



## **Educators and Students at Risk: Coping with Personal Threats**



*A substitute teacher, I was completely unprepared that day. Tyrone, a new transfer on whom we had almost no information, went after another art student and shattered a glass door. There was blood everywhere. I screamed to the student teacher to run for help while I tried to stop the bleeding. That was 20 years ago, yet the scene is still vivid in my memory.*



*In our elementary school, a student received several threatening letters. Her parents demanded action, so we interviewed many classmates and teachers, but we still couldn't determine who had written the letters. The entire grade was in turmoil. Weeks later, the student admitted that she had written the letters herself.*

This article offers answers to some commonly asked questions about how to handle personal threats at school.

### **What if you may be in immediate danger?**

The first step in assessing a situation is to determine *whether you and others are in immediate danger*. Remember that some individuals pose a grave threat but never verbalize their intentions. For example, if you are alone in an isolated corridor when someone approaches you with a weapon, you must do whatever possible to be safe. The Federal Protective Service of the U.S. General Services Administration advises that you take these steps if threatened with a weapon:

- Stay calm. Quietly signal for help. (Use a duress alarm or code words.)
- Maintain eye contact.
- Stall for time.
- Keep talking-but follow instructions from the person who has the weapon.
- Don't risk harm to yourself or others.
- Never try to grab a weapon.
- Watch for a possible chance to escape to a safe area. (1999, available at [www.gsa.gov/pbs/fps/maincard.htm](http://www.gsa.gov/pbs/fps/maincard.htm))

### **What about bomb threats?**

Let's say you answer the school phone and the caller threatens a bombing. In this case, you follow the steps outlined in your school's safety plan, trying to recall and write as much as you can about the call on a bomb threat form such as the one included here. (It's a good idea to keep a copy under every telephone.)

## **BOMB THREAT TELEPHONE FORM**

Call taken by: \_\_\_\_\_ Time of Call \_\_\_\_\_

Number called: \_\_\_\_\_ Location in Bldg.: \_\_\_\_\_

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK CALLERS:**

1. When will the bomb explode? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the location of the bomb? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What does it look like? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Can it accidentally explode? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Was it you that put the bomb in the building? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Why did you do it? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Where are you from? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Who are you? \_\_\_\_\_

### **THE CALLER'S VOICE:**

Young \_\_\_ Old \_\_\_ Male \_\_\_ Female \_\_\_ Calm \_\_\_ Excited \_\_\_ Loud \_\_\_ Soft \_\_\_ Happy \_\_\_ Angry \_\_\_

Slow \_\_\_ Fast \_\_\_ Clear \_\_\_ Slurred \_\_\_ Deep \_\_\_ High Pitched \_\_\_ Nasal sound \_\_\_ Lisp \_\_\_

Stutter \_\_\_ Accent \_\_\_ Raspiness \_\_\_ Crying \_\_\_ Laughing \_\_\_ Cracking \_\_\_ Normal \_\_\_ Deep \_\_\_

Breathing \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**CALLER SOUNDED FAMILIAR? WHO?** \_\_\_\_\_

### **CALLER SOUNDED:**

Intelligent \_\_\_\_\_ Incoherent \_\_\_\_\_ Foul-mouthed \_\_\_\_\_ Irrational \_\_\_\_\_ Taped \_\_\_\_\_

### **BACKGROUND NOISE:**

People Talking \_\_\_\_\_ Television \_\_\_\_\_ Street Noise \_\_\_\_\_ Machines \_\_\_\_\_

Music \_\_\_\_\_ (What kind?) \_\_\_\_\_ Other? \_\_\_\_\_

## **What if you sense that an individual might lose control but has not really threatened you?**

Perhaps you're in a situation where an individual may be in crisis, but has made no threats. Here are some general tips on how to de-escalate an individual who is getting out of control.

