

Ten Lessons Learned from School Shootings and Foiled Attacks

Peter Langman, Ph.D.

LESSON I

The Limits of Privacy

Parents of school shooters get a lot of blame. They are blamed for raising hateful children. They are blamed for not seeing the warning signs. They are blamed for creating monsters who kill. This blame is misguided. No parents encouraged their children to commit murder or helped them plan their attacks. In hindsight, it is easy to criticize them for what they did or did not do. Doing this, however, is not productive. A more useful approach is to learn from past tragedies in the hope that we can prevent future ones. What is the role of parents in preventing school shootings? Parents can do several things to minimize the risk not only of school shootings but dangerous behavior in general. Perhaps the most important task is to know your child. This, of course, is easier said than done, especially with teenagers. Adolescents are remarkably good at living private lives that their parents never see. Nonetheless, maintaining a supportive and nurturing relationship is important. Open communication can allow you to respond promptly as problems arise. Knowing your children's friends, where they go, what they do, what Web sites they visit, what they are posting on their own web pages, and so on, can prevent many problems.

But what about privacy? Parents often want to give their teens increasing privacy as they mature. The need for monitoring your children varies according to their behavior. Most teens do not need to have their rooms inspected on a regular basis. But if you catch your son with a pipe bomb, then routine inspections are in order. If you know your daughter is angry and

obsessed with weapons, that she visits weapon-related websites and seems preoccupied with death and violence, it would be a good idea to keep close tabs on her and to seek professional assistance.

For example, Eric Harris's parents knew he had built a pipe bomb. In hindsight, it may seem obvious that they needed to be more vigilant, but they were living in a pre-Columbine world. Eric liked to set off fireworks and homemade explosives in a field; to those around him, this may not have raised any red flags. We, however, are living in a post-Columbine world. Times have changed. If parents know that their son or daughter is building bombs, or reading books on bomb making such as *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, they need to investigate.

Similarly, Kip Kinkel gave an oral report on how to build a bomb. He made and detonated bombs. He begged and pleaded that his parents buy him guns. Guns, guns, guns. They were all he wanted. His parents recognized things were not going well, but his father continued to buy Kip guns in the hope of being able to monitor his weapons use and perhaps improve their father-son relationship. In retrospect, it is easy to see the warning signs. If today children or students seem preoccupied with weapons, talk openly about building bombs, and are desperate to have guns, they are not necessarily potential murderers, but it is crucial that people deny them access to weapons and look into the situation.

Both Kip and Eric manufactured and stored a large number of bombs in their homes. They also had multiple firearms hidden in their rooms or elsewhere in the house. When children are preoccupied with weapons, parents need to monitor their behavior and personal space to see what might be going on.

From *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* by Peter Langman, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2009 by the author and reprinted by permission of Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited.

In the case of Shalisa from the last chapter, her parents were concerned about her and had her hospitalized. They searched her room and found two knives and a gun. Not all parents need to search their houses, but when there is a reason to be concerned, a house search is essential. If there is reason to think there might be bombs in the home, it is best to notify law enforcement and let them conduct the search. First of all, they will be better at recognizing a bomb when they see one, and second, the bombs may pose a danger. After Kip went on his rampage at school, the police searched his home. Not only did they find his parents' bodies, but they found so many sophisticated bombs that they had to evacuate the neighborhood while the bombs were removed.

Parents should also be alert to warning signs of potential violence. If they read a short story or a journal written by their child and have concerns about the content, they need to know what to do. Depending on the nature of the concern, it should be reported to the school, to a mental health professional, or to the police. Imminent threats of violence should be reported to law enforcement. Concern about someone's rage and depression, in the absence of a clear threat, should result in an appointment with a mental health professional. Other threats may warrant notification of school personnel. If your child reports that a peer is considering an attack, you must pass this information along immediately to the school and law enforcement.

