Several incidents of school violence across the U.S. have prompted parents, students, administrators, and law enforcement officials to ask “Why?” and “What can we do to prevent it?” There are no easy answers.

The good news: Most schools are safe. Less than one percent of all violent deaths of children occur on school grounds. A child is far more likely to be killed in the community or at home than at school.

But no school is immune to violence. Recent incidents are a wake-up call that some students bring guns to school and some will use them to kill. And while these incidents are deeply troubling, they are not necessarily inevitable. Acting to help prevent school violence is our best defense.

WHAT HELPS MAKE A SCHOOL SAFER?

Strategies for preventing and responding to violence work best in school communities that follow these guidelines.

Focus on academic achievement. Convey the attitude that all children can achieve academically and behave appropriately, while accepting individual differences.

Involve families in meaningful ways. When their families are involved, students are more likely to experience school success and less likely to become involved in anti-social activities.

Develop close ties to valuable community resources. These include families, support services, community law enforcement, faith-based organizations and the community at large.

Help foster student support from school staff. Research shows that a positive relationship with an adult is critical in violence prevention, so provide support from your school staff when it’s needed.
Discuss safety issues openly. Teach children about the dangers of firearms and appropriate ways to deal with anger and resolve conflicts.

Treat students with equal respect. Unfair treatment because of ethnicity, gender, race, social class or other differences can lead to violence and backlash. Victims can become scapegoats and/or targets of violence, which may lead them to react in aggressive or violent ways.

Create ways for students to share their concerns. Protect students who report troubling behaviors that may lead to dangerous situations or violence.

Help children feel safe expressing their emotions. Unexpressed feelings of isolation, rejection and disappointment are more likely to increase acting-out behaviors. Allow them to share fears and anxieties to school staff.

Devising a system for referring victims of suspected abuse or neglect. Work with your attorney to implement an appropriate referral system that complies with any applicable federal and state guidelines.

Offer extended before- and after-school programs for children. School-based programs can be effective in reducing violence.

Promote good citizenship and character. In addition to their academic mission, schools can help students become good citizens by reinforcing and promoting positive values, such as honesty, kindness, responsibility and respect for others.

Identify problems and assess progress toward solutions. And share information with students, families and the community at large.

Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace. Young people need help planning their future and developing skills. Provide them with community service opportunities, work-study programs and apprenticeships that connect them to caring adults in the community.

WHAT SHOULD YOUR SCHOOL’S SECURITY PLAN INCLUDE?

Here are some elements to consider for a successful plan.

Control access. There should be only one unlocked entrance door to each building, usually the main entrance.

• Keep all other doors locked, making sure locks permit evacuation of the building, if needed
• Consider installing “panic” hardware

• Post signs in parking lots, grounds areas and in the building to direct visitors to the office

Monitor visitors. Have them sign in and out, and make sure they have an escort.

• Review the log at the end of each day
• Provide visitors with identification (a badge, tag, etc.)
• Escort visitors to and from their destinations
• Don’t allow visitors to roam the building unescorted

Report strangers. Staff and students alike should follow this rule.

• Report all unaccompanied strangers who lack identification used by authorized visitors
• Report strangers to a designated administrator or security personnel

Install alarms. In addition to fire and sprinkler alarms, schools should consider installing:

• A central station security alarm with full perimeter protection and interior motion detection
• Silent “panic” alarms for offices or out-of-the-way areas
• Monitoring by a qualified alarm company, local law enforcement or the 911 emergency system

Use metal detectors. Carefully consider whether to use any of these devices:

• Metal detectors or X-ray units that students must pass through every day
• Hand-held metal detectors used on a random basis

Employ on-site security staff. You could choose:

• A privately contracted security staff on duty during school hours or part-time
• The local police department, which can provide these options:
  » Regular patrols that cruise the schools at various times during the day and night
  » Part-time officers on the premises
  » Full-time officers assigned to the school

Ensure proper training. Make sure officers or security personnel are prepared with required training in:

• School psychology
• Conflict resolution
• State and federal laws concerning schools and child abuse or neglect
• Recognition of the warning signs for violence.
Behavioral and emotional problems can signal a troubled child when viewed in context. Early warning signs are indicators that a student may need help, but don’t necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward anyone. Imminent warning signs, on the other hand, signal that a student may engage in behavior that’s potentially dangerous to himself or others.

**WHAT ARE EARLY WARNING SIGNS?**

- Social withdrawal
- Excessive feelings of rejection, isolation and being alone
- Having been a victim of violence
- Feelings of being picked on and persecuted
- Low interest in school and poor academic performance
- Expressions of violence in writings and drawings
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating and bullying behaviors
- History of disciplinary problems
- Past history of violent and aggressive behavior
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- Drug and alcohol use
- Serious threats of violence

**WHAT ARE IMMINENT WARNING SIGNS?**

- Serious physical fighting with peers or family members
- Severe destruction of property
- Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons
- Detailed threats of lethal violence
- Inappropriate access to, possession and use of firearms
- Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide

*Imminent warning signs generally require an immediate response.*

**HOW SHOULD YOUR SCHOOL RESPOND TO EARLY WARNING SIGNS?**

Be careful not to jump to conclusions. Educators, parents and, in some cases, students, can help interpret early warning signs accurately by applying these principles:

- **Do no harm.** Don’t use the presence of early warning signs as a rationale to exclude, isolate or punish a child.

