

**THE  
PROTOCOL APPROACH  
TO  
SCHOOL VIOLENCE**

**HANDBOOK FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES**

*AN INTERVENTION PROGRAM TO IDENTIFY AND INTERVENE BEFORE  
VIOLENCE OCCURS*

A PROGRAM FOR THE AGAWAM SCHOOL SYSTEM

by

Ann L. Moriarty, Ph.D.  
&  
Paul M. Kalill, J.D, Ph.D.

**AGAWAM HIGH SCHOOL**

**Ralph J. Figy**  
School Adjustment Counselor  
CRISIS : 413-568-6386

760 Cooper St.                      Tel: 413-821-0533  
Agawam, MA 01001              Fax: 413-821-0539  
Email: rfigy@agawampublicschools.org

**AGAWAM HIGH SCHOOL**

**Stacy Wright**  
School Adjustment  
Substance Abuse Counselor  
CRISIS : 413-568-6386

760 Cooper St.                      Tel: 413-821-0590  
Agawam, MA 01001              Fax: 413-821-0539  
Email: swright@agawampublicschools.org

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## WELCOME

Welcome to the Protocol Approach to School Violence Parents and Family workshop. Your school system is implementing a new and valuable program to help identify and respond to students who may be having emotional difficulties or who may be at risk for potential violence. You are a very important part of this program's success.

Why are you here? This is a program that identifies and responds to early warning signs of potential violence exhibited by students. As parents and family members, you know your children best. You know when they are behaving normally or when something is "out of the ordinary". During the day, teachers and school officials spend time with your children and have also come to know them. The goal of this program is to bring everyone together in a uniform format to detect changes in a child's language and behavior that may indicate they are in need of help.

With the support of the administrators, teachers, the school adjustment counselors and hopefully a good portion of the students your school system will increase the chances of stopping a student's progression towards violence mid stream and get that student the help they need. Parents and family are at the center of this effort and your support and participation is a vital link to making schools safe.

This program will be filled with information and discussion on The Protocol Approach To School Violence. We want to explain in detail how the program works, how it will help you and your children and how you can help to prevent violence and get children the help they may need. Please participate fully. Ask questions, raise issue and challenge everyone in the program to become an advocate for school safety.

Violence should never be a part of the educational environment of our children. The goal of this program is to prevent violence before it happens. We need your help.

*"AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION IS WORTH A POUND OF CURE"*

*Proverb*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PROTOCOL MODEL FOR SCHOOL VIOLENCE

School violence is a growing problem. All too often we are shocked in disbelief at children perpetrating violence on other children.

According to *The Guide to Safe Schools*, the leading cause of deaths for adolescents in the United States are homicide and suicides. One in 16 adolescents is a victim of violent crime.

In the 2 years encompassing 1996-97 and 97-98, youth homicides and suicides reached over the 11,000 mark. 54 of these deaths occurred on school grounds. 10% of schools in 1996-97 reported one or more incidences of violent crime. 3% of high school seniors report carrying a gun to school at least once a month and 29% of eighth graders report being threatened by other kids.

Each time we see the horror of school violence on television we all ask the same questions, "How could this happen? Could this have been avoided? How can we keep our schools safe?"

We live in a dangerous world. Anger, hostility, incivility and violence permeate our society. From our highways to our neighborhoods to our homes we see anger and violence. Each day the news brings us instant video of violence on small and large scales, from murder to war. It is reflected in our entertainment choices - movies, music, books, video games and Internet sites. Our children are exposed to violence everyday.

When violent acts enter the school system we look to the school for answers. Where there any warning signs? Could this have been prevented?

We look to place the burden of detecting potentially violent students on teachers and school administrators who are overworked, underpaid and not trained to be mental health professionals. We also place the burden on other students to be able to determine what is a real threat and what is not.

Potentially violent students have early warning signs. *The Guide to Safe Schools*, a booklet created by the Department of Education has identified these signs. The challenge for schools, parents and law enforcement is to determine how to recognize these signs and how to intervene.

The Protocol Approach is a system designed to identify language and behavior that may be indicative of students who are at risk of self harm or harm to others.

Once a protocol is triggered, the interventions are automatic. The protocol can be terminated at anytime if further intervention is not indicated or can be followed through to the end taking advantage of each possible intervention that is necessary and appropriate.