LESSON 2

Do Not Lie to Protect Your Child

The day before Kip's rampage at school, he was suspended for having a gun at school and was taken to the police station. When Mr. Kinkel went to the police station, he told the officer that his son would be safe at home. He assured the officer that there were no more guns in the house. This was a lie, and Mr. Kinkel knew it. He had bought guns for Kip; obviously, he knew that there were other guns. Mr. Kinkel's apparent motivation was to minimize the scandal. Even though Kip had been found with a loaded gun in his locker, his father focused on Kip's grades and getting him through the school year. The gravity of the situation did not seem to register, or if it did, Mr. Kinkel's reaction was to think about Kip's academic career, not people's safety. This failure to tell the police about Kip's other weapons cost the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Kinkel and two students.

Long before the murders, Mrs. Kinkel also told a lie that may have had damaging consequences. She was concerned enough about Kip to take him to a psychologist. When the psychologist asked her if there was any family history of mental illness, however, she said no. Serious mental illness was rampant on both sides of Kip's family; relatives had been dangerous, and numerous relatives had been hospitalized. Psychologists ask about family history because many psychological problems have a genetic basis. Perhaps if the psychologist had known the extreme nature of the family's psychological history, he might

have proceeded differently. Perhaps he would have probed Kip more deeply or urged the parents to more carefully monitor the boy's behavior. Lying to professionals when a child is in crisis just makes things worse.

LESSON 3

Follow Through with Due Process, No Matter Who Is Involved

There is yet another twist to the Kinkel story. Kip's parents were teachers, and his father had taught in Kip's school for years. The fact that the school knew Kip's family influenced the course of events. Policies and procedures were not followed, and Kip was treated differently from how students were supposed to be treated when they brought a loaded gun at school.

No matter who presents a threat, a proper threat assessment needs to occur. This must apply to everyone, whether it is the son of the principal or the daughter of the police chief. Policies and procedures exist for a reason, and bypassing protocol because the family is well known or has a good reputation can be a grievous mistake. Dick Doyle, the assistant principal at Kip's school, said, "The rules we set up were ignored when the moment of truth arrived. They were not followed because, quite simply, he was Kinkel. Instead of considering the fact of the gun, they considered the family of the boy who was caught with it."¹

LESSON 4

If the School Is Concerned About Your Child, Pay Attention

It is not always easy for parents to hear negative information about their children. This is understandable. Nonetheless, if someone from the school calls with a concern that a child's behavior might pose a threat, parents should take this seriously. It might be a false alarm, but it might be a matter of life and death.

Several weeks before Columbine, Dylan Klebold wrote a story about a man who brutally murdered a group of students. His English teacher was so upset by the story that she talked to Dylan and called the Klebolds to discuss it. Dylan's explanation was that it was "just a story." His parents accepted this, having no reason not to. How could they know that Dylan was planning to act out the story?

A similar situation played out when Kip Kinkel did a class presentation on making bombs. A school counselor heard about it and urged Mrs. Kinkel to get professional help for her son. Mrs. Kinkel apparently resented the suggestion and requested that Kip be assigned to a different counselor.²

The lesson here is that parents should give the school the benefit of the doubt. Teachers read thousands of papers without contacting a parent. If a teacher does contact a parent because of something a child has written, there might be a very good reason for concern. This does not mean that the child needs to

be suspended or arrested in the absence of a more substantive threat, but there should be some kind of follow-up. If parents do not know how to address the situation with their child, they can seek guidance from the school or take their child for a psychological evaluation.

A related point for teachers is that they should pay attention to their own reactions. They deal with hundreds of students and read thousands of papers. If a particular paper strikes them as disturbing or threatening, there may be a good reason. Dylan Klebold's English teacher was right to be concerned by his story about a man who went on a rampage of murder against students. Unfortunately, no one listened.

LESSON 5

Eliminate Easy Access to Guns

Easy access to guns is a critical concern. Most school shooters get their weapons from their own homes, from their grandparents' homes, or from friends and neighbors. Drew Golden was 11 years old and able to quickly amass an arsenal of weapons. Michael Carneal took guns from a neighbor. Andrew Wurst brought his father's pistol to the dinner-dance. And Kip Kinkel not only convinced his father to buy him guns but knew where they were kept.

