Detecting the Potential for Violence
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Introduction

When anyone--child, teenager, adult--threatens to commit violence, the threats must be taken seriously. People, young or old, sometimes make threats in the heat of the moment. Later, they want to take the threats back. Other times, danger is at hand. What is the difference between a threat that is likely to be acted on and a threat that is not?

A Precipitating Event

Youths who have shown a pattern of direct statements and a pattern of behaviors suggesting the possibility of their being violent, often act out the violence following an event they find highly stressful. Examples include Kip Kinkel, who killed his parents and two classmates, and wounded 22 others told a classmate the day before the killings that he wanted to get back at the people who had expelled him from school. He was expelled for having a loaded pistol in his locker. Andrew Golden, 13, who murdered a teacher and classmates in Jonesboro, AK, had been rejected by a girl on whom he had a crush.

Patterns of Direct Statements

Direct statements about committing violence are red flags. When youth have made statements more than once, to several different people, and in different contexts (e.g., home, schoolyard, classroom, neighborhood), the danger is increased. Sometimes youth are just blowing off steam, do not have a pattern of invoking violence, and are not at risk, but to know this, the following assessments must be made.

Verbal Statements

Verbal statements include talking about harming/killing others, idolizing violent heroes, and providing specific details of how the violence will take place, including who the intended victims are, and when and where the violent events are to take place.
Written statements

Writing poems and stories about killing people could be a warning sign in combination with other indicators. The more often youth does this and the variety of places in which such writings are shared may increase the likelihood of violence.

Circumstances that Increase the Likelihood of Violence

One or more of the following increases the likelihood of acting out the talk.

1. **Preoccupation with violence**
   - Youth spends hours a day playing violent videos, listening to violent music, playing violent games, reading about violence, writing about violence
   - Youth collects weapons.
   - Youth cannot see that violence hurts other people.
   - Youth sees violence as a way of demonstrating manhood and "guts"

2. **Means to commit the violence**
   - Youth have access to weapons.
   - Youth have a history of fascination with weapons.

3. **Patterns of bullying and being bullied**
   - Youth has a history of being bullied and has not handled this well but instead feels picked on.
   - Youth has a history of bullying others.

4. **Psychological vulnerability**
   - Youth feels weak and powerless and fantasizes about lashing out at others.
   - Youth "attaches" to violent others.
   - Youth wants to please violent others to the point where own moral compass is lost.

5. **Part of a group of youth who are preoccupied with violence**
   - The group has violent initiation rites.
   - Violence is a means of showing that you've got guts
• Leaders of the group scapegoat and manipulate one or more members. These members may be at highest risk.

6. **History of violence in the families of origin**

• This violence includes wife beating and rape, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and witnessing or being the target of such violence.

7. **A Pattern of glorifying violence**

• Many people glorify violence as a mark of manhood. This may happen in the youth's family and/or in youth's peer group and community. Youth also may actively seek persons who idealize violence.

• Any of the above factors in the lives of youth merit a gentle but firm conversation. The more factors youth have, the more serious is the potential for violence.

8. **A sense of entitlement**

• Some youth believe that are entitled to get what they want when they want. They push this belief to such an extent that they are willing to use whatever it takes, including violence, to get what they want.

**Indirect Indicators: Signs of Cumulative Stress**

Indirect indicators increase the likelihood of youth acting out violently, but by themselves they are indicators of serious issues that indicate the youth need intervention. If the direct communication is not present, the likelihood of violence is diminished. If direct communication of violence and these signs of cumulative stress are present, then the likelihood of violence is increased.

1. **Emotionally closed**

• Youth shows an inability to share personal and private hurts, rejections, abandonments, and a sense of failure.

2. **Shame, feeling defective**

• Youth has a sense of shame, of feeling diminished by feelings of powerless and unworthiness.

3. **Unshared anger and grief**

• Youth has unshared anger and grief that leads to a sense of the self as bad and deserving of bad things. The root meaning of anger is grief.

