

K-12 VIOLENCE RISK TRIAGE CHECKLIST

USER GUIDE

Purpose and Limits

The K-12 Violence Risk Triage Checklist is an initial triage aid for situations involving possible harm to others. It helps school personnel organize available information, identify concerns requiring prompt behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) review, and determine when a comprehensive violence risk assessment is indicated.

The checklist is not a validated predictor of violence, a diagnosis, or a substitute for multidisciplinary professional judgment. It is not intended to replace the online version of Pathways or serve as a comprehensive violence risk assessment. Use it when computer access is unavailable, impractical, or would slow an initial response. **For imminent threats, suicide risk, weapon concerns, violence, or abuse/neglect, immediately follow applicable school, reporting, BTAM, and law-enforcement procedures.**

The full Pathways framework provides a more detailed examination of student behavior across multiple areas of concern. The one-page checklist distills the most important initial triage concepts into a format that administrators, counselors, school psychologists, school resource officers, and other BTAM members can use quickly. It preserves the basic three-level Pathways concept of increasing concern and emphasizes the distinction between lower-level or transient behavior and more substantive, actionable threats.

Why use a paper triage checklist?

Its principal advantage is speed and accessibility. A staff member can check observable behaviors, identify critical warning signs, and decide whether to move immediately to a full violence risk assessment without a login, device, internet connection, or software access. This can be especially useful during urgent incidents, technology outages, off-site activities, after-hours situations, or anywhere a school team needs an immediate first-pass screening tool.

The checklist also promotes consistency. Instead of relying only on whether behavior feels concerning, it prompts staff to examine threats, target focus, leakage, planning, preparation, weapons access connected to the concern, stalking or approach behavior, and movement toward violent action. The goal is to understand what a student may be moving toward—not simply whether the student has mental-health symptoms or other background difficulties.

When to use the checklist

Use it to:

- Conduct an initial behavioral triage.
- Organize information from multiple sources.
- Identify critical triggers requiring a full assessment.
- Support an initial BTAM referral or consultation.
- Document why a case was elevated, monitored, or referred.

Do not use it to:

- Predict whether a student will become violent.
- Make decisions based solely on identity, diagnosis, ideology, appearance, interests, clothing choices, violent media, or social isolation.
- Replace emergency action, suicide assessment, mandated reporting, or a comprehensive violence risk assessment.
- Treat the numerical score as more important than credible, case-specific information.

Broad indicators such as depression, isolation, academic problems, unusual interests, violent media, controversial beliefs, or clothing choices may provide important context, but should not independently be treated as evidence that a student is dangerous. Their significance increases when they converge with grievance, target focus, leakage, planning, preparation, or capability.

How to Complete the Checklist

Step 1: Address immediate safety needs

Before scoring, determine whether emergency, protective, safeguarding, or mandated-reporting action is required. If an attack appears imminent or is underway, emergency protective action comes first.

Step 2: Gather available information

Use direct observations and credible collateral information. Record the sources consulted and distinguish among:

- Verified information.
- Credible but unconfirmed information.
- Allegations or reports requiring follow-up.
- Information that is genuinely unknown.

Important: The checklist uses 0 for “absent/unknown,” but unknown does not mean absent. Document significant information gaps and gather additional information before relying on a low score.

Step 3: Review critical triggers

The Critical Triggers section is especially important. Certain behaviors indicate the need for a higher-level assessment regardless of the numerical score. A credible substantive threat, identified target, or attack planning, weapon acquisition connected to a grievance, surveillance of a target, or suicidal intent combined with plans to harm others should not be minimized simply because few other boxes are checked.

Review every trigger in context. A named person, map, grievance, weapon, disturbing post, or other isolated detail does not automatically establish violent intent. Determine how the information connects to targeting, intent, planning, preparation, capability, or movement toward action.

Step 4: Identify protective and stabilizing factors

Record factors that are currently present, credible, and likely to reduce or stabilize risk, including supportive adults or family, prosocial peers, treatment or support engagement, future goals, acceptance of limits or help, reduced access to means, and a credible alternative explanation for the behavior.

Consider each factor's strength, reliability, and durability. Do not treat a possible support as protective unless it is available and the student is reasonably willing or able to use it. Protective factors inform intervention and case management; they do not cancel a critical trigger or automatically reduce the numerical score.

