

Module 13: School Threat



What is a School Threat?

School Threats: Introduction

Acts of targeted violence committed by individuals under the age of twenty-one on elementary, middle, and high school campuses have led to the death of dozens of individuals and have escalated in recent years. These incidents do not occur in isolation. The U.S. Secret Service and the Department of Education launched a collaborative effort to determine what could be done to prevent future attacks from occurring and developed the *Safe School Initiative*, publishing the [2004 Final Report](#). Secret Service's [National Threat Assessment Center](#) (NTAC) has also researched and published studies on targeted school violence.

The mission of the local countywide [School Threat Protocol](#) is risk reduction and violence prevention to promote the safety of students throughout the county. This protocol commits San Diego County to a coordinated community response to threats of targeted school violence. The local protocol encompasses all forty-two K-12 school districts and guides how schools, law enforcement and prosecutors respond to school threats, using evidenced-based guidelines for investigation and resolution of the threat.

Responding to School Threats: Guidance for Providers

SchoolLink providers are guests on school campuses and operate under the direction of school leadership. When incidents involving school threats occur, it is important to follow school protocols and understand the scope of your role on campus.

Providers' Role During School Threat Events:

- **Follow School Leadership:** Providers should follow the direction of school administrators during any active threat or post-event recovery.
- **SchoolLink providers are there to support the students receiving SchoolLink services, not to manage the broader campus response.** The County Office of Education (COE) has a specific protocol, working with the school district to support the larger student body in the case of school threat events. At times, COE may request additional behavioral health support from the County. SchoolLink providers may be asked to assist, but only within the defined protocol established by COE, which includes COE communicating the request to County BHS, who then coordinates support with the SchoolLink provider.

Managing Real or Perceived Threats

- Students may be affected even if a threat is not credible. Anxiety, fear, and uncertainty are common reactions.
- If a student on your caseload is experiencing increased distress related to a school threat (real or perceived), provide trauma-informed, short-term support and collaborate with school staff as needed.
- In cases where a student you serve is identified as having made a threat, consult your supervisor immediately and follow your agency's internal policies. Therapeutic support may still be appropriate and can be a critical part of risk reduction, care planning, and emotional stabilization.

Understanding Ongoing Student Anxiety Around School Threats

Many students experience heightened anxiety related to school threats, even when those threats are not credible or have been resolved. This anxiety is often compounded by regular lockdown drills, media coverage of school violence, and past traumatic experiences. For some youth, especially those with existing mental health concerns, the fear of a potential incident can lead to chronic stress, hypervigilance, difficulty concentrating, or avoidance of school altogether. It's important to validate these fears, provide accurate information, and equip students with coping strategies to manage their anxiety while reinforcing that schools have safety protocols in place.

Symptoms of increased anxiety around school threat:

- Increased irritability or emotional outbursts
- Sleep disturbances (trouble falling or staying asleep, nightmares)
- Avoidance behaviors, such as reluctance or refusal to attend school
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches with no medical cause)
- Hypervigilance or being easily startled
- Difficulty concentrating or staying focused in class
- Withdrawal from peers or activities they once enjoyed
- Repetitive questioning or seeking constant reassurance about safety
- Heightened sensitivity during lockdown or safety drills
- Expressions of hopelessness, fear, or fatalistic thinking about school safety

SchoolLink providers play a vital role in maintaining a safe and supportive school environment by **staying vigilant** for any signs of potential threats or danger on campus. It is important to consistently **Look** for unusual behavior, **Read** students' verbal and written communication for warning signs, and **Listen** closely to what students share or express through their emotions and interactions. If anything seems suspicious or concerning, it is essential to promptly discuss it with your supervisor to ensure the safety and well-being of all students and staff.

LOOK	READ	LISTEN
APPEARANCE EMULATION: Dressing like or idolizing past mass shooters or violent figures. BEHAVIOR CHANGE: Sudden withdrawal or new interest in violent or dark content. PROBING: Testing school boundaries or security responses. REHEARSAL: Acts of cruelty (e.g., harming animals or peers) as a trial run for violence	VERBAL STATEMENTS Pay attention to what is said, but also what is implied or hinted at. ANNOUNCEMENT: Take all threats seriously – attacks may be publicly announced and need to be clearly ruled out. SOCIAL IMAGE If others nickname someone "the school shooter" don't ignore it – it could mean they are exhibiting behavioral indicators of violence that others find scary.	INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH: Repeated searches or deep interest in past school shootings. DON'T EXPLAIN IT AWAY: Ask directly about concerning material; do not assume it is harmless. CONSUMPTION IS KEY: What someone researches online is an indicator of true interests and aspirations. WRITING/SCHOOL PROJECTS LEAKAGE: Projects or papers may reference mass violence.

Referrals Following School Threat Incidents

Students impacted by school threats as well as students identified as potential threats may be appropriately referred to SchoolLink providers. Students who are involved in incidents or pose potential concerns may be referred to SchoolLink for follow-up support after the school has addressed immediate safety needs. Referrals should follow the established school-site process, including communication with designated staff (such as the school counselor, administrator, or mental health lead). SchoolLink providers should confirm that referred students are appropriate for services within the scope of the program and consult with their clinical supervisors as needed.

HELPFUL LINKS



- [School Safety - San Diego County Office of Education](#)
- [How to Talk With Kids About School Threats | post](#)
- [Helping Children Cope with Terrorism](#)
- [Sandy Hook Promise](#)

Administrative Information

For administrative information or to provide feedback about the [SchoolLink training program](#), please email BHSContactUs.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov with subject line: SchoolLink