Some may raise the concern that some language and behavior that trigger the protocol may not have

necessarily lead to violence. This is true. However, it is our contention that even in situations where violence may not have been the final outcome the intervention will be valuable to the student and his/her family in identifying issues important to the student's mental health.

The goal of this approach is not to overreact or label students as potentially violent. But, to identify and assist students that may be having some level of difficulty. For example, a protocol triggered for language of self harm for which the student was not serious is easily terminated in the first stage with no additional intervention. There may be benefit to the student in that the language brought a response and in that response the student has learned that their well being is of concern to adults. It is also an opportunity for the student to explore any issues that may be of concern even if not potentially leading to violence.

The protocol approach is a tool that takes the burden of assessing the language and behavior of a student off the shoulders of teachers, administrators and other students. It puts that burden where it belongs, in the hands of the school psychologist or adjustment counselor who is trained to determine risk and refer to appropriate professionals in the fields of mental health and law enforcement.

The triggering of a protocol will, for the most part, identify students who are at the beginning of difficulty. This will lead to family and school intervention and support. Hopefully, the intervention takes place before the potential for violence becomes a real concern.

This system identifies children that may be in need of help. It is not just for students who may be violent. Intervening early in the process can assist students in getting the help they need.

The protocol approach also allows the school system to create a response program in collaboration with parents, community and law enforcement before violence occurs. It provides a level of accountability. It creates a chain of events documenting the potential trigger and the process of intervention. It will lead to the cooperative intervention from outside agencies and family.

The protocol approach is not the answer to school violence, it is a tool in the fight to save our children. It is a system which puts the language and behaviors of children in focus and creates a model for appropriate intervention by properly trained professionals.

## **SCHOOL VIOLENCE: CONCERNS OF PARENTS**

As a society, we are both heartbroken and appalled by recent eruptions of violence by children against children, especially in our schools. As parents we have always been concerned about the safety of our children. Now, we have even greater concerns as parents across the country face concerns of their child as a victim of violence or a perpetrator of violence.

### **My Child As Victim:**

As we have watched our televisions over the past several years we have seen the faces of parents whose children have been wounded or killed in acts of violence by other children. We are horrified at the violence and shutter to imagine ourselves in the place of the grieving parents. We want to keep our children safe but we can't protect them 24 hours a day. The good news is that schools are safe. The incidence of violence in schools is not very high. Generally students are safe. However, we want schools to be as safe as they possibly can be. We want our children to go to school and focus on learning not protection. We want our children not to worry about potentially violent students that may act out in a rage-filled moment that changes the lives of all involved forever.

### **My Child As Perpetrator:**

When school violence strikes, we generally identify with the parents of the victims. What about the parents of the perpetrators? Our first reaction might be to blame them and vent our anger. But we see over and over again that they are as shocked as everyone else. Their lives are forever changed not only with guilt but with the loss of their own children either by death or incarceration.

It's awfully hard to imagine our children as the perpetrators of violence. But in order to maximize the safety of our children we have to put ourselves in the place of those parents whose children have been violent. If those parents had considered the possibility of what seemed impossible, perhaps they may have been able to observe the warning signs of potential violence or at least see changes in their children that might have led them to seek help. We have to be willing to think the unthinkable in service to our children. By imagining ourselves in the shoes of those parents, we are more likely to look for signs that tell us our child needs help — not when the problem has progressed to violence but long before, when it's a manageable issue that can be handled.

## QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK

### *Couldn't This Have Been Prevented?*

In every school tragedy that has occurred, parents, students and teachers have all said the same thing.

### *I never thought this could happen here!*

We all have to face the fact that violence can happen anywhere and be proactive in preventing it's occurrence.

### *Weren't there signs that this student was having problems or was potentially violent?*

The answer in most every case is YES!. There were warning signs of potential violence or at least some problem that should have been evaluated.

Most schools have excellent intervention programs to help students that are in need of evaluation and intervention. The problem is not in violence prevention programs, the problem is in how to identify students that need help and get them connected to the programs the school has in place.

In most schools, this is done by the teacher. If a student is acting out or appears 'down' they may send them to the office or to the school counselor. There is no system in place to identify early signs of concern in a standard way that takes the haphazard guess work out of it for teachers. This program does just that. The program takes away the guess work and allows teacher let the professional make the determination of counseling or other support needs.

