

Warning Signs: Leakage and Threats & Attack Related Behavior

Leakage and Threats

Though we might tend to think that warning signs of impending school attacks are difficult to discern, the truth is that all too frequently they are hiding in plain sight. Perhaps the most common category of warning signs is what is known as “leakage,” meaning that students “leak” their intentions. Though leakage can be vague, in many cases it is shockingly explicit.

For example, it is not uncommon for students to simply tell their friends that they are planning to commit an attack. This leakage takes a variety of forms. They may disclose it as a secret. They may brag about it to their best friends or post an announcement on their social media. They may warn their friends to stay away so that they don’t get hurt. In some cases, they tell a friend and then ask if the friend will join them in the attack.

Leakage, however, is not always explicit. Prior to various school shootings, the perpetrators have made comments that there was going to be “an evil day,” or that they were going to do “something stupid” that would get them jailed or killed, or warned a friend to avoid school the next day but without saying what was going to happen.

Whereas leakage consists of comments made to a third party, threats are made directly to intended victims. As with leakage, threats can be explicit or ambiguous. Explicit threats include a student saying to his intended victim, “When I come back with a gun, you’re going to be the one I shoot,” or another student telling his ex-girlfriend “I’m going to blow your brains out.”

Ambiguous threats can take many forms. Examples include, “I watched five movies about serial killers and thought of you the whole time,” “You better watch your back if you flunk me,” and “You know who I am and you know what’s going to happen.”

Though threats and leakage offer clear opportunities for intervention, these opportunities are often missed. Why? Perhaps the most common explanation is that people simply do not take explicit comments seriously. We may think that if someone is going to commit a major crime, he isn’t going to announce it. And yet, this is exactly what many school shooters do—they announce their intentions.

When it comes to ambiguous threats and leakage, the problem may be that people do not read between the lines to perceive the danger. Or if they do hear the implied threat of violence, again, they fail to take it seriously.

When school attacks have been thwarted, most commonly it has been because students reported threats and leakage. This highlights the need for students (as well as school personnel, parents, and the larger community) to be educated regarding warning signs of potential violence and what to do when they encounter them.

Attack-Related Behavior

As important as threats and leakage can be in identifying the risk of violence, it is possible that people say things that they do not mean literally. If students are engaged in planning and preparing an attack, however, this constitutes attack-related behavior. The significance of this behavior is that it indicates the person is not simply fantasizing about violence or bantering with friends about committing violence but is taking concrete steps to make the fantasy a reality. Such behavior increases the level of concern.

What counts as attack-related behavior? Anything that moves the student closer to committing an attack. This includes planning when, where, and how to carry out the attack; obtaining and perhaps practicing with firearms or experimenting with making explosives; deciding how to get the weapons into the building; creating a hit list of intended victims; and trying to recruit one or more people to join the attack (this is also a form of leakage).

The more attack-related behavior a student engages in, the more imminent the risk of violence.

This brings us to another concept: evidence of imminence. Not all warning signs are equally concerning. For example, a student might say, “if nothing changes, I may have to get a gun from somewhere and take care of things.” Though this is concerning, it is conditional on things not getting better. In addition, it indicates that the student does not have a gun and may not know how to obtain one.

In contrast, a student could say, “I bought a shotgun and on the first day of school, I’m hiding the gun in my guitar case and the seven worst people in the school are going to die.” This one sentence contains critical pieces of information that constitute evidence of imminence. It tells us where the attack is going to occur (the student’s school), when it’s going to happen (the first day of school), what kind of attack it will be (a shooting), and indicates he has the means to carry out the attack (has obtained a shotgun). In addition, it tells us he has created a hit list and has a plan for how to get the gun inside the school. The extent of the student’s attack-related behavior reveals that he poses a very imminent danger.

Of course, the two categories of “things people say” and “things people do” are interrelated. When students engage in attack-related behavior, they often talk about their plans with their peers. Thus, leakage may reveal evidence of imminence. A student may brag that he has obtained a weapon to shoot up the school or warn his friends to skip school on a certain day because he’s going to go on a rampage. Such comments are leakage, but the leakage reveals attack-related behavior.

When investigating safety concerns, threat assessment teams should pay special attention to attack-related behavior and any details that constitute evidence of imminence. Students may make threats they don’t mean or talk about violence without any intent to commit violence, but if they are taking concrete actions toward carrying out an attack, this requires immediate investigation and intervention.

Finally, for prevention efforts to be successful, schools need to have well-trained threat assessment teams that can investigate safety concerns and intervene appropriately. This will not only save lives but can help to move students out of whatever crisis has put them on the path of violence and steer them in a better—and safer—direction.
