

Behavior Threat Assessment and Management in the Virtual Environment

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

This document was designed to assist schools with behavior threat assessment and management (BTAM) decisions in a virtual environment, and it may be particularly useful as schools experience extended closures due to the worldwide coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Moving educational services to online/virtual delivery format does not absolve or excuse schools from still attending to school safety and crisis response. If state laws require threat assessment teams be implemented, those laws must still be followed, unless specific exemptions have been provided.

Threat assessment represents an important component of a comprehensive approach to school safety that gives schools an alternative to zero-tolerance discipline policies that have proven to be ineffective and counterproductive. The goals of threat assessment are to keep schools safe and to help potential offenders overcome the underlying sources of their anger, hopelessness, or despair. Effective threat assessment provides school professionals with useful information about an individual's risks and personal resources.

This document assumes the reader has some knowledge and experience with the BTAM process. It is intended as a supplement to the *Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM): Best Practice Considerations for K–12 Schools*. Please refer to the later document for a full review of BTAM and related guidance.

Step 1. Establish a Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Team

- *Can the BTAM team meet virtually?*
 - Yes, use a secure virtual/video platform on a password-protected and secure internet connection or on a conference line to hold regular meetings about cases. Ensure all BTAM team members have the same platform, and provide quick tips for access and using that platform. This may require school districts to purchase a platform that has secure functions that do not allow students to record the session or share their screen. Ensure communication platforms used have increased security features such as password protection, ability to place participants in a “waiting room” and host must approve their admission into the meeting.
 - Ensure all BTAM team members have access to a phone number to call if they cannot connect via video conferencing. This may be particularly important for BTAM members that are not employed by the school district.
 - During times of extended school closures, when educators may have several other virtual meeting expectations each day, regularly scheduled BTAM meetings are encouraged to be brief (e.g., 20 minutes). Set an agenda, keep time, and strive to be efficient.
 - Avoid the use of personal cell phones when calling students or families. There are a number of platforms that allow staff members to call students and their families or other staff members without providing a personal cell phone. This can include conference calling services and apps that allow calls using a different phone number (e.g., Google Voice, Grasshopper). Consult with your district’s information technology (IT) department to see which platforms are approved.

- Check on state and federal guidelines on the best virtual technology to use to conduct interviews and meet with members of the BTAM team. Some states may require that a district follow HIPAA guidelines on how to speak with individuals in confidential situations.
- *Who can serve on the BTAM team when staff members are teleworking?*
 - Anyone who was originally assigned to the BTAM team and anyone specifically identified as a needed BTAM member to work a case (e.g., law enforcement).
 - Add essential community members that can conduct any follow-ups with the individual of concern and the target(s).
 - Teams may need to revise memorandums of understanding (MOU) to include any community resource individuals involved (if not already included in current MOU).
- *What might be different about virtual team meetings, compared to those done in person?*
 - Expect interruptions from children, family members, or pets seeking team members' attention. While this may feel unprofessional to some, it will be important to set a culture of acceptance, patience, and flexibility during times of extended school closures.
 - In times where in-person contact is limited (e.g., quarantining), a care-for-the-caregiver culture may be even more important for BTAM teams. Team members are likely to have increased job, family, or personal responsibilities/challenges. Rotate team members when possible, allow opt-outs, and be aware of team member personal needs or histories when possible. Check in on each other more often than what is typical to simply connect (i.e., non-work related).
- *What are some additional tips for effective virtual BTAM team meetings?*
 - Set up a group text/chat to notify the team if/when you need to meet; also agree upon a video conferencing platform and ensure all on the team have it set up and working. As needed, be ready to provide the team guidance/training on the platform and/or related technology (e.g., some computers may need software updates to function adequately and safely).
 - If actively working a case where an extended virtual time commitment is required, be sure to provide frequent breaks approximately every 45–50 minutes.
 - Use cloud-based platforms to set up spreadsheets or tables with tasks to be completed. Project management systems can also help teams to know what tasks need to be completed, who is assigned to complete them, and the deadline.

