

## Four-Pronged Assessment.

(Adapted from the FBI Academy report by Mary Ellen O'Toole, PhD –  
The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective)

*This model is not a “profile” or a checklist of danger signs. Those things do not exist. Once a threat is made, however, having a fair, rational and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important. The systematic procedure outlined below provides a starting point for investigations.*

### **Prong One—Personality Traits and Behavior (check all that apply)**

- Leakage: Intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes, or intentions that may signal an impending violent act. These clues can be subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums. They may be spoken or conveyed in stories, diary entries, essays, poems, letters, songs, drawings, doodles, tattoos, or videos (maybe a rap song on a CD). Asking other students to help them prepare for a violent act, maybe even through deception (asking a friend to provide ammunition for them because they are going hunting.)
- Low tolerance for frustration: The student is easily bruised, insulted, angered, and hurt by real or perceived injustices done to him by others and has great difficulty tolerating frustration.
- Poor Coping Skills: The student consistently shows little if any ability to deal with frustration, criticism, disappointment, failure, rejection, or humiliation. His or her response is typically inappropriate, exaggerated, immature, or disproportionate.
- Lack of Resiliency: The student lacks resiliency and is unable to bounce back even when some time has elapsed since a frustrating or disappointing experience, a setback, or putdown.
- Failed Love Relationship: The student may feel rejected or humiliated after the end of a love relationship, and cannot accept or come to terms with the rejection.
- “Injustice Collector” The student nurses resentment over real or perceived injustices. No matter how much time has passed, the “injustice collector” will not forget or forgive those wrongs or the people he or she believes are responsible. The student may keep a hit list with the names of the people he feels have wronged him.
- Signs of Depression: The student shows features of depression such as lethargy, physical fatigue, a morose or dark outlook on life, a sense of malaise, and a loss of interest in activities that he once enjoyed. May show unpredictable and uncontrolled outbursts of anger, a generalized and excessive hatred toward everyone else, and feelings of hopelessness about the future. Restlessness, inattention, sleeps and eating disorders, markedly diminished interest in about everything that previously occupied and interested him.
- Narcissism—The student is self-centered, lacks insight into other’s needs and/or feelings, and blames others for failures and disappointments. The narcissistic student may embrace the role of victim to elicit sympathy and to feel temporarily superior to others. He or she displays signs of paranoia, and assumes an attitude of self-importance or grandiosity that masks feelings of unworthiness (Malmquist 1996). A narcissistic student may be either very thin-skinned or very thick skinned in responding to criticism.
- Alienation—The student consistently behaves as though he feels different or estranged from others. This sense of separateness is more than just being a loner. It can involve feelings of isolation, sadness, loneliness, not belonging, and not fitting in.

- ❑ Dehumanizes Others – The student consistently fails to see others as fellow humans. He characteristically views other people as “non persons” or objects to be thwarted. This attitude may appear in the student’s writings and artwork, in interactions with others, or in comments during conversation.
- ❑ Lack of Empathy – The student shows an inability to understand the feelings of others, and appears unconcerned about anyone else’s feelings. When others show emotion the student may ridicule them as weak or stupid.
- ❑ Exaggerated Sense of Entitlement - The student constantly expects special treatment and consideration, and reacts negatively if he doesn’t get the treatment he feels entitled to.
- ❑ Attitude of Superiority - The student has a sense of being superior and presents himself as smarter, more creative, more talented, more experienced, and more worldly than others.
- ❑ Exaggerated or Pathological Need for Attention – The student shows an exaggerated, even pathological, need for attention, whether positive or negative, no matter what the circumstances.
- ❑ Externalizes Blame - The student consistently refuses to take responsibility for his or her own actions and typically faults other people, events or situations for any failings or shortcomings. In placing blame, the student frequently seems impervious to rational argument and common sense.
- ❑ Masks Low Self-esteem - Though he may display an arrogant, self-glorifying attitude, the student's conduct often appears to veil an underlying low self-esteem. He avoids high visibility or involvement in school activities, and other students may consider him a nonentity.
- ❑ Anger Management Problems - Rather than expressing anger in appropriate ways and in appropriate circumstances, the student consistently tends to burst in temper tantrums or melodramatic displays, or to brood in sulky, seething silence. The anger may be noticeably out of proportion to the cause, or may be redirected toward people who had nothing to do with the original incident. His anger may come in unpredictable and uncontrollable outbursts, and may be accompanied by expressions of unfounded prejudice, dislike, or even hatred toward individuals or groups.
- ❑ Intolerance - The student often expresses racial or religious prejudice or intolerant attitudes toward minorities, or displays slogans or symbols of intolerance in such things as tattoos, jewelry, clothing, bumper stickers, or book covers.
- ❑ Inappropriate Humor - The student's humor is consistently inappropriate. Jokes or humorous comments tend to be macabre, insulting, belittling, or mean.
- ❑ Seeks to Manipulate Others - The student consistently attempts to con and manipulate others and win their trust so they will rationalize any signs of aberrant or threatening behavior.
- ❑ Lack of Trust - The student is untrusting and chronically suspicious of others' motives and intentions. This lack of trust may approach a clinically paranoid state. He may express the belief that society has no trustworthy institution or mechanism for achieving justice or resolving conflict, and that if something bothers him, he has to settle it in his own way.
- ❑ Closed Social Group - The student appears introverted, with acquaintances rather than friends, or associates only with a single small group that seems to exclude everyone else. Students who threaten or carry out violent acts are not necessarily loners in the classic sense, and the composition and qualities of peer groups can be important pieces of information in assessing the potential that a threat will be acted upon.