### **De-Escalation Tips for Working with Potentially Violent Students**

- ☑ Don't threaten. The individual might interpret this as a power play, become more fearful, and respond with assaultive behavior.
- ☑ Don't shout (unless distance or hearing loss prevents the individual from hearing your normal speaking voice.)
- ☑ Don't criticize. It will only make matters worse. It cannot possibly make things better.
- ☑ Don't squabble with others over "best strategies" or allocations of blame. This is no time to prove a point.
- ☑ Don't bait the individual into acting out wild threats. The consequences could be tragic.
- ☑ Don't stand over the individual if he or she is seated. Instead, seat yourself.
- ☑ Avoid direct, continuous eye contact or touching the individual.
- ☑ Comply with requests that are neither endangering nor beyond reason. This provides the individual with an opportunity to feel somewhat "in control."
- ☑ Don't block the doorway. However, do keep yourself between the individual and an exit.

[These suggestions are adapted from an article in *The Voice* newsletter published by the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Southwestern Pennsylvania Chapter, 1996, 3,3,6]

## **How do you know whether a verbal threat is serious or not?**

There are several parts to this answer. *First, consider your information.* Is there a note, e-mail, telephone message, or fax? Is there other evidence (e.g., a diagram, materials or weapon)? Are there witnesses? Have others shared concern about the individual(s) in the past?

*Secondly, ask yourself, "Could this individual carry out the threat?"* Could the individual's friends or family members carry out the threat? For example, does the individual have access to firearms?

*Thirdly, does the threat come from someone who is at risk for violent behavior?* The National School Safety Center offers a checklist of warning signs, based on its

research on school violence and the profiles of students who were violent. "While there is no foolproof system for identifying potentially dangerous students who may harm themselves and/or others, this checklist provides a starting point. These characteristics should serve to alert school administrators, teachers and support staff to address needs of troubled students through meetings with parents, provision of school counseling, guidance and mentoring services, as well as referrals to appropriate community health/social services and law enforcement personnel. Further, such behavior should also provide an early warning signal that safe school plans and crisis prevention/intervention procedures must be in place to protect the health and safety of all school students and staff members so that schools remain safe havens for learning." (National School Safety Center, 1998)

No doubt, you realize that you will need to interview not only the individual(s) but also those who know them, in order to complete this risk assessment checklist. If threats come from a student, you may call on your Student Assistance Team, Teaching Team, Pupil Services staff, and other students. On the other hand, if an employee is involved, you may work closely with your Human Resources administrator, School Board, police, and union officials. If the threats come from an unknown source or a community member (e.g., parent, visitor), you will need to work with the police and school administrators.

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- Characteristically resorts to name calling, cursing or abusive language.
  - Habitually makes violent threats when angry.
  - Has previously brought a weapon to school.
  - Has a background of serious disciplinary problems at school and in the community.
  - Has a background of drug, alcohol or other substance abuse or dependency.
  - Is on the fringe of his/her peer group with few or no close friends.
  - Is preoccupied with weapons, explosives, or other incendiary devices.
  - Has previously been truant, suspended, or expelled from school.
  - Displays cruelty to animals.
  - Has little or no supervision and support from parents or a caring adult.
  - Has witnessed or been a victim of abuse or neglect in the home.
  - Has been bullied and/or bullies or intimidates peers or younger children.
  - Tends to blame others for difficulties and problems s/he causes her/himself.
  - Consistently prefers TV shows, movies or music expressing violent themes and acts.
  - Prefers reading materials dealing with violent themes, rituals and abuse
  - Reflects anger, frustration, and the dark side of life in school essays or writing projects.
  - Is involved with a gang or an antisocial group on the fringe of peer acceptance.
  - Is often depressed and/or has significant mood swings.
  - Has threatened or attempted suicide.

(National School Safety Center, 1998)

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Be sure that you document your concerns for any serious threat, as the need for this information may arise again in the future.

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## Resources

If you would like to find out more about school safety, check out these resources:

<http://helping.apa.org/warningsigns>

This site, maintained by the American Psychological Association, includes a color brochure on warning signs.

<http://www.gsa.gov/pbs/fps/fps1.htm> and <http://www.opm.gov/workplac/>

These sites offer federal guidelines for workplace violence prevention.

<http://www.keepschoolssafe.org/mis.htm>

The National Association of Attorneys General and the National School Boards Association jointly maintain this site on keeping schools safe.

<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html>

You can print the federal safe schools planning guide from this site.

<http://www.nssc1.org/home.htm>

This is the site of the National School Safety Center, which has many resources for school personnel.

<http://www.trauma-pages.com>

David Baldwin's informative site offers many helpful reports and links on violence and trauma.