- **Understand violence and aggression within a context.** Violence and aggressive behavior as an expression of emotion may have many antecedent factors, such as stress. Certain environments or situations can trigger a violent action.

- **Don’t tolerate stereotypes.** They can interfere with, and even harm, the school community’s ability to identify and help children. Stereotypes based on race, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, etc., can unfairly harm children, especially when the school community acts on them.

- **Consider the child’s developmental level.** Children have varying social and emotional capabilities that may be expressed differently at various age and developmental levels.

- **Look for multiple warning signs.** Troubled children usually exhibit many. So, it’s important not to overreact to single signs, words or actions.

**HOW SHOULD YOUR SCHOOL RESPOND TO IMMINENT WARNING SIGNS?**

When there are warning signs of imminent danger, the safety of everyone involved must be the first and foremost consideration.

School authorities, and possibly law enforcement officers, should intervene immediately 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 tried to carry out threats in the past

- **Has threatened to use a weapon.**

- **Is carrying a weapon, particularly a firearm.**

- **Presents other threatening behaviors.**

Also take these actions:

- **Inform the child’s parents** of your concerns immediately

- **If required by law, seek assistance from appropriate agencies,** such as child and family services and community mental health.
**DEVELOP A VIOLENCE PREVENTION & RESPONSE PLAN FOR YOUR SCHOOL**

Create a written violence prevention and response plan that reflects the common and unique needs of educators, students, families and the greater community. Then form a core prevention and response team to implement it.

### WHAT TO INCLUDE IN YOUR PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early warning signs of potentially violent behavior</th>
<th>A crisis response plan that includes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedures for identifying children</strong> who exhibit early warning signs</td>
<td>• Immediate responses for imminent warning signs and violent behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective prevention practices for building a foundation that:</td>
<td>• A contingency plan for use in a crisis or after a tragedy, with these provisions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Responds to all children</td>
<td>1. <strong>Evacuation and other procedures</strong> to protect students and staff from harm. It’s critical to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enhances the effectiveness of interventions</td>
<td>» Identify safe areas where students and staff should go in a crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategies</strong> to help troubled children, including:</td>
<td>» Conduct evacuation drills so that they can evacuate the premises in an orderly manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Early interventions for students who are at risk of behavioral problems</td>
<td>2. <strong>An effective communication system</strong> that clearly designates roles and responsibilities to specific people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• More intensive, individualized interventions and resources for students with severe behavioral problems or mental health needs</td>
<td>3. <strong>A process for securing immediate external support</strong>, which should come from law enforcement officials and other appropriate community agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consistency with federal, state and local laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support of families and the local school board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provisions for good community communications, training, and monitoring and assessing violence prevention efforts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### WHO SHOULD BE ON YOUR TEAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building administrator</th>
<th>School resource officer</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General/special education teachers</td>
<td>Safe and drug-free schools program coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Many others, such as community leaders, law enforcement personnel, attorneys and judges, clergy, and media representatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil support services representative (school psychologist, social worker or counselor)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### CRISIS RESPONSE

Because violence can happen anytime and anywhere, schools should be well prepared for any potential crisis or violent act. Two components are especially critical: intervention and response.

### INTERVENTION DURING A CRISIS

Situations like those listed below call for immediate, planned action and long-term intervention:

- The presence of weapons
- Bomb threats or explosions
- Fights
- Natural disasters
- Accidents
- Suicides

As part of your intervention during a crisis, follow the contingency provisions in your crisis intervention plan, such as evacuating students and staff to protect them from harm.
## CRISIS RESPONSE (CONTINUED)

### RESPONSE AFTER A CRISIS

**Members of the crisis team should:**
- Understand how people react to stress
- Know how different individuals might respond to death and loss, given developmental variability, religious beliefs and cultural values

**Schools that have experienced tragedy should:**
- Help parents understand children’s reaction to violence, including unrealistic fears of the future, difficulty sleeping, becoming easily distracted and physically ill
- Help teachers and other staff deal with their reactions: Debriefing and grief counseling are just as important for adults as they are for students
- Help students and faculty adjust: Provide short-term and long-term mental health counseling following a crisis
- Help victims and family members re-enter the school environment with a plan that makes it easier to adjust
- Help students and teachers address the return of a previously removed student to the school community: If the student is returning from a juvenile detention or mental health facility, coordinate with staff from that facility to make the transition as smooth as possible

### LOWER RISK BY PLANNING FOR THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO

To conclude, your school may be in a better position to handle crisis situations if you:
- Develop a specific focus
- Devise and implement appropriate security systems
- Understand and train your staff to recognize and deal with early and imminent warning signs
- Develop and implement prevention and response plans

This paper provides only general information and should not be considered a complete resource.

For more detailed information, consult *Early Warning, Timely Response, A Guide to Safe Schools*, produced by the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institutes for Research.  

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1 Early Warning, Timely Response, A Guide to Safe Schools. Produced by the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institutes for Research in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists, under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs (grant #H237T60005).

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