Step 5: Rate observable concerns

Select the rating that best describes the behavior supported by the currently available information. Use the item-specific guidance in Section 5 together with these general anchors:

- **0 — Absent/unknown:** Not reported, not supported by available information, or not yet known. Document important information gaps.
- **1 — Emerging/reactive:** Limited, situational, recent, or readily redirected; little evidence of persistence or movement toward action.
- **2 — Persistent/escalating:** Repeated, worsening, increasingly focused, resistant to intervention, or supported by related concerning behavior.
- **3 — Severe/acute:** Specific, credible, action-oriented, or strongly connected to targeting, planning, preparation, capability, or recent serious violence.

The seven action-oriented items are weighted $\times 2$; the remaining three contextual items are weighted $\times 1$. The maximum score is 51. This weighting and the numerical cutoffs are local triage heuristics, not validated probability estimates.

Step 6: Make and document the triage decision

Lower concern (0–7): Address the behavior and support needs; document and monitor. Identify conditions that would prompt renewed review.

Elevated concern (8–15): Conduct BTAM review, gather collateral information, and consider a full violence risk assessment.

Higher concern (16+): A full violence risk assessment is indicated.

Any credible critical trigger: A full violence risk assessment is indicated regardless of score.

Immediate danger: Take emergency protective action first.

Professional judgment governs. The score supports, but does not determine, the decision. A team may escalate a case based on credible contextual information even when the score falls below a cutoff. A lower score must not override a critical trigger, a major information gap, or an urgent safety concern.

Understanding the Critical Triggers

When supported by credible information and considered in context, any critical trigger justifies moving beyond brief screening to a comprehensive assessment. If an attack appears imminent or is underway, emergency protective action comes first ([U.S. Secret Service, NTAC, 2018](#)). Each entry below explains what the trigger means and why it warrants escalation.

Substantive or direct threat with intent to seriously injure or kill

A substantive threat communicates a serious intention to injure or kill another person and is not readily explained as a brief joke, figure of speech, or momentary expression of anger. Concern increases when the threat is repeated, credible, specific, or accompanied by planning, preparation, capability, or behavior consistent with carrying it out.

Why it matters: A serious threat that cannot be readily resolved as transient requires examination of intent, capability, circumstances, and protection of the potential victim. Substantive student threats were substantially more likely to be attempted than transient threats; an apology or retraction alone should not end the inquiry ([Burnette, Datta, & Cornell, 2018](#)).

Named or narrowing target with intent to seriously injure or kill

This refers to identifying or increasingly focusing on a particular person, group, class, location, school, or event as the object of anger or intended harm. A narrowing target may indicate a shift from generalized frustration to targeted violence.

Why it matters: The team should determine why the target was selected, whether the student can reach the target, and what protective needs exist. Naming someone in a complaint is not enough on its own ([FBI, 2017](#)).

Time, location, method, weapon, or security detail with intent to seriously injure or kill

A threat becomes more actionable when the student identifies when, where, or how violence might occur. References to weapons, routes, schedules, security procedures, access points, or other operational details may indicate movement beyond fantasy or venting toward implementation.

Why it matters: A full assessment should determine whether the details reflect actual planning, available resources, and an approaching opportunity to act. Specificity raises concern but does not establish credibility on its own ([U.S. Secret Service, NTAC, 2018](#)).

Leakage of violent intent or an attack plan

Leakage occurs when a student reveals violent thoughts, intentions, plans, or clues to another person or through writings, social media, drawings, videos, messages, or other communications. It is especially significant when it includes identifiable targets, methods, timing, preparation, or statements suggesting the student expects to act.

Why it matters: Because leakage may reveal an emerging attack before a direct threat is delivered, assess the communication, its context, and any corresponding preparation ([Meloy et al., 2012](#)).

Planning, preparation, or rehearsal

This includes concrete steps that move a student closer to violence: researching methods, creating attack lists or maps, writing an action-oriented manifesto, practicing, rehearsing, obtaining supplies, selecting a time or location, conducting surveillance, or coordinating an attack sequence. Movement through ideation, planning, preparation, and implementation deserves substantially greater attention than disturbing thoughts or interests alone.

Why it matters: Research, rehearsal, and preparation connected to an intended attack are recognized as pathway warning behavior. A full assessment should establish how far preparations have progressed and what could interrupt them. A list, map, checklist, or manifesto is concerning because of its connection to violence—not its format alone ([Meloy, 2012](#)).

Weapons access or acquisition connected to the concern

This trigger applies when weapon access, acquisition, practice, or preparation is meaningfully connected to a threat, grievance, target, or violent plan. Ordinary lawful family access or a general interest in weapons does not automatically support the same conclusion; the critical issue is the connection between capability and apparent intent or preparation.

