

Warning signs of youth & adult violence



Introduction

Violence. It's the act of purposefully hurting someone. And it's a major issue facing today's young adults.

According to the 2011 [Center for Disease Control and Prevention Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance survey](#), 16.6 percent of high school students carried a weapon at least once during the 30 days before they were surveyed. And, 7.4 percent reported that they have been threatened or injured with a weapon. Many different factors cause violent behavior. The more these factors are present in your life, the more likely you are to commit an act of violence.

Reasons for violence

What causes someone to punch, kick, stab or fire a gun at someone else or even him/herself?

There is never a simple answer to that question. But people often commit violence because of one or more of the following:

- **Expression.** Some people use violence to release feelings of anger or frustration. They think there are no answers to their problems and turn to violence to express their out of control emotions.
- **Manipulation.** Violence is used as a way to control others or get something they want.
- **Retaliation.** Violence is used to retaliate against those who have hurt them or someone they care about.
- **Violence is a learned behavior.** Like all learned behaviors, it can be changed. This isn't easy, though. Since there is no single cause of violence, there is no one simple solution. The best you can do is learn to recognize the warning signs of violence and to get help when you see them in your friends or yourself.

Recognizing violence warning signs in others

Often people who act violently have trouble controlling their feelings. They may have been hurt by others. Some think that making people fear them through violence or threats of violence will solve their problems or earn them respect. This isn't true. Some violence occurs as a response to prolonged hurt, trauma, bullying or victimization. People may use violence to get something, while others may act out of self-protection or desperation.

People who behave violently lose respect. They eventually find themselves isolated or disliked, and they still feel angry and frustrated.

Anger itself is not always a sign that violence is imminent. While anger may be a warning sign of violence, it must be put in context. In fact, by assuming that anger or increased substance abuse will always lead to violence means that many non-violent people who are in need of help become unfairly characterized as violent. What is most important to look at is if there are "new" signs and significant changes in behavior.

The presence of some of the signs or factors listed below should alert us to the possibility that an individual may be at risk of violence. It should be noted, however, that the presence of one or more signs or factors does not necessarily mean that the person will be violent.

Some signs of potential for violence may be historical or static (unchangeable) factors like:

- A history of violent or aggressive behavior
- Young age at first violent incident
- Having been a victim of bullying
- History of discipline problems or frequent conflicts with authority
- Early childhood abuse or neglect
- Having witnessed violence at home
- Family or parent condones use of violence
- A history of cruelty to animals
- Having a major mental illness
- Being callous or lacking empathy for others
- History of vandalism or property damage

Other signs of potential violence may be present over time and may escalate or contribute to the risk of violence given a certain event or activity. These might include:

- Serious drug or alcohol use
- Gang membership or strong desire to be in a gang
- Access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns
- Trouble controlling feelings like anger
- Withdrawal from friends and usual activities

- Regularly feeling rejected or alone
- Feeling constantly disrespected

Some signs of potential violence may be new or active signs. They might look like:

- Increased loss of temper
- Frequent physical fighting
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Increased risk-taking behavior
- Declining school performance
- Acute episode of major mental illness
- Planning how to commit acts of violence
- Announcing threats or plans for hurting others
- Obtaining or carrying a weapon

There is research that indicates that new or active signs are more predictive of short-term risk of violence than historical factors, which may be more predictive of longer term risk.

What you can do if someone you know shows violence warning signs

When you recognize violence warning signs in someone else, there are things you can do. Hoping that someone else will deal with the situation is the easy way out.

Above all, be safe. Don't spend time alone with people who show warning signs. If possible without putting yourself in danger, remove the person from the situation that's setting them off.

Tell someone you trust and respect about your concerns and ask for help. This could be a family member, guidance counselor, teacher, school psychologist, coach, clergy, school resource officer or friend.

If you are worried about being a victim of violence, get someone in authority to protect you. Do not resort to violence or use a weapon to protect yourself.

The key to really preventing violent behavior is asking an experienced professional for help. The most important thing to remember is to not go it alone and to take any signs or threats seriously.

Dealing with anger

It's normal to feel angry or frustrated when you've been let down or betrayed. But anger and frustration don't justify violent action. Anger is a strong emotion that can be difficult to keep in check, but the right response is to always stay cool.

Here are some ways to deal with anger without resorting to violence:

- Learn to talk about your feelings — if you're afraid to talk or if you can't find the right words to describe what you're going through, find a trusted friend or adult to help you one-on-one.

- Express yourself calmly — express criticism, disappointment, anger or displeasure without losing your temper or fighting. Ask yourself if your response is safe and reasonable.
- Listen to others — listen carefully and respond without getting upset when someone gives you negative feedback. Ask yourself if you can really see the other person's point of view.
- Negotiate — work out your problems with someone else by looking at alternative solutions and compromises.
- Take a self time-out and calm yourself down **before** you respond to the situation or person who is triggering your anger.

Anger is part of life, but you can free yourself from the cycle of violence by learning to talk about your feelings. Be strong. Be safe. Be cool.

