EARLY WARNING
TIMELY RESPONSE

A Guide to Safe Schools

Organizations Supporting This Guide

American Association of
School Administrators

American Counseling
Association

American Federation of
Teachers

American School Counselors
Association

Council of Administrators of
Special Education

Council for Exceptional
Children

Federation of Families for
Children's Mental Health

National Association of
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Principals

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Principals

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Association

National School Public
Relations Association

Police Executive Research
Forum

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20202-_____

August 22, 1998

Dear Principal and Teachers:

On June 13, after the tragic loss of life and injuries at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, President Clinton directed the Department of Education and the Department of Justice to develop an early warning guide to help "adults reach out to troubled children quickly and effectively." This guide responds to that Presidential request. It is our sincere hope that this guide will provide you with the practical help needed to keep every child in your school out of harm's way.

America's schools are among the safest places to be on a day-to-day basis, due to the strong commitment of educators, parents, and communities to their children. Nevertheless, last year's tragic and sudden acts of violence in our nation's schools remind us that no community can be complacent in its efforts to make its schools even safer. An effective and safe school is the vital center of every community whether it is in a large urban area or a small rural community.

Central to this guide are the key insights that keeping children safe is a community-wide effort and that effective schools create environments where children and young people truly feel connected. This is why our common goal must be to reconnect with every child and particularly with those young people who are isolated and troubled.

This guide should be seen as part of an overall effort to make sure that every school in this nation has a comprehensive violence prevention plan in place. We also caution you to recognize that over labeling and using this guide to stigmatize children in a cursory way that leads to over-reaction is harmful. The guidelines in this report are based on research and the positive experiences of schools around the country where the value and potential of each and every child is cherished and where good practices have produced, and continue to produce, successful students and communities.

We are grateful to the many experts, agencies, and associations in education, law enforcement, juvenile justice, mental health, and other social services that worked closely with us to make sure that this report is available for the start of school this fall. We hope that you and your students and staff, as well as parents and the community, will benefit from this information.

Sincerely,

Richard W. Riley
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education

Janet Reno
Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice

Early Warning, Timely Response

A Guide to Safe Schools

Although most schools are safe, the violence that occurs in our neighborhoods and communities has found its way inside the schoolhouse door. However, if we understand what leads to violence and the types of support that research has shown are effective in preventing violence, we can make our schools safer.

Research-based practices can help school communities—administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members—recognize the warning signs early, so children can get the help they need before it is too late. This guide presents a brief summary of the research on violence prevention and intervention and crisis response in schools. It tells school communities:

- **What to look for**—the early warning signs that relate to violence and other troubling behaviors.

- **What to do**—the action steps that school communities can take to prevent violence and other troubling behaviors, to intervene and get help for troubled children, and to respond to school violence when it occurs.

Sections in this guide include:

- **Section 1: Introduction**. All staff, students, parents, and members of the community must be part of creating a safe school environment. Schools must have in place approaches for addressing the needs of all children who have troubling behaviors. This section describes the rationale for the guide and suggests how it can be used by school communities to develop a plan of action.

- **Section 2: Characteristics of a School That Is Safe and Responsive to All Children**. Well functioning schools foster learning, safety, and socially appropriate behaviors. They have a strong academic focus and support students in achieving high standards, foster positive relationships between school staff and students, and promote meaningful parental and community involvement. This section describes characteristics of schools that support prevention, appropriate intervention, and effective crisis response.

- **Section 3: Early Warning Signs**. There are early warning

signs that, when viewed in context, can signal a troubled child. Educators and parents—and in some cases, students—can use several significant principles to ensure that the early warning signs are not misinterpreted. This section presents early warning signs, imminent warning signs, and the principles that ensure these signs will not be misinterpreted. It concludes with a brief description of using the early warning signs to shape intervention practices.

- **Section 4: Getting Help for Troubled Children**. Effective interventions for improving the behavior of troubled children are well documented in the research literature. This section presents research- and expert-based principles that should provide the foundation for all intervention development. It describes what to do when intervening early with students who are at risk for behavioral problems, when responding with intensive interventions for individual children, and when providing a foundation to prevent and reduce violent behavior.