Step 2. Define Prohibited and Concerning Behaviors

- *What types of behaviors in the virtual environment should be considered concerning?*
 - Any communication that is threatening in nature to self and/or others (i.e., same as in-person concerns).
 - Increase focus on identifying and identifying and managing threats in social media or during virtual teaching. Prepare the school staff, parents/caregivers, and students for what to expect and how to respond if they see threatening behavior.
 - Schools may see an increase in cyberbullying behavior while students are learning in a virtual environment (a significant risk factor in those who want to do harm to others). Set or revisit existing policy for addressing bullying in a virtual learning environment.
 - During extended school closures, schools may see an increase in student mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, depression, substance abuse). This may include an increase in existing symptomology or the development of new concerns. Identifying and managing mental health concerns can reduce harm to self and others among individuals of concern.
- *How might extended school closures trigger or contribute to threatening behavior?*
 - Student, family, and community stressors are very likely to increase in frequency, duration, and intensity during times of extended school closure. Examples include: increased isolation, increased financial stress,

reduced supervision, increased connection to unsafe individuals in the home (e.g., domestic abuse), decreased involvement with prosocial school staff members/peers, increased engagement with unsafe or violence-promoting internet chat rooms/groups, increased perceptions of uncertainty (e.g., unknown time frame for when COVID-19 may end), and increased feelings of resentment due to societal and educational inequities. All of these may increase individual perceptions of aloneness and potentially contribute to mental health challenges.

- The TOADS acronym (time, opportunity, ability, desire, and stimulus) can help determine imminence and intent of a threat. With increased isolation, each of the TOADS components is likely to be more prominent (e.g., more time to ruminate, increased stressors, less supervision).

Step 3. Develop a Central Reporting Mechanism

- *What can BTAM teams do to help school staff members assist with threat identification in the virtual environment?*
 - First, remind the school staff that a BTAM team exists and will continue to function (e.g., it will follow up on threats and provide interventions to individuals of concern and potential targets). Given that BTAM's primary goal is *not* punitive response to threats, schools must continue managing and intervening, even in a virtual environment.
 - Review definitions of threats with school staff members (e.g., may be expressed directly/explicitly or veiled/implicit). Provide examples of what would be expected to be reported.
 - Provide guidance to teachers and other school staff members on how to respond and report concerns [e.g., document date/time, what was said or seemingly implied (even if veiled)].
 - Remind the school staff that, although they are in a virtual environment, they are still mandated reporters. In addition, their professional ethics require addressing safety concerns and engaging in support for all students.
 - Communicate and periodically remind the school community (i.e., the staff, students, parents/caregivers) about anonymous tip lines/reporting procedures. Explain that the reporting source will remain confidential and the BTAM team goal is to respond with actions consistent with the level of threat (i.e., assistance and supports will be provided when appropriate, not a zero-tolerance approach).
 - Raise awareness of cultural considerations or past traumas that may influence student or community member willingness to report. When comments like “snitches get stitches” are made, explain the harm that can be done when people do not report. Provide outreach to community members to better understand fears and to talk about incidents in the community that have happened when people did report to authorities.
 - Address bystander effect with students (i.e., “if you see something, say something” still applies in a virtual environment).

Step 4. Determine the Threshold for Law Enforcement Intervention

- *Does law enforcement involvement in the BTAM process change in a virtual environment?*
 - With extended school closures, the threshold for law enforcement engagement (and/or providing mental health supports) may now be earlier in the BTAM process. Schools are typically less able to engage their building-centered student management and support.
 - BTAM teams may need to reidentify what law enforcement supports are even accessible/available, as School Resource Officers may be reassigned to other law enforcement duties. Regularly scheduled BTAM team meetings can be used to prepare for and adjust to such changes. Questions to consider: Who can the BTAM team contact within the law enforcement agency? What if they are not able to respond? Who is the law enforcement back-up? Does the district have a memorandum of understanding with law enforcement? If yes, when is law enforcement required to be involved? Can schools contact 911 to get immediate law enforcement support for behavior threat cases?
 - Law enforcement may make an initial determination that the person of concern is not a high or imminent threat. This does not mean that the school should discontinue the behavior threat assessment and management process. BTAM teams should carefully document if law enforcement does not take action or if they determine law enforcement engagement is not necessary or limited.

- Law enforcement professionals who serve on the BTAM team generally cannot give the police department any personally identifiable information from a student's education record. However, if the BTAM team determines that an actual, impending, or imminent health or safety emergency exists, then law enforcement may disclose, on behalf of the school, to the appropriate officials under the health or safety emergency exception in FERPA §§ 99.31(a)(10) and 99.36.
- Collaborate with law enforcement to determine how and when law enforcement should notify the BTAM team of a potential threat in the school community and vice versa.