Are you at risk for violent behavior?

If you recognize any of these signs for violent behavior in yourself, talk with someone who can help, a friend, but especially an adult you trust.

You don't have to live with the guilt, sadness and frustration that comes from hurting others.

Admitting you have a concern about hurting others is the first step. The second is to talk to a trusted adult such as a school counselor or psychologist, teacher, family member, friend or clergy. They can get you in touch with a licensed mental health professional who cares and can help.

Controlling your own risk for violent behavior

Everyone feels anger in his or her own way. Start managing it by recognizing how anger feels to you.

When you are angry, you probably feel:

- Muscle tension
- Accelerated heartbeat
- A "knot" or "butterflies" in your stomach
- Changes in your breathing
- Trembling
- Goose bumps
- Flushed in the face

You can reduce the rush of adrenaline that's responsible for your heart beating faster, your voice sounding louder and your fists clenching if you:

- Take a few slow, deep breaths and concentrate on your breathing.
- Imagine yourself at the beach, by a lake, or anywhere that makes you feel calm and peaceful.
- Try other thoughts or actions that have helped you relax in the past.

Keep telling yourself:

- "Calm down."
- "I don't need to prove myself."
- "I'm not going to let him/her get to me."

Stop. Consider the consequences. Think before you act. Try to find positive or neutral explanations for what that person did that provoked you. Don't argue in front of other people. Make your goal to defeat the problem, not the other person. Learn to recognize what sets you off and how anger feels to you. Learn to think through the benefits of controlling your anger and the consequences of losing control. Most of all, stay cool and think. Only you have the power to control your own violent behavior. Don't let anger control you.

Violence against self

Some people who have trouble dealing with their feelings don't react by lashing out at others. Instead, they direct violence toward themselves. The most final and devastating expression of this kind of violence is suicide. Like people who are violent toward others, potential suicide victims often behave in recognizable ways before they try to end their lives. Suicide, like other forms of violence, is preventable. The two most important steps in prevention are recognizing warning signs and getting help. Warning signs of potential self-violence may include:

- Previous suicide attempts
- Significant alcohol or drug use
- Threatening or communicating thoughts of suicide, death, dying or the afterlife
- Sudden increase in moodiness, withdrawal or isolation
- Major change in eating or sleeping habits
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt or worthlessness
- Poor control over behavior
- Impulsive, aggressive behavior
- Drop in quality of school performance or interest
- Lack of interest in usual activity
- Getting into trouble with authority figures
- Perfectionism
- Giving away important possessions
- Hinting at not being around in the future or saying good-bye
- Feeling like a burden to others

These warning signs are especially noteworthy in the context of:

- A recent death or suicide of a friend or family member
- A recent break-up with a boyfriend or girlfriend or conflict with parents

- News reports of other suicides by young people in the same school or community
Often, suicidal thinking comes from a wish to end deep psychological pain. But keep in mind that pain often diminishes and feelings change. There are almost always options to something as final as suicide. Sometimes we just need some help to see them. If a friend mentions suicide, take it seriously. Listen carefully and then seek help immediately. Never keep their talk of suicide a secret, even if they ask you to. Remember, you risk losing that person forever.
When you recognize the warning signs for suicidal behavior, do something about it. Tell a trusted adult what you have seen or heard. Get help from a licensed mental health professional as soon as possible. They can help work out the problems that seem so unsolvable but, in fact, are not.
Take a stand against violence.

About this guide

The original *Warning Signs of Youth Violence* guide was co-produced by the APA and MTV in 1999 to help young people recognize when a classmate or friend might be a potential danger to themselves or others. The project was launched with the airing of a 30-minute MTV special, called "Warning Signs" on April 22, 1999. "Warning Signs" was the first major piece of programming in "Fight for Your Rights: Take a Stand Against Violence," MTV's 1999 pro-social campaign. Over the past decade, APA's grassroots network of psychologist worked in communities to provide information on the warning signs of youth violence by organizing video viewing and discussion programs and giving media interviews and presentations.

In January 2013, the *Warning Signs of Youth Violence* guide was updated with assistance from the following psychologists:

Alan Berman, PhD, ABPP

American Association of Suicidology, Washington, D.C.

Eva Feindler, PhD

Long Island University/C.W. Post Campus

Phillip M. Kleespies, PhD

VA Boston Healthcare System

Peter Sheras, PhD

University of Virginia; Curry School of Education

APA gratefully acknowledges the following original contributors to this guide:

Alan Berman, PhD

American Association of Suicidology, Washington, D.C.

Eva Feindler, PhD

Long Island University/C.W. Post Campus

Arnold Goldstein, PhD
Syracuse University, Center for Research on Aggression
Nancy Guerra, EdD
University of California at Riverside
Rodney Hammond, PhD
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Peter Sheras, PhD
University of Virginia; Curry School of Education
Fernando Soriano, PhD
San Diego State University; San Diego Children's Hospital
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Acknowledgements

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