- **Section 5: Developing a Prevention and Response Plan**. Effective schools create a violence prevention and response plan and form a team that can ensure it is implemented. They use approaches and strategies based on research about what

works. This section offers suggestions for developing such plans.

- **Section 6: Responding to Crisis**. Effective and safe schools are well prepared for any potential crisis or violent act. This section describes what to do when intervening during a crisis to ensure safety and when responding in the aftermath of crisis. The principles that underlie effective crisis response are included.

- **Section 7: Conclusion**. This section summarizes the guide.

- **Section 8: Methodology, Contributors, and Research Support**. This guide synthesizes an extensive knowledge base on violence and violence prevention. This section describes the rigorous development and review process that was used. It also provides information about the project's Web site.

A final section lists resources that can be contacted for more information.

The information in this guide is not intended as a comprehensive prevention, intervention, and response plan—school communities could do *everything* recommended and still experience violence. Rather, the intent is to provide school communities with reliable and practical information about what they can do to be prepared and to reduce the likelihood of violence.

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A Guide to Safe Schools

Most schools are safe. Although fewer than one percent of all violent deaths of children occur on school grounds—indeed, a child is far more likely to be killed in the community or at home—no school is immune.

The violence that occurs in our neighborhoods and communities has found its way inside the schoolhouse door. And while we can take some solace in the knowledge that schools are among the safest places for young people, we must do more. School violence reflects a much broader problem, one that can only be addressed when everyone—at school, at home, and in the community—works together.

The 1997-1998 school year served as a dramatic wake-up call to the fact that guns do come to school, and some students will use them to kill. One after the other, school communities across the country—from Oregon to Virginia, from Arkansas to Pennsylvania, from Mississippi to Kentucky—have been forced to face the fact that violence can happen to them. And while these serious incidents trouble us deeply, they should not prevent us from acting to prevent school violence of any kind.

There is ample documentation that prevention and early intervention efforts can reduce violence and other troubling behaviors in schools. Research-based practices can help school commu-

nities recognize the warning signs early, so children can get the help they need before it is too late. In fact, research suggests that some of the most promising prevention and intervention strategies involve the entire educational community—administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members—working together to form positive relationships with all children.

If we understand what leads to violence and the types of support that research has shown are effective in preventing violence and other troubling behaviors, we can make our schools safer.

About This Guide

This guide presents a brief summary of the research on violence prevention and intervention and crisis response in schools (see Section 8 for a review of methodology and information on how to locate the research). It tells members of school communities—especially administrators, teachers, staff, families, students, and community-based professionals:

- *What to look for*—the early warning signs that relate to violence and other troubling behaviors.

- *What to do*—the action steps that school communities can take to prevent violence and other troubling behaviors, to intervene and get help for

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troubled children, and to respond to school violence when it occurs.

The information in each section is not intended as a comprehensive prevention, intervention, and response system or plan. Indeed, school violence occurs in a unique context in every school and every situation, making a one-size-fits-all scheme impossible. Moreover, school communities could do **everything** recommended and still experience violence. Rather, this guide is designed to provide school communities with reliable and practical information about what they can do to be prepared and to reduce the likelihood of violence.

Creating a safe school requires having in place many preventive measures for children's mental and emotional problems—as well as a comprehensive approach to early identification of **all** warning signs that might lead to violence toward self or others. The term "violence" as used in this booklet, refers to a broad range of troubling behaviors and emotions shown by students—including serious aggression, physical attacks, suicide, dangerous use of drugs, and other dangerous interpersonal behaviors. However, the early warning signs presented in this document focus primarily on aggressive and violent behaviors toward others. The guide does not attempt to address all of the warning signs related to depression and suicide. Nevertheless, some of the signs of potential violence toward others are also signs of depression and suicidal risk, which should be addressed through early iden-

tification and appropriate intervention.

Using the Guide To Develop a Plan of Action

All staff, students, parents, and members of the community must be part of creating a safe school environment:

- **Everyone** has a personal responsibility for reducing the risk of violence. We must take steps to maintain order, demonstrate mutual respect and caring for one another, and ensure that children who are troubled get the help they need.

- **Everyone** should have an understanding of the early warning signs that help identify students who may be headed for trouble.

