

BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT (BTAM): TIPS FOR K–12 SCHOOLS

Behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) is a multidisciplinary, fact-based, systematic process designed to identify, assess, and manage potentially dangerous or violent situations. The purpose of the BTAM team is to help schools distinguish between incidents where a student threat has no intent to harm and incidents in which the student does pose an actual threat of targeted violence. The systematic and proper implementation of BTAM helps avoid impulsive and potentially harmful decisions that can lead to unnecessary suspension and expulsion or referrals to the juvenile justice system. BTAM processes should be followed in accordance with IDEA, Section 504, FERPA, and civil rights and privacy laws.

ESTABLISH PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES THAT CONTAIN:

- Authority for school professionals to act on reported threats or concerning behaviors
- Implementation of a best practice model
- A well-trained, multidisciplinary BTAM team
- Integrated interagency systems and partnerships
- BTAM training for staff, students, parents, and community partners
- Proactive and preventive social and emotional initiatives
- Mechanisms for providing comprehensive school mental health services
- Confidential reporting procedures
- Clear guidelines for information sharing
- Procedures for determining disciplinary action, when warranted

BTAM IS NOT:

- Profiling
- Adversarial
- A disciplinary process
- A panacea for safe schools
- A (functional) behavioral assessment

ESTABLISH AND IMPLEMENT THE BTAM PROCESS

STEP 1. ESTABLISH A MULTIDISCIPLINARY THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAM

- Include an administrator, at least one school mental health professional (e.g., school psychologist), and an SRO/law enforcement officer trained to work in schools.
- Explicitly define roles and responsibilities for all members and backup staff.
- Include members who speak a language other than English, if needed.
- Include professionals who work with individuals with disabilities.

STEP 2. DEFINE PROHIBITED AND CONCERNING BEHAVIORS

- Educate the school community on behaviors that should be reported (e.g., weapons possession, violent threats verbally/on social media, abrupt behavior changes).
- Establish procedures to report when someone is at risk of harm to self or others.

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STEP 3. DEVELOP A CENTRAL REPORTING MECHANISM

- Have multiple confidential and accessible reporting methods.
- Train students, staff, and families what and what not to report and how.
- Be aware of cultural implications that may affect willingness to report serious incidents.

STEP 4. DETERMINE THE THRESHOLD FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT INTERVENTION

- Include law enforcement as part of the BTAM team, but not necessarily in every BTAM case.
- Involve a law enforcement officer if there is imminent risk and actions need to be taken.
- For community law enforcement officers, develop a memorandum of understanding that defines roles and describes responsibilities of school staff and law enforcement.

STEP 5. ESTABLISH ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

- Identify the subject whose behavior has raised concern through clear and confidential reporting.
- Conduct an objective inquiry to gather additional data.
- Assess information regarding situation, context, and developmental or disability factors to determine if the subject poses a threat of violence or harm to self or others.
- Consider team members' biases to ensure process does not contribute to the disproportionality in disciplinary practices.

STEP 6. DEVELOP RISK MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

- Review all data, including risk and protective factors, and identify the level of concern (low, moderate, high, imminent).
- Use levels of concern to design interventions and supports, not to automatically determine a change of educational placement.

STEP 7. DEVELOP INTERVENTIONS

- Develop a written plan of supports to assist the individual of concern and mitigate the impact of the situation.
- Provide school and culturally relevant community-based supports that focus on building resiliency and protective factors for the student while also addressing safety concerns.
- Be mindful that punitive measures such as suspension and expulsion can increase risk.
- Document all actions taken to support the school's good faith efforts throughout the process.

STEP 8. MONITOR PROGRESS AND STAY ENGAGED

- Provide informal monitoring for situations determined to be of low risk.
- Implement more formalized progress monitoring for those individuals determined to be of moderate, high, or imminent risk.
- Schedule meetings to review progress and make intervention adjustments.
- Obtain guidance from district legal counsel regarding threat assessment records.

An effective and appropriate BTAM process integrates these best practice guidelines, is embedded within a comprehensive multitiered system of supports, promotes positive school climate and discipline practices, and is critical to saving lives, enhancing school safety, and ensuring legal and ethical guidelines are followed.