

“He Was Just Joking
When He Said He’d
Blow Up the School”:
How to Effectively
Conduct a Threat
Assessment

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History

U. S. Secret Service School Safety Research

- National Threat Assessment Center & Department of Education
 - Columbine High School, 1999
 - *Safe School Initiative (SSI)* , 2002
 - *Bystander Study*, 2008

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History (cont'd)

In Texas,

- Senate Bill 11, 86th Legislative Session, 2019
 - Section 115 added to Chapter 37 of TEC
 - Established Safe & Supportive School Program Teams
 - Conduct behavioral threat assessments
 - Texas School Safety Center policies and procedures
 - Required training
 - TEA reporting requirements

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Currently

88th Legislative session, 2023

Added five responsibilities to the school behavioral threat assessment process:

1. Clear procedure to report concerning behavior
2. Protect identify of the reporter
3. Parental notifications
4. Retain information in school records
5. Share disciplinary record and threat assessments if student transfers schools

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What is "Behavioral Threat Assessment?"

Fact-based,
systematic process

Designed to identify,
assess, and manage
potentially dangerous
or violent situations.

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Primary goal
of BTA

Identify students of concern,
assess their risk for engaging in
violence or other harmful
activities, and identify
intervention strategies to manage
that risk.

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Violence is preventable

School threat assessment teams are a critical component to school safety

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Threat Assessment



Most effective when embedded within a comprehensive multitiered system of supports (MTSS)



Multidisciplinary



Collaborative partnerships



Focus on prevention

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MTSS
Framework

Helps to identify students before they enter onto the pathway to violence.

Identifies students in need of additional supports.

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Outcomes of an Effective BTA process

- Increase in school engagement activities
 - Mentoring programs
- Additional interventions and supports
 - Student assistance teams
 - School/community mental health services
- Initiation or revision of student plans
 - IEP
 - Section 504
 - FBA
 - BIP
- Problem-solving process

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Special Education/ Section 504

- Need to balance a student's rights afforded by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and school safety
- Threat assessment and special education/504 teams must collaborate
- BTA and special education/504 processes are separate yet complementary
- A threat assessment is NOT an educational evaluation or MDR
- The BTA team is not an IEP/504 team
- BTA team makes recommendations for next steps
- BTA teams provides information for IEP /504 teams to consider
- Only the IEP/504 team makes decisions for students with plans

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Establishing and Implementing the BTA Process

- BTA is not a predictive model for future violence
- BTA is not a foolproof method of assessing risk of harm to others
- BTA can help to identify potential threats
- Assist schools in the development of an intervention & management plan

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Best Practice Threat Assessment Model

- Outlined by the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC; 2018) of the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Homeland Security
- Research-based
- Eight steps and critical components

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Eight-step, High-Quality BTA Process

Step 1. Establish a Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Core Team

- Carefully selected
- Appropriately trained
- Expertise

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Step 2. Define Prohibited and Concerning Behaviors

- A key distinction is the difference between ***making*** a threat and ***posing*** a threat.
- Research suggests that as many as 70% of threats may be transient (low level) and can often be resolved or managed through existing supports.
- For those who pose a threat, the BTA process identifies more specifically the level of concern and actions needed to assure safety.

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Step 3. Develop a Central Reporting Mechanism

- Essential for BTA teams to appropriately identify safety concerns
- Ongoing awareness training
 - What, when, how to report
- Taken seriously
- Handled responsibly
- Confidential
- Culturally sensitive
- Various methods for reporting

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Step 4.
Determine the
Threshold for
Law
Enforcement
Intervention

- Key to distinguish between ***making*** a threat and ***posing*** a threat.
- Low level/transient versus legitimate threat requiring mitigation actions

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Step 5.
Establish
Assessment
Procedures

BTA process is designed to:

- Identify
- Inquire
- Assess
- Manage

Focus of the BTA is to:

- Gather facts
- Understand the situation
- Determine how to mitigate safety concerns

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Key data sources:

- Current school academic and discipline records
- Previous school academic, mental health, and discipline records
- Law enforcement records
- Search of the student, locker, car on school property
- Search of room/home/vehicle with law enforcement
- Internet histories/activities; written and artistic material
- Social media history/activity
- Information from probations, juvenile diversion, social services, or other involved agencies
- Additional information deemed relevant – IEP, BIP, 504 plans, FBA

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TOADS Acronym

Helps to facilitate data collection and determine imminence and intent. Does the student have the:

T - time to execute their plan

O - opportunity to carry out the plan and/or ability to access “targets”

A/D - ability and desire to carry out the plan

S - stressors that are negatively impacting life and decision making that can serve as a stimulus/trigger

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Risk Factors for Targeted School Violence

