

# School Safety

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# Why Schools Are Difficult Clients

- People always report too late
- Entrust life-or-death decisions to untrained faculty and supervisors
- Predictable over-reactors
- Tacit approval of misbehavior by failure to act
- Fairness always trumps safety
- Failure to create, identify, and rely on real experts in threat assessment
- Complacency and denial

# Dangerous Myths

- Safety is the job of the police
- The key is to teach crisis response
- Focus on active shooter drills
- People “just snap”
- The most dangerous place in the world
- We should be scared of teenagers
- Schools are very dangerous places...

# NPR August 27, 2018

- US Department of Education reported 240 cases of school shootings in 2015-16, but...
- NPR investigation revealed that 2/3 of the incidents never happened
- NPR was able to confirm 11 cases of school shootings
- The truth is, we don't know the actual number

# Threats

- What is a threat?
- Threats can be uttered or posed
- Threats can be explicit, implied, or ambiguous
- Threats are our friends
- Why aren't threats reported?
- Types of threats
  - Contingent threats
  - Terroristic threats

# Responding to Threats

- Early is good and late is bad
- Don't ignore or neglect threats
- Don't escalate threats by confrontation
- Try to make the threat explicit: "I don't understand what you mean."
- Documenting and communicating threats
- Take every threat seriously
- Do not ignore you own fear

# Threats in Context

- We overgeneralize from vivid events
- Lots of people are “troubled” but almost no one will assault you
- After a highly publicized violent crime, we are not in any more danger than we were the day before it happened
- Focus on the things that are actually likely to harm us

# Risk Assessment versus Threat Assessment

- Risk assessment identifies characteristics of people who have been violent
- What is a profile?
- What is the “profile” of a mass killer?
- Risk assessment ignores situations
- Risk assessment requires predictions of human behavior
- Threat assessment requires no predictions



# What's Wrong with Profiles?

- Non-specific indicators
- False positives
  - Depressed
  - Angry
  - Disconnected people
- False negatives
- The role of alcohol and stimulants
- Malicious false reports
- Negligent false reports
- Labeling and ostracism
- “Black trench coat” error
- Marilyn Manson error

# Joel's Grandmother: "You catch more flies with sugar..."

- Treat everyone with respect, especially when you're taking their kids away
- Why I love mediation
- There is never, ever, ever a good reason to humiliate someone
- Civility and courtesy do not imply weakness

# At the End of the Day, Your Best Friend is Your Own Common Sense

- Trust your instincts, especially fear
- You're not the Black Panther – he's fictional!
- Cell phones
- What to do if stalked or followed
- Home security

# What about Mental Disorders?

- The real relationship between serious mental illness and violence
- SMI and gun violence
- The difference between mental illness and despair

# Suicidality

- Suicide is an exit strategy
- It is a way to end psychological pain
- Suicide is an expression of the belief that there is no other solution
- All suicidal people are ambivalent
- Ultimately, extreme suicidality removes all protective factors against violence

# Physical Structure Issues

- Most schools have a ton of blind spots
- How many entrances?
- How will you or your staff ask for help in an emergency? Who will hear you? Who will respond? How long will it take?
- Dealing with local police BEFORE you need them

# School Discipline

- Be firm but respectful
- Have clear expectations about behavior
- Focus on the behavior, not the person
- The Disciplinarian: When all you have is a hammer, the whole world starts to look like a nail.
- Respect the person's culture

# Culture

- What exactly does it mean to be culturally competent?
- Can you learn it in a seminar?
- Can you learn it by Duolingo?
- The best way to address culture is to be humble, inquisitive, and respectful



# Assessing Threats in the Moment

- Assessing a threat: The best way to predict a person's behavior is to ask
  - Be direct
  - Be respectful
  - If possible, try to be matter-of-fact
  - Be non-judgmental
- Except in a crisis, or in the face of a violent threat, don't reward intimidation
  - Appeasement does not help, but....
  - Grant reasonable requests

# Responding to a Crisis

- Think before you talk – what you say matters
- Always respect threats, especially weapons
- Don't challenge their willingness to strike out
- Don't interpret the person's feelings
- Focus on the outcome – safety is more important than being right
- It is OK to acknowledge fear, but try not to panic
- Make sure to ask the person what they want – it may not be so bad

# Simple Things to Remember

- **Trust your instincts about threats and violence - if you feel afraid, you probably have a good reason**

# Simple Things to Remember

- **Don't Lie**
  - Reverse psychology
  - “White lies”
  - Promises that can't/won't be kept
  - False advertising
  - False hope
  - Half truths
  - Setting limits is fine, as long as the limits are real

# Simple Things to Remember

Don't be a jerk!

- **Don't be rude**
- **Don't be a power freak**
- **Don't be a bore**
- **Don't be judgmental**
- **Don't disrespect**
- **Don't be arrogant**

**In short, the best way not to get hit is to avoid being the kind of person you would want to hit**

# Zero Tolerance: When good ideas good terribly bad

- Zero Tolerance was never supposed to mean zero discretion or zero judgment.
- “Don’t ignore troubled students, teachers or staff...”
- ...does not mean that every situation should get the same response.
- Punitive, overly rigid responses simply drive threats underground, so you never know when to duck!

# What to Teach Your Kids and Your Staff

- Report all threats, bullying, and harrassment, and anyone who is making others feel extremely uncomfortable
- The school's presumptive response to any troubled person must be beneficent
- Response decisions should be made by people who have the right training to make them
- Have expert resources available

# Characteristics of Schools and Their Students

- Nobody has a boss
- Consensus decisions take more time
- Faculty autonomy prevents efficient response
- Amateur hour
- Democracy gone wild!!!
- Widespread acceptance of heavy (often binge) drinking and recreational drug use



# Characteristics of Schools and Their Students

- Risk-taking behaviors
- Cultural inhibitions against reporting misbehavior
- Acceptance of diversity, at its extremes, can preclude judging others as abnormal or deviant...
- Too much privacy can be a dangerous thing

# Commandments of Violence Prevention

- Early is good, and late is bad
- Create a workplace where people feel safe, respected, and fairly treated, but...
- ...safety is more important than fairness or being right.
- In order to get people to report troubled people and troubling situations, the presumptive response must be beneficent