Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

New Violence Prevention Manual

_Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines_ (CSTAG) is the sequel to _Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence_, updated with more than a decade of new research and practical experience.

- CSTAG retains the original Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG), but introduces a streamlined decision tree, more comprehensive forms, and guidance on threats by adults.
- Intended for K-12 school-based multidisciplinary teams including administration, law enforcement, and mental health.
- Incorporates guidance from the FBI and U.S. Secret Service reports on school shootings.
- Allows teams to evaluate student and adult threats of violence, quickly resolve less serious transient threats and take appropriate action in response to more serious, substantive threats.
- Manual includes forms that can be freely copied and customized. See www.schoolta.com
- Developed in 2001, widely implemented across U.S. and Canada
- Recognized as an evidence-based practice in 2013 by the federal government’s National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

Our published studies found that schools using this model were able to resolve threats safely and effectively, allowing almost all students to return to school. Fewer than 1% of threats resulted in a physical act of violence (all fights with no serious injuries). Studies also found that schools had lower suspension rates and fewer alternative school transfers, with no racial/ethnic disparities for Black and Hispanic students. Students in special education programs received similar outcomes to other students. On school climate surveys, students and teachers reported less bullying and more positive perceptions of school climate than students and teachers in control group schools.

$50 per manual. 10% discount for purchases of 20+.


Dewey Cornell, Ph.D. is a forensic clinical psychologist who holds the Bunker Chair as Professor of Education at the University of Virginia. Dr. Cornell directs the Virginia Youth Violence Project and has studied youth violence and school safety for more than 30 years. Based on his clinical evaluations of young homicide offenders and school shootings, and his work assisting the FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime in its study of school shootings, he led the development of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. Since the first field-testing in 2001, he has directed a series of published studies demonstrating the value of this model and has trained thousands of threat assessment teams. In 2015, he was recognized as a Promise Champion by the Sandy Hook Promise Foundation.

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**OVERVIEW**

A threat is a communication of intent to harm someone that may be spoken, written, gestured, or expressed in some other form, such as via text messaging, email, or other digital means. An expression of intent to harm someone is considered a threat regardless of whether it is communicated to the intended target(s) and regardless of whether the intended target is aware of the threat. Threats may be implied by behavior that an observer would reasonably regard as threatening, planning, or preparing to commit a violent act. When in doubt, treat the communication or behavior as a threat and conduct a threat assessment. Threats that are not easily recognized as harmless (e.g., an obvious joke that worries no one) should be reported to the school administrator or other team members. The administrator or another team member makes a preliminary determination of the seriousness of the threat. The student, targets of the threat, and other witnesses should be interviewed to obtain information using this protocol. A transient threat means there is no sustained intent to harm and a substantive threat means the intent is present (or not clear) and therefore requires protective action. This form is a guide for conducting a threat assessment, but each case may have unique features that require some modification.

A threat assessment is not a crisis response. If there is indication that violence is imminent (e.g., a person has a firearm at school or is on the way to school to attack someone), a crisis response is appropriate. Take immediate action such as calling 911 and follow the school crisis response plan.

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**School Threat Assessment Decision Tree**

**Step 1. Evaluate the threat.**
Obtain a detailed account of the threat, usually by interviewing the person who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses. Write the exact content of the threat and key observations by each party. Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student’s intentions. Is there communication of intent to harm someone or behavior suggesting intent to harm?

- **Yes**
  - **Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transient.**
    Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be easily resolved so that there is no intent to harm? Does the person retract the threat or offer an explanation and/or apology that indicates no future intent to harm anyone?
    - **Yes** Case resolved as transient; add services as needed.
    - **No**
  - **Step 3. Respond to a substantive threat.**
    For all substantive threats:
    a. Take precautions to protect potential victims.
    b. Warn intended victim and parents.
    c. Look for ways to resolve conflict.
    d. Discipline student, when appropriate.
    Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up whereas very serious means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon.
    - **Serious** Case resolved as serious substantive threat; add services as needed.
    - **Very Serious**
  - **Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantive threat.**
    In addition to a-d above, the student may be briefly placed elsewhere or suspended pending completion of the following:
    e. Screen student for mental health services and counseling; refer as needed.
    f. Law enforcement investigation for evidence of planning and preparation, criminal activity.
    g. Develop safety plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs. Plan should include review of Individual Educational Plan if already receiving special education services and further assessment if possible disability.

- **Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.**
  Document the plan.
  Maintain contact with the student.
  Monitor whether plan is working and revise as needed.

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*This 5-step decision tree is a revision of the original 7-step decision tree for the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines that retains the same information and procedures in a more condensed format.*