- ❑ Change of Behavior - The student's behavior changes dramatically. His academic performance may decline, or he may show a reckless disregard for school rules, schedules, dress codes, and other regulations.
- ❑ Rigid and Opinionated - The student appears rigid, judgmental and cynical, and voices strong opinions on subjects about which he or she has little knowledge. He disregards facts, logic, and reasoning that might challenge these opinions.
- ❑ Unusual Interest in Sensational Violence - The student demonstrates an unusual interest in school shootings and other heavily publicized acts of violence. He may declare his admiration for those who committed the acts, or may criticize them for "incompetence" or failing to kill enough people. He may explicitly express a desire to carry out a similar act in his own school, possibly as an act of "justice."
- ❑ Fascination with Violence-Filled Entertainment - The student demonstrates an unusual fascination with movies, TV shows, computer games, music videos or printed material that focus intensively on themes of violence, hatred, control, power, death, and destruction. He may incessantly watch one movie or read and reread one book with violent content, perhaps involving school violence. Themes of hatred, violence, weapons, and mass destruction recur in virtually all his activities, hobbies, and pastimes. The student spends inordinate amounts of time playing video games with violent themes, and seems more interested in the violent images than in the game itself. On the Internet, the student regularly searches for web sites involving violence, weapons, and other disturbing subjects. There is evidence the student has downloaded and kept material from these sites.
- ❑ Negative Role Model - The student may be drawn to negative, inappropriate role models such as Hitler, Satan, or others associated with violence and destruction.
- ❑ Behavior Appears Relevant to Carrying Out a Threat - The student appears to be increasingly occupied in activities that could be related to carrying out a threat - for example, spending unusual amounts of time practicing with firearms or on various violent websites. The time spent in these activities has noticeably begun to exclude normal everyday pursuits such as homework, attending classes, going to work, and spending time with friends.

## **PRONG TWO: Family dynamics**

- ❑ Turbulent Parent-Child Relationship - The student's relationship with his parents is particularly difficult or turbulent. This difficulty or turbulence can be uniquely evident following a variety of factors, including recent or multiple moves, loss of a parent, addition of a step parent, etc. He expresses contempt for his parents and dismisses or rejects their role in his life. There is evidence of violence occurring within the student's home.
- ❑ Acceptance of Pathological Behavior - Parents do not react to behavior that most parents would find very disturbing or abnormal. They appear unable to recognize or acknowledge problems in their children and respond quite defensively to any real or perceived criticism of their child. If contacted by school officials or staff about the child's troubling behavior, the parents appear unconcerned, minimize the problem, or reject the reports altogether even if the child's misconduct is obvious and significant.
- ❑ Access to Weapons - The family keeps guns or other weapons or explosive materials in the home, accessible to the student. More important, weapons are treated carelessly, without normal safety precautions; for example, guns are not locked away and are left loaded. Parents or a significant role model may handle weapons casually or recklessly and in doing so may convey to children that a weapon can be a useful and normal means of intimidating someone else or settling a dispute.