It is not enough for guns to be secured somewhere in the house. Children often know where weapons are hidden or where to find the key to the gun cabinet. When Drew Golden wanted guns, he knew exactly where to find them at home and at his grandparents' house. His grandfather had a gun rack in which the guns were secured by a wire. Drew simply cut the wire and had an instant arsenal. If children, using every tool at their disposal, including hammers, screwdrivers, crowbars, and power tools, can get at the guns, then the weapons are not secure. The weapons need to be kept at a gun club or some other place that is unknown to and/or out of reach of adolescents.

What if parents are absolutely confident that their children would not misuse firearms? They should remember that it is possible that their trust is misplaced. This certainly happened in the families of several school shooters. Even if their children are trustworthy, what about their peers? If kids in the neighborhood know where a family keeps its guns, the guns may not be secure. Michael Carneal took weapons from a neighbor's garage. If the kids in the home know where the guns are, it is likely that other kids also know.

LESSON 6

Assume Threats Are Serious Until Proven Otherwise

After all the shootings that have occurred, it would be reassuring to think that everyone recognizes by now that a death threat

cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, that is not the case. In 2007 a student named Asa Coon in Cleveland, Ohio, threatened to come to school and kill everybody. Numerous students heard him make his threats. No one took him seriously. A few days later, he showed up with a gun and went on a rampage.

Students need to be trained to know what to look for and to know what to do when they observe a potential threat. This is the foundation of preventing school shootings and will be discussed later in this chapter.

LESSON 7

Anyone Can Stop a School Shooting

Numerous students have prevented possible attacks because they knew enough to report what they heard to parents or school personnel. Students are not the only people, however, who have prevented school shootings. Anyone who is alert to warning signs can be a hero by coming forward and saving people's lives.

In 2001 Al Deguzman, a 19-year-old student at De Anza College in Cupertino, California, planned to commit mass murder at the college with guns and bombs. Shortly before the attack, Deguzman took photographs of himself with his arsenal of weapons. A clerk in the shop where the photographs were developed became worried and notified her father, a police officer. This led to a raid of Deguzman's room and the discovery of his guns, bombs, a map showing where the bombs were to be placed, and a tape recording of Deguzman apologizing for what he was about to do. The attack was planned for the following day.

In July 2007, just three months after the attack at Virginia Tech, a gun dealer stopped a possible attack. A customer by the name of Olutosin Oduwole seemed overly eager for his shipment of semiautomatic weapons. Oduwole was a student at Southern Illinois University. Something about him made the dealer nervous; there was an urgency, a desperation, in his behavior. The dealer reported his concern to the police. When Oduwole's vehicle was searched, police found a written document threatening to carry out an attack similar to that at Virginia Tech.

Also in July 2007, someone found a notebook in the parking lot of a McDonald's restaurant on Long Island, New York. The notebook contained comments about an upcoming attack at Connetquot High School. Included in the notebook was the statement "I will start a chain of terrorism in the world." The would-be killer wrote: "Take everyone down, turn the guns on the cop, take out myself. Perfecto."³ An investigation discovered that two students were involved in the planned attack, they had made a video about their plans, and they had attempted to purchase an Uzi automatic rifle, an AK-47 assault rifle, and five pounds of black powder explosives. Their plans were foiled because of a notebook in a parking lot and an alert citizen. As these examples show, school shootings can be prevented by anyone who notices a possible threat and takes prompt action.