- **Everyone** should be prepared to respond appropriately in a crisis situation.

Research and expert-based information offers a wealth of knowledge about preventing violence in schools. The following sections provide information—what to look for and what to do—that school communities can use when developing or enhancing violence prevention and response plans (see Section 5 for more information about these plans).

We hope that school communities will use this document as a guide as they begin the prevention and healing process today, at all age and grade levels, and for all students.

Characteristics of a School That Is Safe and Responsive to All Children

Well functioning schools foster learning, safety, and socially appropriate behaviors. They have a strong academic focus and support students in achieving high standards, foster positive relationships between school staff and students, and promote meaningful parental and community involvement. Most prevention programs in effective schools address multiple factors and recognize that safety and order are related to children's social, emotional, and academic development.

Effective prevention, intervention, and crisis response strategies operate best in school communities that:

- **Focus on academic achievement.** Effective schools convey the attitude that all children can achieve academically and behave appropriately, while at the same time appreciating individual differences. Adequate resources and programs help ensure that expectations are met. Expectations are communicated clearly, with the understanding that meeting such expectations is a responsibility of the student, the school, and the home. Students who do not receive the support they need are less likely to behave in socially desirable ways.

- **Involve families in meaningful ways.** Students whose families are involved in their growth in and outside of school are more likely to experience school success and less likely to become involved in antisocial activities. School communities must make parents feel welcome in school, address barriers to their participation, and keep families positively engaged in their children's education. Effective schools also support families in expressing concerns about their children—and they support families in getting the help they need to address behaviors that cause concern.

- **Develop links to the community.** Everyone must be committed to improving schools. Schools that have close ties to families, support services, community police, the faith-based community, and the community at large can benefit from many valuable resources. When these links are weak, the risk of school violence is heightened and the opportunity to serve children who are at risk for violence or who may be affected by it is decreased.

- **Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff.** Research shows that a

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positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when needed is one of the most critical factors in preventing student violence. Students often look to adults in the school community for guidance, support, and direction. Some children need help overcoming feelings of isolation and support in developing connections to others. Effective schools make sure that opportunities exist for adults to spend quality, personal time with children. Effective schools also foster positive student interpersonal relations—they encourage students to help each other and to feel comfortable assisting others in getting help when needed.

- **Discuss safety issues openly.** Children come to school with many different perceptions—and misconceptions—about death, violence, and the use of weapons. Schools can reduce the risk of violence by teaching children about the dangers of firearms, as well as appropriate strategies for dealing with feelings, expressing anger in appropriate ways, and resolving conflicts. Schools also should teach children that they are responsible for their actions and that the choices they make have consequences for which they will be held accountable.

- **Treat students with equal respect.** A major source of conflict in many schools is the perceived or real problem of bias and unfair treatment of students because of ethnicity, gender, race, social class, religion, disability, nationality, sexual orientation, physical appearance, or some other factor—both by staff and by peers. Students who have been treated unfairly may become scapegoats and/or targets of violence. In some cases, victims may react in aggressive ways. Effective schools communicate to students and the greater community that all children are valued and respected. There is a deliberate and systematic effort—for example, displaying children's artwork, posting academic work prominently throughout the building, respecting students' diversity—to establish a climate that demonstrates care and a sense of community.

- **Create ways for students to share their concerns.** It has been found that peers often are the most likely group to know in advance about potential school violence. Schools must create ways for students to safely report such troubling behaviors that may lead to dangerous situations. And students who report potential school violence must be protected. It is important for schools to support and foster positive relationships between students and adults so students will feel safe providing information about a potentially dangerous situation.

- **Help children feel safe expressing their feelings.** It is very important that children feel safe when expressing their needs, fears, and anxieties to school staff. When they do not have access to caring adults, feelings of isolation, rejection, and disappointment are more likely to occur, increasing the probability of acting-out behaviors.

- **Have in place a system for referring children who are suspected of being abused or neglected.** The referral system must be appropriate and reflect federal and state guidelines.

- **Offer extended day programs for children.** School-based before- and after-school programs can be effective in reducing violence. Effective programs are well supervised and provide children with support and a range of options, such as counseling, tutoring, mentoring, cultural arts, community service, clubs, access to computers, and help with homework.

