dynamics within the student's family - and how those dynamics are perceived - is a key factor in understanding the circumstances in a student's life that could lead them to issue a threat or make the decision to carry it out.

Social Dynamics

Social dynamics are patterns of behavior, thinking, beliefs, customs, traditions, and roles that exist in the larger community where a student lives. These patterns have an impact on student behavior, their feelings about themselves, outlook on life, attitudes, perceived options, and lifestyle practices. An adolescent's beliefs and opinions, choice of friends, activities, entertainment, and reading material, and his attitudes toward such things as drugs, alcohol, and weapons will all reflect in some fashion the social dynamics of the community where he lives and goes to school.

Within the larger community, an adolescent's peer group plays an especially crucial role in influencing attitudes and behavior. Information about a student's choice of friends and relations with his peers can provide valuable clues to his attitudes, sense of identity, and possible decisions about acting or not acting on a threat.

School Dynamics

The relationship between school dynamics and threat assessment has not been established or quantified. While it may be difficult for educators to "critique" their own school, it is necessary to have some level of understanding of the particular dynamics in their school because it could become the scene of a crime.

School dynamics are patterns of behavior, thinking, beliefs, customs, traditions, roles and values that exist in a school's culture. Some of these patterns can be obvious, and others subtle. Identifying those behaviors which are formally or informally valued and rewarded in a school helps explain why some students get more approval and attention from school authorities and have more prestige among their fellow students. It can also explain the "role" a particular student has, and how the student fits into, or fails to fit into the value system of the school.

Students and staff may have very different perceptions of the culture, customs, and values in their school. Assessors need to be aware of how a school's dynamics are seen by students. A big discrepancy between student perceptions and the administration can itself be a significant piece of information when evaluating the nature of a threat.

Evaluation

If enough issues are identified, and there is evidence of consistent problems in all four areas, it may indicate that a student is fantasizing about acting on the threat, has the motivation to carry out a violent act, or has actually taken steps to carry out a threat.

The NCAVC report offers the following **cautions**:

1. No one or two traits or characteristics should be considered in isolation or given more weight than the others. Any of these traits, or several, can be found in students who are **not** contemplating an act of violence. The key is to determine

if there is evidence of problems in a **majority of items** in each of the four areas. A common sense application of this model indicates that the more problems identified, the greater the level of concern should be.

2. One bad day may not reflect a student's normal personality or behavior. To evaluate someone's behavior, first establish a **baseline**: i.e., define how they behave most of the time. Those responsible for assessing a student should seek information from people who have known the student over a period of time and have been able to observe him in varying situations and with a variety of people.

3. Many of the behaviors and traits examined in a threat assessment are found in depressed adolescents with narcissistic personality characteristics and other possible mental health problems. Despite this overlap, evaluations made using the NVCAC model **cannot substitute** for a clinical diagnosis. Signs of serious mental illness and/or substance abuse disorders can significantly elevate the risk for violence and should be evaluated by a mental health professional.

The NCAVC offers a list of points, presented in the attached **threat assessment form**, that identifies behaviors, personality traits and family, school and social dynamics that are associated with violence.

The Role of Law Enforcement

In the vast majority of cases, the decision on whether to involve law enforcement will hinge on the level of the threat: low, medium, or high.

Low Level: A threat that has been evaluated as low level poses little threat to public safety and in most cases would not necessitate law enforcement investigation for a possible criminal offense. Law enforcement agencies, however, may be asked for information in connection with a threat of any level.

Appropriate intervention in a low level case requires interviews with the student and their parents. If the threat was aimed at a specific person, they should be asked about the circumstances that led up to the threat. The response - whether it is disciplinary action, counseling or another form of intervention - should be determined according to school policies and the judgment of parents and school administrators.

Medium Level: When a threat is rated as medium, the response will include contact with a law enforcement agency, as well as other sources, to obtain information (and potentially reclassify the threat as high or low level). A medium threat will sometimes, though not necessarily, warrant investigation as a possible criminal offense.

High Level: If a threat is evaluated as high, the school immediately informs a law enforcement agency. A response plan, which is defined ahead of time and rehearsed, should direct the response. A high-level threat is likely to result in a criminal prosecution, publicity and may have unintended consequences.

Circling the Wagons

Whenever a child picks up a weapon and enters a school, it ends a story of failure. That story begins in a lot of ways, but it always features a number of signs that a tragedy is unfolding that we can see, if we **pay attention**.

While there are no easy ways to respond, and no simple recipe for a successful intervention, we can interrupt the plot and direct a child to a different ending. Hollywood, and the local or national news won't show any interest, however. The quiet, noble victory of a community coming together to save a child isn't very dramatic. That child will simply pick up and live their life, with a lot of help from those who care. It's just another daily miracle.

In the timeless battle against savagery, how will we know if we're winning?

The level of violence in schools has been falling, despite the intense media coverage of recent events. We don't notice the good news, the thousands of schools that don't see any tragedy; we focus on the exceptions. We can only keep track of the kids we see every day: they count on us, and we should do our best to show them we are here for them. The kids need to know that they can talk to us about anything, and we will do what it takes to keep them, our tribe and our culture intact.

The methods defined in the NCAVC report can help us to assess a threat, evaluate the risk, and respond appropriately. We know that students will continue to make threats in schools, and that most will never carry them out. If we measure our response, we can help those in need without inflicting scars they will never be able to hide.

-- Steven Peterson, 2013

For more information about Threat Assessment in Schools, see the US Secret Service Guide to Manage Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates.

https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

Share this article:

http://www.desolationpress.com/essays/anotherpile.html