- ❑ Lack of Intimacy - The family appears to lack intimacy and closeness. The family has moved frequently and/or recently.
- ❑ Student "Rules the Roost" - The parents set few or no limits on the child's conduct, and regularly give in to his demands. The student insists on an inordinate degree of privacy, and parents have little information about his activities, school life, friends, or other relationships. The parents seem intimidated by their child. They may fear he will attack them physically if they confront or frustrate him, or they may be unwilling to face an emotional outburst, or they may be afraid that upsetting the child will spark an emotional crisis. Traditional family roles are reversed: for example, the child acts as if he were the authority figure, while parents act as if they were the children.
- ❑ No Limits or Monitoring of TV and Internet - Parents do not supervise, limit or monitor the student's television watching or his use of the Internet. The student may have a TV in his own room or is otherwise free without any limits to spend as much time as he likes watching violent or otherwise inappropriate shows. The student spends a great deal of time watching television rather than in activities with family or friends. Similarly, parents do not monitor computer use or Internet access. The student may know much more about computers than the parents do, and the computer may be considered off limits to the parents while the student is secretive about his computer use, which may involve violent games or Internet research on violence, weapons, or other disturbing subjects.

### **PRONG THREE: School Dynamics (student's perspective)**

- ❑ Student's Attachment to School - Student appears to be "detached" from school, including other students, teachers, and school activities.
- ❑ Tolerance for Disrespectful Behavior - The school does little to prevent or punish disrespectful behavior between individual students or groups of students. Bullying is part of the school culture and school authorities seem oblivious to it, seldom or never intervening or doing so only selectively. Students frequently act in the roles of bully, victim, or bystander (sometimes, the same student plays different roles in different circumstances). The school atmosphere promotes racial or class divisions or allows them to remain unchallenged.
- ❑ Inequitable Discipline - The use of discipline is inequitably applied - or has the perception of being inequitably applied by students and/or staff.
- ❑ Inflexible Culture--The school's culture - official and unofficial patterns of behavior, values, and relationships among students, teachers, staff, and administrators -- is static, unyielding, and insensitive to changes in society and the changing needs of newer students and staff.
- ❑ Pecking Order Among Students - Certain groups of students are officially or unofficially given more prestige and respect than others. Both school officials and the student body treat those in the high-prestige groups as though they are more important or more valuable to the school than other students.
- ❑ Code of Silence - A "code of silence" prevails among students. Few feel they can safely tell teachers or administrators if they are concerned about another student's behavior or attitudes. Little trust exists between students and staff.
- ❑ Unsupervised Computer Access - Access to computers and the Internet is unsupervised and unmonitored. Students are able to use the school's computers to play violent computer games or to explore inappropriate web sites such as those that promote violent hate groups or give instructions for bomb making.

#### **PRONG FOUR: Social Dynamics**

- ❑ Media, Entertainment, and Technology - The student has easy and unmonitored access to movies, television shows, computer games, and Internet sites with themes and images of extreme violence. Peer Groups the student is intensely and exclusively involved with a group who share a fascination with violence or extremist beliefs. The group excludes others who do not share its interests or ideas. As a result, the student spends little or no time with anyone who thinks differently and is shielded from the "reality check" that might come from hearing other views or perceptions.
- ❑ Drugs and Alcohol-- Knowledge of a student's use of drugs and alcohol and his attitude toward these substances can be important. Any changes in his behavior involving these substances can also be important.
- ❑ Outside Interests-- A student's interests outside of school are important to note, as they can mitigate the school's concern when evaluating a threat or increase the level of concern.
- ❑ The Copycat Effect-- School shootings and other violent incidents that receive intense media attention can generate threats or copycat violence elsewhere. Copycat behavior is very common, in fact. Anecdotal evidence strongly indicates that threats increase in schools nationwide after a shooting has occurred anywhere in the United States. Students, teachers, school administrators and law enforcement officials should be more vigilant in noting disturbing student behavior in the days and weeks or even several months following a heavily publicized incident elsewhere in the country.