- **Promote good citizenship and character.** In addition to their academic mission, schools must help students become good citizens. First, schools stand for the civic values set forth in our Constitution and Bill of Rights (patriotism; freedom of religion, speech, and press; equal protection/nondiscrimination; and due process/fairness). Schools also reinforce and promote the shared values of their local communities, such as honesty, kindness, responsibility, and respect for others. Schools should acknowledge that parents are the primary moral educators of their children and work in partnership with them.

- **Identify problems and assess progress toward solutions.** Schools must openly and objectively examine circumstances that are potentially dangerous for students and staff and situations where members of the school community feel threatened or intimidated. Safe schools continually assess progress by identifying problems and collecting information regarding progress toward solutions. Moreover, effective schools share this information with students, families, and the community at large.

- **Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace.** Youth need assistance in planning their future and in developing skills that will result in success. For example, schools can provide students with community service opportunities, work-study programs, and apprenticeships that help connect them to caring adults in the community. These relationships, when established early, foster in youth a sense of hope and security for the future.

Research has demonstrated repeatedly that school communities can do a great deal to prevent violence. Having in place a safe and responsive foundation helps **all** children—and it enables school communities to provide more efficient and effective services to students who need more support. The next step is to learn the early warning signs of a child who is troubled, so that effective interventions can be provided.

"We must avoid fragmentation in implementing programs. The concepts in preventing and responding to violence must be integrated into effective school reform, including socially and academically supportive instruction and caring, a welcoming atmosphere, and providing good options for recreation and enrichment."

Howard Adelman, Professor of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles

Early Warning Signs

Why didn't we see it coming? In the wake of violence, we ask this question not so much to place blame, but to understand better what we can do to prevent such an occurrence from ever happening again. We review over and over in our minds the days leading up to the incident—did the child say or do anything that would have cued us in to the impending crisis? Did we miss an opportunity to help?

There are early warning signs in most cases of violence to self and others—certain behavioral and emotional signs that, when viewed in context, can signal a troubled child. But early warning signs are just that—indicators that a student may need help.

Such signs may or may not indicate a serious problem—they do not necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward self or others. Rather, early warning signs provide us with the impetus to check out our concerns and address the child's needs. Early warning signs allow us to act responsibly by getting help for the child before problems escalate.

Early warning signs can help frame concern for a child. However, it is important to avoid inappropriately labeling or stigmatizing individual students because they appear to fit a specific profile or set of early warning indicators. It's okay to be worried about

a child, but it's not okay to overreact and jump to conclusions.

Teachers and administrators—and other school support staff—are not professionally trained to analyze children's feelings and motives. But they are on the front line when it comes to observing troublesome behavior and making referrals to appropriate professionals, such as school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and nurses. They also play a significant role in responding to diagnostic information provided by specialists. Thus, it is no surprise that effective schools take special care in training the entire school community to understand and identify early warning signs.

When staff members seek help for a troubled child, when friends report worries about a peer or friend, when parents raise concerns about their child's thoughts or habits, children can get the help they need. By actively sharing information, a school community can provide quick, effective responses.

Principles for Identifying the Early Warning Signs of School Violence

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

Use the Signs Responsibly

It is important to avoid inappropriately labeling or stigmatizing individual students because they appear to fit a specific profile or set of early warning indicators. It's okay to be worried about a child, but it's not okay to overreact and jump to conclusions.

relationships with children and youth—getting to know them well enough to be aware of their needs, feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns. Educators and parents together can review school records for patterns of behavior or sudden changes in behavior.

Unfortunately, **there is a real danger that early warning signs will be misinterpreted**. Educators and parents—and in some cases, students—can ensure that the early warning signs are not misinterpreted by using several significant 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 a child early. The early warning signs should not to 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. Formal disability identification under federal law requires individualized evaluation by qualified professionals. In addition, all referrals to outside agencies based on the early warning signs must be kept confidential and must be done with parental consent (except referrals for suspected child abuse or neglect).

- **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 set it off. 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 community's ability to identify and help children. It is important to be aware of false cues—including race, socio-economic 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 and youth 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 what is developmentally typical behavior, so that behaviors are not misinterpreted.