Step 5. Establish Assessment Procedures

- *How can BTAM teams interview an individual of concern or others with information in a virtual environment?*
 - A secure video conferencing platform is preferred that allows for facial expressions and nonverbal behaviors to be observed. Review pros and cons of various platforms and consult district/state guidelines regarding permission for use of various platforms (e.g., availability, cost, time limits, ability to record, confidentiality).
 - Interview others with critical information (e.g., peers, caregivers, teachers) via video conference or phone.
 - Have alternative plans if technology fails (e.g., start by requesting a phone number to call if video conferencing is not working adequately).
 - Before starting an interview, discuss privacy issues, limits of confidentiality, and other expectations with individuals being interviewed (e.g., Will the session be recorded? Who is in the room on both ends?).
 - Consider having two BTAM team members facilitate the interview and monitor for inconsistencies in facts, stories, or facial expressions.
- *What if parents refuse to allow for the BTAM team to speak with their child?*
 - The BTAM team needs to decide in advance what kind of student contact is allowed, how that contact can be made, and if parent/guardian permission is needed. This needs to be clearly stated in BTAM procedures. Each school district may have different guidelines around virtual student contact. Ensure student contact procedures in the BTAM process are aligned with general district guidelines.
 - Document the actions taken to try and secure permission and, as needed, refer the case to additional authorities if needed (e.g., law enforcement, community mental health, child protective services).
- *What other BTAM assessment practices may require special consideration during extended school closures?*
 - Access educational and behavioral records virtually; if original hard-copy records are vital to the process (e.g., handwritten confidential notes in a school file), a BTAM member may need special access to the school building to retrieve them.
 - Increased law enforcement participation in homes may be necessary, with consent of the parent/guardian or a warrant (e.g., to determine access to weapons, journal writing, social media posts, computer search engine history).
- *As with traditional BTAM procedures, do BTAM teams still try to determine level of concern/risk?*
 - Yes, the BTAM decision making process still needs to be followed. BTAM teams must strive to match a response/intervention to the level of concern and implement interventions and supports as needed.
 - See *Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM): Best Practice Considerations for K–12 Schools* for more detailed guidance on determining level of concern/risk.
 - In a virtual environment, BTAM teams may have to estimate levels, with less information, and potentially involve law enforcement or other outside agencies sooner.
 - To manage the needs of students who make threats and others who are threatened, BTAM teams must make plans to collaborate with parents on how to intervene or manage behaviors at home.

Step 6. Develop Risk Management Options

- *How can potential targets take protective actions when they are outside the traditional school environment?*
 - Ensure reduced social media presence, creating less ability for the person making the threat to interact (e.g., activate privacy settings, turn off location trackers).
 - Ask friends and family members to stop indicating or “tagging” the potential target in social media posts (and turn off tagging options when possible). This includes not sharing activities the target participates in or the location of the activities. The target, friends, and family members may want to turn off the geolocation setting for pictures that they take with the target that will be posted on social media.
 - Work with teachers to ensure intended targets are not placed into virtual classrooms or group assignments with the individuals displaying potential threatening behaviors.
- *In a virtual environment, what interventions can be provided to students who have made threats and to potential targets of a threat?*
 - Daily virtual check-ins with parents and/or the student.
 - Monitoring of school email and internet activity (if school issued device).
 - Teachers monitor schoolwork that is submitted and chats between students when conducting virtual academic lessons.
 - Check-ins from an identified mentor, coach, or other community support person.
 - Social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons or counseling sessions, provided by school-based mental health professionals, to individuals of concern and targets. Determine how to provide those traditional mental health resources virtually (i.e. telehealth/teletherapy).
 - App-based supports for depression, anxiety, PTSD, resiliency, and more may be recommended by school-based mental health professionals.
 - Law enforcement can provide assistance by conducting home visits and making referrals for mental health and juvenile justice interventions when traditional school-based support is unavailable or less available.
- *How can schools that rely on control-based methods for management (e.g., suspension, expulsion) respond to threats in a virtual environment?*
 - Regardless of setting, BTAM best practices always emphasize interventions and management of challenges, as opposed to solely focusing on exclusionary responses to threats. Schools must carefully consider what an exclusionary response (e.g., suspension) would provide, or how it would even be possible, during extended school closures.
 - It is important to remember that overuse of exclusionary practices can escalate risk. BTAM best practices, regardless of setting, require a thorough assessment process to ensure the management actions taken are appropriate to the level of concern.
- *How does the BTAM team engage with and support parents and other caregivers in the home during the BTAM process?*
 - Start by identifying and assisting the family in their efforts to meet basic needs (e.g., food banks, mental health agencies, financial supports, crisis hotlines).
 - Recognize the value of providing care for the student’s immediate caregivers during this stressful time. Decreasing family stressors can help to mitigate risk for targeted acts of violence.
 - Provide guidance to parents on how to effectively implement increased monitoring, supports, and behavioral management strategies.