If we as parents and act as if school violence is not a problem we are giving a troublesome message to our children. If we as parents act as if it could never happen here are we fully protecting our children? If we as parents act as if our child can not have a problem that may need help are we not setting them up for problems later on?

We need to give children the message that school violence is not acceptable, problems should be identified and handled and that we care about them and there safety.

### *What About Stigma?*

Some parents may be concerned that their child might be labeled as a behavior problem, or as needing counseling or some other service. They may want to protect their child from being labeled.

That is certainly understandable. With The Protocol Approach there are no labels, no stigma. We are all coming together to get children help they need. Clearly, a child who is a victim or perpetrator of violence will have a much greater problem dealing with the associated issues than a child who is getting some help for a problem that may have. These Protocols are not labeling documents. They are *action plans* that help parents play a vital role in helping their child. Getting a child the help they need to be health happy productive members of society is not a stigma, it's an obligation parents and other members of the school community share.

## **THE PROTOCOL APPROACH TO SCHOOL VIOLENCE: HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS**

The Protocol Approach to School Violence has three main components. Each component is a vital part of the program and requires that support and cooperation of all involved.

### **COMPONENT ONE: THE PROTOCOLS**

The Protocols are step by step action plans that allow the school adjustment counselor to respond to language and behavior observed and reported by anyone in the school that may indicate a student is in some difficulty.

There are four language and behavior protocols and one crisis protocol. They are as follows:

#### **Protocol One: Verbal Threat of Self-harm or Harm To Others.**

This is a situation where a student threatens another student, teacher or school official or indicates they may harm themselves in some way. The language can be verbal or can be written, played out on a video tape as part of a school assignment, letter, or posting on the Internet.

#### **Protocol Two: Acts of Physical Violence With Intent To Cause Harm:**

This constitutes a physically aggressive act by a student towards another individual student, teacher or school official with the intent to cause some type of bodily harm. This is a step beyond a threat and this behavior carries with it a greater risk to all involved.

#### **Protocol Three: Aggregate Warning Signs**

Multiple warning signs may indicate that a student may be in need of help. Usually, the picture of multiple warning signs develops through observation by a number of different people within the school system and by parents and family members at home. It is important to be clear that this protocol is not stereotyping of any particular group of students. These signs may indicate that the student may be having difficulty and need some type of support.

#### **Protocol Four: Bringing A Weapon To School (Without Intent To Use It)**

When a student brings a weapon to school the actual threat of harm escalates significantly. Even if the student has no intention of using the weapon the potential for that weapon to cause harm is a real threat. The weapon could be unintentionally used or could fall into the hands of another student. Weapons in the school intensify the possibility of a violent outcome.

#### **Protocol Five: Bringing A Weapon To School (With Intent To Use It)**

When a student or group of students brings a weapon to school with the intent to cause harm to one or more individuals you must immediately go to a crisis mode. Your school has in place a crisis plan. Information on your role in this plan is an important part of the overall plan to help minimize violent outcomes.

### **How Protocols Are Triggered:**

When a student exhibits language or behavior that are part of a protocol, the teacher or school official sends a referral form to the school adjustment counselor. If school policy indicates, a report will also be sent to the office. When the school adjustment counselor receives a referral, he/she will call the student in for an evaluation. If the school adjustment counselor determines that there may be areas that this student needs help they will follow the step by step guide of the protocol documenting each action along the way.

Each protocol indicates that the school adjustment counselor notifies the parents and depending on the nature of the problem asks the parents to come in and actively participate in gathering important information, pooling the knowledge and coming up with a viable plan for the student.

### **How Protocols Are Ended:**

Protocols are ended when everyone involved is comfortable that the student has been evaluated, a determination has been made on what type of help the student needs ( if any), the student has obtained that help and change has occurred. As a parent your input and support is vital to the success of the plan to help your child.

### **COMPONENT TWO: EVALUATIONS**

When a student demonstrates a language or behavior that triggers a protocol, they are sent to the School Adjustment Counselor for an initial evaluation. This evaluation looks at the current situation, issues and events that may have lead up to the current situation and relevant information on the students personal level of functioning that may shed light on problem areas. This evaluation format has been developed from standard evaluation formats. The School Adjustment Counselor is trained in performing the evaluation and making appropriate assessments and referrals. Parents are an important part of the evaluation process as they often have important information on changes that may have occurred in the students attitudes, behavior and mood.