- **Understand that children typically exhibit multiple warning signs.** It is common for children who are troubled to exhibit multiple 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.

"When doing consultation with school staff and families, we advise them to think of the early warning signs within a context. We encourage them to look for combinations of warning signs that might tell us the student's behavior is changing and becoming more problematic."

Deborah Crockett, School Psychologist, Atlanta, GA

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Early Warning Signs

It is not always possible to predict behavior that will lead to violence. However, educators and parents—and sometimes students—can recognize certain early warning signs. In some situations and for some youth, different combinations of events, behaviors, and emotions may lead to aggressive rage or violent behavior toward self or others. A good rule of thumb is to assume that these warning signs, especially when they are presented in combination, indicate a need for further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention.

We know from research that most children who become violent toward self or others feel rejected and psychologically victimized. In most cases, children exhibit aggressive behavior early in life and, if not provided support, will continue a progressive developmental pattern toward severe aggression or violence. However, research also shows that when children have a positive, meaningful connection to an adult—whether it be at home, in school, or in the community—the potential for violence is reduced significantly.

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 match individual children. Rather, the early warning signs are offered only as an aid in identifying and referring children who may need help. School communities must ensure that staff and students only use the early warning signs for identification and referral purposes—only trained professionals

should make diagnoses in consultation with the child's parents or guardian.

The following early warning signs are presented with the following qualifications: They are not equally significant and they are not presented in order of seriousness. The early warning signs include:

- *Social withdrawal.* In some situations, gradual and eventually complete withdrawal from social contacts can be an important indicator of a troubled child. The withdrawal often stems from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness, and lack of confidence.

- *Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone.* Research has shown that the majority of children who are isolated and appear to be friendless are not violent. In fact, these feelings are sometimes characteristic of children and youth who may be troubled, withdrawn, or have internal issues that hinder development of social affiliations. However, research also has shown that in some cases feelings of isolation and not having friends are associated with children who behave aggressively and violently.

- *Excessive feelings of rejection.* In the process of growing up, and in the course of adolescent development, many young people experience emotionally painful rejection. Children who are troubled often are isolated from their mentally healthy peers. Their responses to rejection will depend on many background factors. Without support, they may be at risk of ex-

pressing their emotional distress in negative ways—including violence. Some aggressive children who are rejected by non-aggressive peers seek out aggressive friends who, in turn, reinforce their violent tendencies.

- ***Being a victim of violence.*** Children who are victims of violence—including physical or sexual abuse—in the community, at school, or at home are sometimes at risk themselves of becoming violent toward themselves or others.

- ***Feelings of being picked on and persecuted.*** The youth who feels constantly picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule, and humiliated at home or at school may initially withdraw socially. If not given adequate support in addressing these feelings, some children may vent them in inappropriate ways—including possible aggression or violence.

- ***Low school interest and poor academic performance.*** Poor school achievement can be the result of many factors. It is important to consider whether there is a drastic change in performance and/or poor performance becomes a chronic condition that limits the child's capacity to learn. In some situations—such as when the low achiever feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and denigrated—acting out and aggressive behaviors may occur. It is important to assess the emotional and cognitive reasons for the academic performance change to determine the true nature of the problem.

- ***Expression of violence in writings and drawings.*** Children and youth often express their thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions in their drawings and in stories, poetry, and other written expressive forms. Many children produce work about violent themes that for the most part is harmless when taken in context. However, an overrepresentation of violence in writings and drawings that is directed at specific individuals (family members, peers, other adults) consistently over time, may signal emotional problems and the potential for violence. Because there is a real danger in misdiagnosing such a sign, it is important to seek the guidance of a qualified professional—such as a school psychologist, counselor, or other mental health specialist—to determine its meaning.

- ***Uncontrolled anger***. Everyone gets angry; anger is a natural emotion. However, anger that is expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior toward self or others.

- ***Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors***. Children often engage in acts of shoving and mild aggression. However, some mildly aggressive behaviors such as constant hitting and bullying of others that occur early in children's lives, if left unattended, might later escalate into more serious behaviors.