Recognize Possible Rehearsals of Attacks

A common behavior among school shooters is the imaginary rehearsal of what they are going to do. This can take the form of drawings, animation, a video, or a short story. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were in a video production class at Columbine. One of their productions was called “Hitmen for Hire,” which portrayed a harassed student who hired Eric and Dylan to kill the people picking on him. Besides this project, which was actually filmed, they talked about making a video of themselves going into the cafeteria and gunning people down.⁴

Dylan also wrote a short story about a man who kills a group of students. Michael Carneal wrote a story about a boy who mutilates, tortures, and kills students. Jeffrey Weise made an animated video of a person who guns down innocent people, blows up a police car, and then shoots himself in the head.

In hindsight, it is easy to see these works as obvious warning signs. However, schoolwork involving war, crime, or horror is commonplace in our culture. So how do you tell a potential school shooter from a student following in the footsteps of Stephen King?

There is no guaranteed way to identify potential killers by what they write in a story. We need to use caution in inferring warning signs of murder from creative works. Because of the frequency with which school shooters have provided such creative rehearsals, however, it seems prudent to attempt to identify possible warning signs.

One such sign is the student’s identification with the perpetrator of violence. For example, in Michael Carneal’s story, the killer is named Michael. In addition, the names of the victims were the names of actual students at the school. These factors increase the sense of imminent danger. A student writing about the murder of other students who are named in the story needs to be investigated.

Similarly, in Dylan’s story, although the narrator is not the murderer, there is an obvious identification with the killer. Dylan was left-handed, approximately six foot four, and wore a black trench coat; the killer in the story was left-handed, six foot four, and wore a black trench coat. In addition, the narrator expressed understanding for the killings and admiration of the murderer bordering on worship. The story ends with this passage: “If I could face an emotion of god, it would have looked like the man. I not only saw in his face, but also felt emanating from him power, complacency, closure, and godliness. The man smiled, and in that instant, through no endeavor of my own, I understood his actions.”⁵

Thus, Dylan created the killer in his own image, wrote that the narrator understood the act of mass murder, and granted godlike status to a coldblooded killer. These are warning signs that may help teachers or parents identify potential warning signs of violence in the work of their students.

One other behavior is worth mentioning. School shooters

sometimes feel the need to record themselves with their weapons. Harris and Klebold made videos of themselves talking about the upcoming attack and holding their guns. They also filmed themselves engaging in target practice with their illegal weapons.

Kimveer Gill, a 25-year-old who shot 20 students in Montreal in 2006, posted 51 photographs of himself on his Web site, all of which showed him in various poses with his guns. Seung Hui Cho made a multimedia manifesto that included photographs of himself posing with a variety of weapons. In 2007 a Finnish student named Pekka-Eric Auvinen posted a video on YouTube about his upcoming attack. And as noted, a clerk who noticed photographs of a young man posing with an arsenal of weapons prevented an attack. Such recordings or photographs can be clues to upcoming attacks.

Student projects that suggest a desire to carry out a murderous attack should be investigated. The stories or videos may turn out to be innocuous, but they might be the red flag that enables us to save lives.

Punishment Is Not Prevention

Over the last 10 years, many schools have adopted a zero-tolerance approach to violence. Theoretically, this seems like a good idea. In practice, however, it often results in inappropriate responses to innocuous situations. This occurs because of the failure to distinguish actual threats from nonthreats. Suspending a student because he brings a plastic figure holding a rifle to school is not a meaningful response.

Punishment in the form of suspension or expulsion for a threat of violence is not effective in preventing violence. In fact, this type of punishment can have several undesirable effects. It can increase students’ rage and the desire for revenge. It can also increase their sense of isolation. They may feel rejected and experience a loss of status. For people who are already on shaky ground emotionally, such punishment can make things even worse. Additionally, suspension or expulsion can result in decreased supervision in which students have unstructured time all day long. The lack of supervision may make preparing for an attack easier. In some families, suspension may enrage the parents to berate or beat their child, exacerbating the crisis. Finally, punishment does not resolve the problem. Suspending or expelling students does nothing to address whatever forces are driving these violent thoughts.