### **COMPONENT THREE: WORKSHOPS**

In order to maximize the potential of this program to help identify and respond to the warning signs of violence and identify students who may be in need of counseling and other support services, we believe that every constituencies of the school needs to understand the why's and how's of the program. That is why you are here today.

In addition to doing workshops with parents, workshops are held for teachers, school administrators and all the students. We also recommend a meeting with law enforcement official so they are aware of how the program works and understand the preventative nature of the program.

## **HOW TO RESPOND TO A PROTOCOL EVALUATION OF YOUR CHILD**

If you are notified by the School Adjustment Counselor that your child is being evaluated due to language or behavior that has triggered one of the protocols, how you react will greatly effect the outcome of the intervention.

First, be grateful that it this situation as been identified at this early stage. Better to respond to a problem early rather than later, when it may be more difficult to deal with.

Second, be cooperative and involved in the process. This is an identification of a *possible* problem. The evaluation may turn out to be of little concern. If there *is* a problem it is best to focus on it now, get the student the help he or she needs so they can move on with their lives.

Third, be involved in the information gathering and planning stage. As a parent you want the best for your child that is available. Advocate for the best level of help you can.

Fourth, let your child know you are involved in the process and will provide the support s/he needs. If counseling is indicated, become involved in the process and let your child know you want him/her to get the most out of that s/he can. If it's some other support program, give him/her the same message.

By participating in the process and focusing on a preventive stance rather than a punitive one, you will create an opportunity for your child to have a positive, helpful experience.

## HOW YOU CAN BECOME INVOLVED IN PREVENTING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

There are many ways for you and your family to take a proactive stance in dealing with school violence issues.

### *1. Discuss Issues Of Violence At Home*

Talk to your children about issues of violence. Ask them about violence at school or around the neighborhood. Get a sense of what their fears and concerns are and let them know that you are working to make their environment a safer place.

### *2. Become Aware of Language You Use and Your Children Use That Is Violent*

We all say things that are violent without giving it a thought. We certainly don't mean it and it has become a part of the language of our culture. However, it is important for you, as parents, to distinguish violent language and provide alternatives for your children. They are exposed to violence and violent language every day. It is important that there is a safe haven at home where open discussion can occur, and a more realistic picture can be created for our children.

### *3. Become Involved In What You And Your Children Engage In For Entertainment*

Children will generally watch anything on TV, listen to anything on CD's and play just about any kind of video game. They do not filter their experience or at least have an outlet to help them distinguish between what is appropriate and what is too violent. They need you to be a part of that process.

### *4. Watch For Early Warning Signs In Your Children And Their Friends*

As parents you are in a unique position to observe changes in your children's language and behavior. Some changes are part of the normal process of growing up. Some may indicate an existing or potential problem. Watching for early warning signs and being involved in children's day to day lives allows you to have a better sense of what is going on for them internally. Being involved in their lives is not an invasion of privacy. The more open you are with your children about your concern for them, their safety and their future, the greater your ability to be a part of their lives in positive proactive ways.

**For Your Information, we are including a list of early warning signs you may want to become familiar with.**

### **THE WARNING SIGNS:**

1. Verbal threats of self harm or harm to others
  - I don't want to live anymore
  - I'm better off dead or gone
  - I'll get even with him (them)
  - I'll fix him/her good
  - He's toast
  - His car is history
  - I'll blow him/her away
  
2. Acts of physical violence
  - fistfight
  - hitting or punching
  - kicking
  - throwing objects at another person
  - biting
  - pushing with harmful intent
  - self - mutilation
  
3. Bringing a weapon to school
  - guns
  - knives
  - bombs
  - razor blades
  
4. Other warning signs
  - social withdrawal
  - victim of violence
  - bullied, picked on or teased by other students
  - poor academic performance
  - low school interest
  - expression of violence in writings, drawings or other forms
  - uncontrolled anger
  - acts of mild aggression
  - history of discipline problems
  - intolerance or prejudicial beliefs or displays
  - gang or outcast group affiliation