- ***History of discipline problems.*** Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems both in school and at home may suggest that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These unmet

needs may be manifested in acting out and aggressive behaviors. These problems may set the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school, and engage in aggressive behaviors with other children and adults.

- *Past history of violent and aggressive behavior.* Unless provided with support and counseling, a youth who has a history of aggressive or violent behavior is likely to repeat those behaviors. Aggressive and violent acts may be directed toward other individuals, be expressed in cruelty to animals, or include fire setting. Youth who show an early pattern of antisocial behavior frequently and across multiple settings are particularly at risk for future aggressive and antisocial behavior. Similarly, youth who engage in overt behaviors such as bullying, generalized aggression and defiance, and covert behaviors such as stealing, vandalism, lying, cheating, and fire setting also are at risk for more serious aggressive behavior. Research suggests that age of onset may be a key factor in interpreting early warning signs. For example, children who engage in aggression and drug abuse at an early age (before age 12) are more likely to show violence later on than are children who begin such behavior at an older age. In the presence of such signs it is important to review the child's history with behavioral experts and seek parents' observations and insights.

- *Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes.* All children have likes and dislikes. However, an intense prejudice toward others based on racial, ethnic, religious, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and physical appearance—when coupled with other factors—may lead to violent assaults against those who are perceived to be different. Membership in hate groups or the willingness to victimize individuals with disabilities or health problems also should be treated as early warning signs.

- *Drug use and alcohol use.* Apart from being unhealthy behaviors, drug use and alcohol use reduces self-control and exposes children and youth to violence, either as perpetrators, as victims, or both.

- *Affiliation with gangs*. Gangs that support anti-social values and behaviors—including extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence toward other students—cause fear and stress among other students. Youth who are influenced by these groups—those who emulate and copy their behavior, as well as those who become affiliated with them—may adopt these values and act in violent or aggressive ways in certain situations. Gang-related violence and turf battles are common occurrences tied to the use of drugs that often result in injury and/or death.

- *Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms.* Children and youth who inappropriately possess or have access to firearms can have an increased risk for violence. Research shows that such youngsters also have a higher probability of becoming victims. Families can reduce inappropriate access and use by restrict-

ing, monitoring, and supervising children's access to firearms and other weapons. Children who have a history of aggression, impulsiveness, or other emotional problems should not have access to firearms and other weapons.

- *Serious threats of violence.* Idle threats are a common response to frustration. Alternatively, one of the most reliable indicators that a youth is likely to commit a dangerous act toward self or others is a detailed and specific threat to use violence. Recent incidents across the country clearly indicate that threats to commit violence against oneself or others should be taken very seriously. Steps must be taken to understand the nature of these threats and to prevent them from being carried out.

Identifying and Responding to 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 self and/or to others. Imminent warning signs require an immediate response.

No single warning sign can predict that a dangerous act will occur. Rather, imminent warning signs usually are presented as a sequence of overt, serious, hostile behaviors or threats directed at peers, staff, or other individuals. Usually, imminent warning signs are evident to more than one staff member—as well as to the child's family.

Imminent warning signs may include:

- Serious physical fighting with peers or family members.

- Severe destruction of property.

- Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons.

- Detailed threats of lethal violence.

- Possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons.

- Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide.

When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, safety must **always** be the first and foremost consideration. Action must be taken immediately. Immediate intervention by school authorities and possibly law enforcement officers is needed when a child:

- Has presented a detailed plan (time, place, 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.

- Is carrying a weapon, particularly a firearm, and has threatened to use it.

In situations where students present other threatening behaviors, **parents should be informed of the concerns immediately**. School communities also have the responsibility to seek assistance from appropriate agencies, such as child and family services and community mental health. These responses should reflect school board policies and be consistent with the violence prevention and response plan (for more information see Section 5).

Know the Law

The *Gun Free Schools Act* requires that each state receiving federal funds under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) must have put in effect, by October 1995, a state law requiring local educational agencies to expel from school for a period of not less than one year a student who is determined to have brought a firearm to school.

Each state's law also must allow the chief administering officer of the local educational agency to modify the expulsion requirement on a case-by-case basis. All local educational agencies receiving ESEA funds must have a policy that requires the referral of any student who brings a firearm to school to the criminal justice or juvenile justice system.

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