Step 7. Create and Promote Safe School Climates

- *How do you reinforce a safe school (home) climate when delivering virtual education to students?*
 - Send positive messaging. Have administration and/or school staff members record a weekly audio/video message for students and parents that emphasizes caring for each other and staying connected; highlights supportive actions being taken; and sends a message of hope, encouragement, and excitement for the eventual return to school.

- Require students to review or revisit safe digital citizenship lessons. Reinforce responsibility pledges previously signed.
 - Provide social–emotional learning (SEL) lessons. There are numerous resources online that can support a school and provide lessons for students. While providing SEL lessons in the traditional school environment is important, it may be even more important in the virtual environment because of the impact of social isolation.
 - Provide guidance for parents/caregivers on what a psychologically safe home climate may include and the need for strong home–school communication.
 - Provide information for parents/caregivers about how the school will continue to support the mental health of students in a virtual environment.
 - Connect parents/caregivers to resources (e.g., mental health resources on the school webpage, helpful handouts or parent-friendly documents via social media).
- *How can BTAM teams address cyberbullying in a virtual environment?*
 - Work with law enforcement, parents, and students to monitor social media of the person of concern and the targets. Law enforcement can also work with internet network providers to determine frequently visited websites and provide assistance in monitoring website activity. Staff members can consult with school IT departments to see if students are searching for prohibited items on school network devices (e.g., how to purchase a gun, how to make a bomb). BTAM members should work with the family of the person of concern to get assistance in monitoring activity on cell phones and home devices (i.e., computers, tablets).
 - Conduct multitiered bullying interventions. Incorporate virtual SEL lessons on how students can be “upstanders” and provide support for those that are bullying victims, bystanders, and the bullies themselves.
 - Create a safe and culturally responsive virtual learning environment so students feel safe reporting bullying concerns to a trusted adult.
 - Review or revise previously stated classroom behavioral expectations. Review definitions of bullying and how to report concerns.
- *How can a BTAM team continue to promote a safe school environment for staff members?*
 - Review definitions of a threat and provide guidance to staff members about how to report a concerning behavior involving students or other staff members. Make a decision on whether reports should be emailed, called in, or submitted via electronic form. Staff members should be reminded that although the building administration is no longer down the hall, they still have to report serious incidents when they occur.
 - Inform or review with staff members where they can go to get support. This may include Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and other community support.
 - Provide guidance to staff members on how to recognize risk factors and warning signs when conducting remote educational lessons. This may include threatening comments in student chats, making threatening comments or videos on social media, and making attempts to engage potential targets online (i.e., “Liking” posts or videos, attempting to “Friend” the target). Additional information on recognizing risk factors and warning signs can be found in *Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM): Best Practice Considerations for K–12 Schools*.
- *How can schools provide care-for-the-caregiver support in a virtual learning environment?*
 - School-based mental health professionals can check in on teachers, BTAM team members, and others providing direct virtual support to monitor workload, provide validation of their efforts, and to offer breaks, when possible. Reinforce agreed upon care-for-the-caregiver culture (e.g., need to take care of oneself, acceptable to ask for assistance, need for healthy habits).
 - Teachers could invite the school mental health professional to join in one of their virtual class lessons. This allows the mental health professional to connect and check in with students. The mental health professional could also facilitate an SEL lesson to provide a virtual “break” for a teacher to watch the lesson and learn strategies to help them cope with the stressful environment.

- Conduct brief care-for-the caregiver webinars regarding how staff can support each other, strategies to cope with stressors, and provide resources (e.g., EAP, websites, community resources).

Step 8. Conducting Training for All Stakeholders

- *How can schools train key stakeholders on how to report behaviors of concerns in a virtual environment?*
 - Conduct a brief webinar reinforcing how to identify individuals who need support and are demonstrating concerning behaviors.
 - Post a link on the school/district website with instructions on how to report concerns.
 - Send periodic email reminders and/or short video messages about the importance of caring for each other and how to seek help.
- *How can schools train new members of the BTAM team?*
 - Train them in traditional protocol and then how it is modified for virtual setting.
 - Have them complete online training sessions from reputable trainers who train best practices models.
 - Complete refresher trainings.

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Please cite this document as:

NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee. (2020). *Behavior Threat Assessment and Management in the Virtual Environment*. [handout]. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

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