- Socially withdrawn
- Isolated and alienated
- Feels rejected
- Violence/bullying victim
- Feels persecuted/having been picked on
- Low school interest and performance
- Intolerance and prejudice
- Drug and alcohol use
- Affiliation with gangs
- Expresses personal grievance/moral outrage
- Thinking framed by ideology
- Failure to affiliate with prosocial groups
- Dependent on virtual communities
- Occupational goals thwarted
- Mental illness
- Poor impulse control
- Access to, and possession of, firearms
- History of ...
 - ✓ violent expressions in writings and drawings
 - ✓ serious threats of violence
 - ✓ uncontrolled anger
 - ✓ impulsive and chronic hitting,
 - ✓ intimidating, bullying
 - ✓ discipline problems
 - ✓ criminal violence
 - ✓ cruelty to animals

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Analyzing Information within the Context of key Investigative Questions:

1. What are the person's motives and goals?
2. Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack or harm others?
3. Has the person shown inappropriate interest in any of the following:
 - (a) Workplace, terrorism, school, or campus attacks or attackers;
 - (b) Weapons (access to or recent acquisition of weapons);
 - (c) Incidents of mass violence (terrorism, workplace violence, mass murderers);
 - (d) Obsessive pursuit, stalking, or monitoring others.

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Analyzing Information within the Context of key Investigative Questions:

4. Has the person engaged in attack-related behaviors?
5. Does the person have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?
6. Is the person experiencing hopelessness, desperation, or despair?
7. Does the person have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible person?

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Analyzing Information within the Context of Key Investigative Questions:

8. Does the person see violence as an acceptable, desirable, or only way to solve problems?
9. Is the person's conversation and story consistent with their actions?
10. Are other people concerned about the person's potential for violence?
11. What circumstances might increase or decrease the likelihood of violence (stressors or protective factors)?

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Warning Signs for Targeted School Violence

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets identified <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Persons ▪ Places ▪ Programs • Processes • Philosophies • Proxies of the above • Articulates motives • Personal • Political • Religious • Racial/ethnic • Environmental • Special interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing intensity of violence related <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Efforts ▪ Desires ▪ Planning • Direct or indirect communications about violence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Words consistent with actions ▪ Sees violence as acceptable/only solution • Access to weapons or methods of planned harm • Leakage of ideations • Social withdrawal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional state <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hopelessness ▪ Desperation ▪ Despair ▪ Suicidal thinking • Feelings of being picked on, teased, bullied, or humiliated • Increasing capacity to carry out threats • Engagement with social media facilitating or promoting violence • Intimate partner problems • Interpersonal conflicts • Significant losses or personal failures
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Note. Amman et al. (2017); de Becker (n.d.); Fein et al. (2004); Langman (2009, 2015); Meloy et al. (2011, 2014, 2015); Nicoletti & Spencer (2002); Reeves & Brock (2018).

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Pathway to Violence

- Data sources are analyzed
- Student poses a threat?
- Pathway behaviors:
 - Ideation
 - Planning
 - Preparation/acquisition
 - Implementation

An effective BTA process can interrupt this pathway.

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Step 6. Develop Risk Management Options

- Consider ALL data
- Risk factors
- Protective factors
- Identify levels of concern – leading to individualized interventions and supports.

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Levels of Concern Conceptualized

Low level concern – Individual/situation does not appear to pose a threat of violence or serious harm to self/others, and any exhibited issues/concerns can be resolved through problem solving measures.

Moderate level concern – Person/situation does not appear to pose a threat of violence or of serious harm to self/others at this time, but exhibits some behaviors that indicate potential intent for future violence or serious harm to self/others; and/or exhibits other concerning behavior that requires intervention.

High level concern – Person/situation appears to pose a threat of violence, is exhibiting behaviors that indicate both a continuing intent to harm and efforts to acquire the capacity to carry out the plan; may also exhibit other concerning behavior that requires immediate interventions to mitigate risk.

Imminent concern – Person/situation appears to pose a clear and immediate threat of serious violence toward others that requires immediate containment to protect self (law enforcement or mental health hold/admission) and actions to protect identifiable target.

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Interventions and Management

- Develop a written plan
- Focus on building resiliency and protective factors
- Identify needed supports

NOTE: Punitive measures, such as school removals and expulsions can increase risk!

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Grievances are the Most Common Motive

- 41% of school attacks took place within the first week back to school following a break in attendance.
- 24% of school attacks took place on the first day the attacker returned to school after an absence.
- 2 cases, attacker was suspended from school at the time of the attack.

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Step 7. Create
and Promote
Safe School
Climates

Prevention and mitigation

Everyone has a role to play -

- Students should feel empowered
- Faculty & staff should take all reports seriously
- Teams assess any information regarding concerning behavior

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Step 8.
Provide
Training for All
Stakeholders

- School personnel
- Students
- Parents
- Law enforcement

*School safety is the responsibility of
all.*

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BTA and Students with IEPs

- “Baseline”
- Pattern or episodic event
- Target behaviors on a BIP
- Manifestation
- Additional data

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Takeaways...

- Violence is preventable
- BTA is research-based approach for mitigating school violence
- Texas School Safety Center at Texas State University

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Thank you!

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