• These behaviors could result from a distorted gender role socialization--that is, unrealistic expectations of what it means to be a man--and not be related to psychological vulnerability.
Chronic emotional isolation, however, eventually leads to emotional distress, but a deep-rooted psychological vulnerability related to psychic wounds are not likely.

4. **Anti-social behaviors**
   - These behaviors include vandalism, shoplifting, stealing, and beating others up.
   - The behaviors could also result from a sense of entitlement and not be related to psychological stress and vulnerability.

5. **Chemical abuse**
   - Risk for violence include misuse of alcohol, drug use, use of inhalants, and sniffing glue.
   - These behaviors could substitute for emotional expressiveness; that is, emotional expressiveness is a great release, but if youth refuse to express their emotions appropriately, they may use chemicals as a way of providing emotional release.

6. **Self-injurious behaviors**
   - These behaviors include cutting, eating problems, suicide attempts, talk of suicide.

7. **Signs of Cumulative Stress**
   - There are many signs of cumulative stress that merit attention, such as chronic behavioral maladaptation, conduct disorders, chronic angry outbursts, psychosomatic disorders, dissociative reactions, phobias, depressive/suicidal thinking, social isolation, sleep disorders, night terrors, and sleep walking.
   - Many youth have these signs of cumulative stress but are not at risk to act out violently. Such youth would not make direct and indirect statements about violence in a patterned way and also have many of the following indicators of lowered risk for violence.

**Indicators That the Youth has a Lowered Risk for Violence**

The following factors diminish the likelihood that a youth will act out a verbal threat. The more negative factors that a youth has, however, and the fewer positive factors, such as those listed below, the more likely it is that violence will take place.

1. **Emotional expressiveness**
   - This is a very important indicator of emotional health. In appropriate circumstances, youth at low risk for violence share personal, painful experiences and express a wide range of emotions.
2. **Empathy for others**
   - Connecting to others on both emotional and cognitive levels and having respect for others is an important indicator of emotional health.

3. **Good interpersonal skills**
   - A person with good interpersonal skills has a lowered risk for violence. These skills include sharing personal issues with others, negotiating for what they want, knowing how to admit wrong-doing, taking responsibility for hurtful behaviors, and making amends for hurtful behaviors.

4. **Spends time with friends who are pro-social**
   - Admiring and emulating pro-social friends is a hopeful sign that youth are functioning well. Feeling accepted by pro-social friends with whom they’ve shared their most personal secrets is a strong indicator of emotional health.

5. **Sense of humor**
   - This is very important, indicating abilities to take a "long" view of present difficulties and to find humor in difficult situations. The humor, however, cannot be sadistic, at the expense of others.

6. **Optimistic about the future**
   - Youth with low risk for violence have clear plans for achieving dreams for the future, have abilities that match plans, learn about possibilities for the future from successful people, and show persistence when circumstances seem to block plans for future.

7. **Has a close relationship with at least one parent**
   - Having a pro-social parent, grandparent, sibling, or other family member to whom youth is close is important. Indicators of closeness include interest in youth's activities and encouragement in several areas, such as emotional expressiveness, school work, and planning for the future. Youth responds by working to capacity in school, having abilities to be emotionally expressive, and makes realistic plans for the future.

8. **Close relationships with adults other than parents**
   - Sometimes relationships within families are not very good, but youth can have good relationships with adults outside of the family. Having good relationships within families and with persons outside of families is the best possible combination.

9. **Willingness to negotiate**
• Youth negotiates for what they want. They don't feel entitled. They don't just take what they want regardless of what affected others might want. They negotiate and work for what they want.

**Summary**

In detecting potential for violence, these positive factors must be looked for as well as the negative factors. When the negatives outweigh the positives, the situation is serious. One or two negative factors in combination with many positives might indicate a child who is blowing off steam and is not a threat. A few negative factors and no positive factors could indicate a problem and require some helpful interventions.

**About the Author**

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