The main problem with punishment, however, is that it does not prevent school shootings. Both the Secret Service and the Department of Education have recognized this fact: “The response with the greatest punitive power may or may not have the greatest preventive power.”⁶ If the goal is to prevent violence, schools need to consider doing more than punishing students who engage in inappropriate or threatening behavior. The shortcomings of punishing students can be demonstrated

by numerous cases, including several school shooters not discussed previously in this book. In the United States, the most significant attack following a suspension was the case of Kip Kinkel. Kip was caught with a gun at school. He was immediately suspended pending a formal expulsion hearing. Later that day Kip shot his father and then his mother. The next day he went to school and shot 27 people. No one conducted a threat assessment to see if Kip had other weapons at home, if anyone knew of a planned attack, or if Kip's writings suggested a risk of homicide. Punishment did not result in prevention. Similar incidents have occurred both in and out of the United States.

In 1995 a boy in South Carolina named Toby Sincino was suspended for making an obscene gesture. A week later he went to school with a gun, shot two teachers, then killed himself. In 2005 a Canadian student named Peter Keatainak was expelled. He returned to school, shot a teacher, and then killed himself. In Germany, in 2002, an expelled student named Robert Steinhauser returned to his school and killed 17 people before committing suicide. And the list goes on.

A student threatening mass murder is a student in crisis. Simply getting such youths out of school by suspension or expulsion does not resolve the crisis. These students need attention, not rejection. This does not mean that there should be no consequences for serious threats of violence. Students may need to be out of school for a variety of reasons, including their own mental health, as well as the safety of the school. While out of school, however, students on the verge of violence need to be monitored and receiving treatment.

There are two points being made here:

1. Suspensions or expulsions need to be used in the appropriate situations, not as knee-jerk responses to any possible threat.
2. Suspending or expelling a student does not necessarily prevent violence. It may be a necessary response, but it should not be the only response.

LESSON 10

The Limits of Physical Security

In the wake of shootings, schools often increase their physical security measures by giving students identification badges, adding surveillance cameras, and installing metal detectors, among other measures. These measures, however, do not prevent school shootings.

When students commit school shootings, they typically do

so at their own schools. Identification badges might help prevent strangers from entering a school, but that is not a relevant factor in the kind of acts discussed in this book. Identification badges and other forms of physical security might help prevent mass murder by strangers that takes place at schools, but that is a different issue.

Similarly, surveillance cameras can have a deterrent effect on people who might try to commit a crime secretly, but they do not stop school shootings. Unlike most killers, school shooters are not concerned with hiding their identities. They commit public acts with no attempt at secrecy. The presence of a camera does not stop an attack. There were cameras at Columbine and at Red Lake, Minnesota, but they were not a deterrent.

Finally, metal detectors can prevent students from sneaking guns or knives into school. They will not, however, prevent school shootings. There was a metal detector and security guards at Red Lake. Jeffrey Weise shot one of the guards and walked into the building. The presence of a metal detector meant nothing. If you expect to die in the attack, it does not matter if you set off an alarm at the metal detector. It does not matter if people see you with a gun, because you are there to kill and to die.

So what can be done? The best defense is early detection. By the time shooters are approaching the school with a gun, it is too late. Even if they can be kept from entering the building, they still can go on a rampage. They can shoot people in the morning as they arrive at school, or wait until school lets out. If a door is locked, they may be able to shoot their way through. Shooters have to be stopped before they can get to the school with weapons. This means a different style of prevention than physical security.

NOTES

- 1 Joseph Lieberman, *The Shooting Game: The Making of School Shooters* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 2006), p. 110.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 3 David Schoetz, "Samaritan Helps Foil Columbine-Style Shooting," *ABC News*, 13 July 2007; <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=3374965>.
- 4 Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, Columbine Documents, p. 2,236.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 10,468.
- 6 Robert A. Fein, Bryan Vossekuil, William S. Pollack, Randy Borum, William Modzeleski, and Marissa Reddy, *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, and U.S. Secret Service (Washington, DC: National Threat Assessment, 2002), p. 65. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.