

## How to Deal with Violent and Physically Aggressive Students

School violence is a serious issue that affects everyone in a school community. The risk of engaging in physical violence is greatest during mid-adolescence. In 2005, approximately 12% of Canadian high school students engaged in violent behaviour at least once during a 12-month period. A summary of research findings is provided at the end of this handout.

### Recognizing violence warning signs

#### Imminent warning signs

- Loss of temper on a daily basis
- Significant vandalism or property damage
- Frequent physical fighting
- Increased risk-taking behaviour
- Detailed plans to commit violent acts
- Announcing threats or violent acts
- Enjoying hurting animals
- Violent or disturbing written communication or images
- Changes deviating from student's usual behaviour
- Comments or observations made by other students

#### Longer-term warning signs

- History of violent or aggressive behaviour
- Serious drug or alcohol abuse
- Gang membership
- Access to weapons
- Threatening others regularly
- Difficulty controlling anger
- Feeling rejected, disrespected, bullied
- Poor school performance
- History of discipline problems
- Failing to acknowledge feelings of others

#### **Scenario:**

Maurice, a 19-year old student, storms into your office. He is very agitated. You are alone with the student. He has his recent essay in his hand and is angry about his grade. He kicks the exam on your desk and kicks the garbage can. He states that he is enraged.

#### **What to do:**

- Get help. If you feel that you are in imminent danger and the person is unable to control herself/himself, attacks you or breaks material, call security (210). Do not stay alone with a violent person.
- If you feel threatened in any sense within the classroom, speak to an Academic Dean as soon as possible.
- Set limits. Position yourself closest to the door in case you need to exit promptly. Keep a safe distance and place yourself diagonally rather than face-to-face or with your back turned. Keep your hands open and in sight.
- Be clear and direct. Let them know that you want to help and what behaviours are acceptable. "You certainly have the right to be mad but you don't have the right to hit or destroy objects" or "If you hit me, I won't be able to help you."
- Show empathy. Staying calm and responding in an empathic manner can help diffuse the situation. Avoid increasing frustration by recognizing the intensity of the situation. "I see that you are angry and that you are very upset about your assignment."
- Let them know that you care about their well-being and want to help them. Encourage the student to express what they are experiencing.

#### **What to avoid:**

- Ignoring alarm signals such as threats, aggressive comments or declarations.
- Threatening, challenging, taunting or touching the student.

## Research on students engaging in violent acts has demonstrated that:

- **There is no specific profile that fits students responsible for school violence.** They come from a range of ethnic, racial, socioeconomic and family backgrounds. Academic performance may range from poor to strong.
- Numerous factors may contribute to students engaging in violent acts including individual (mental illness, history of aggression or substance abuse, declining respect for life), family (distressed parent-child relations, history of child abuse or neglect), social (alienation, bullying) and environmental (media, access to weapons) factors. **It is important to be aware of the student's behaviour and communications.** It is often an interaction of several factors which contribute to violent behaviour. The more risk factors present, the greater likelihood that a person will become violent.
- Though research indicates that there is no specific profile that fits students responsible for school violence, Bender (1999) identified *invisible kids* as those committing random school shootings. They are generally unknown to most people, quiet, reserved, bullied, labeled as geeks or nerds, alienated from family and friends, male, possess average or above average intelligence, underachievers (high intelligence, low motivation), are not known to school administration, generally do not misbehave, do not belong to the *in* crowd and have acceptable academic performance.
- Many students responsible for school violence also live with mental illness such as depression, schizophrenia, stress disorders and personality disorders. Suicidal thinking is also a common feature.
- There is a prominent sense of hopelessness, difficulty coping with personal failure and feeling rejected, alienated, bullied, attacked, humiliated and threatened. It has been documented that students may commit violent acts as a result "of being shunned and emotionally wounded by peers and essentially ignored by adults in their school" (Windham, Hooper & Hansen, 2005).
- Violent acts are usually planned a few days prior to the event. Perpetrators may share their plan with others. **They are likely to talk to peers: classmates, friends, or siblings so it is important to be aware and report any information that you come across to an Academic Dean. It is less likely that they will talk to an adult.** However, students may not share their plans with others and still pose a threat. Perpetrators are likely to have engaged in behaviours that were alarming prior to an incident.
- Most documented school shooters are male.

Sources: APA Help Center (1999). *Warning signs of teen violence. Recognizing violent warning signs in others.* Retrieved January 2008 from <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=38>

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