Why it matters: Clarify actual access, efforts to obtain weapons, and needed protective steps because stated intent and available means must be evaluated together ([U.S. Secret Service, NTAC, 2018](#)).

Approach behavior, stalking, or security probing

This includes following or surveilling a target, repeatedly violating boundaries, appearing unexpectedly, gathering information about routines, testing access, researching or probing security, or attempting to enter restricted areas. These behaviors are especially concerning when they reduce practical barriers between the student and a potential target.

Why it matters: Such behavior may show action beyond verbal expression and reveal immediate vulnerabilities that require protection ([FBI, 2017](#)).

Escalating fixation, grievance, or vengeance

This describes an increasingly rigid focus on a perceived wrong and a growing desire to punish, retaliate against, or “make things right” with those seen as responsible. Concern becomes critical when grievance organizes the student’s behavior and converges with a target, violent fantasies, planning, preparation, or consideration of time and place.

Why it matters: A full assessment should examine escalation, deterioration in functioning, and movement toward action. Ordinary anger or a legitimate grievance alone does not establish this warning pattern ([Meloy et al., 2012](#)).

Last-resort or action-imperative state

This occurs when a student expresses that no acceptable alternatives remain, that something “has to be done,” or that violence is the only remaining solution. These statements are especially concerning when paired with hopelessness, grievance, revenge, an identifiable target, capability, or concrete steps toward action.

Why it matters: A last-resort state may reflect increasing desperation, a sense that time is running out, narrowing alternatives, and growing pressure to act. It warrants urgent assessment ([Meloy et al., 2012](#)).

Serious violent behavior, credible attempt, or attack preparation

This includes recent acts or attempts demonstrating willingness or ability to cause serious physical harm, especially when intentional, targeted, escalating, or weapon-related. Movement from threats or fantasies into serious violent action should outweigh an otherwise low score.

Why it matters: Determine whether danger continues, whether additional targets or means are involved, and what management measures can prevent further harm ([FBI, 2017](#)).

Suicidal intent converging with harm-to-others planning

This refers to suicidal thinking or intent connected with plans to harm other people, including murder-suicide thinking, statements about “taking someone with me,” or planning violence before dying. Suicide concerns alone

require appropriate safety intervention; convergence with a target, revenge, weapons, or attack planning creates a distinctly urgent harm-to-others concern.

Why it matters: Assessment must address both self-directed and other-directed violence, including plans, targets, and access to lethal means. Student threats involving harm to both self and others were more likely to be classified as substantive ([Burnette, Datta, & Cornell, 2018](#)).

Understanding the Observable Concerns

Rate each item using the 0–3 anchors in Section 3. Interpret all behavior in context and look for patterns, changes over time, convergence, and movement toward action.

Threats/Intimidation

Includes spoken, written, electronic, or behavioral communications that express or imply an intention to harm, frighten, or intimidate another person. Concern increases when threats become repeated, persistent, targeted, specific, or supported by actions, means, or preparation rather than being a brief reactive statement.

Target Focus/Grievance

Look for growing preoccupation with a person, group, school, or perceived injustice, particularly when the student repeatedly blames others or talks about retaliation, punishment, or “making things right.” Concern increases when grievance becomes rigid, consumes the student’s attention, narrows toward an identifiable target, or shifts from anger into thoughts of revenge or action.

Planning/Preparation

Includes behaviors that move beyond thinking or talking about violence and begin to organize how it could occur. Examples include researching methods, creating lists or maps, selecting a time or location, rehearsing, gathering supplies, conducting surveillance, or taking other steps that make an attack more possible; these behaviors generally deserve greater attention because they show movement toward implementation.

Weapons/Capability

Consider whether the student has access to, is attempting to obtain, or is preparing to use a weapon or other means of serious harm in connection with a threat, grievance, target, or violent plan. General interest in weapons should not automatically be treated as dangerous; concern rises when access or acquisition connects with intent, planning, preparation, practice, or a specific target.

Stalking/Approach/Harassment

Includes repeated unwanted contact, following, monitoring, surveillance, showing up unexpectedly, boundary violations, intimidation, or attempts to get physically or digitally closer to a target. Concern increases when the student ignores clear limits, tests security or access, gathers information about a target’s routines, or progressively moves closer to the person or location of concern.

Violent Behavior/Escalation

Includes assaults, attempts to seriously injure others, escalating fights, destructive aggression, or increasingly severe behavioral outbursts. Pay particular attention to changes in frequency, severity, loss of control, use of weapons, or a progression from threats and intimidation to actual violence.

Leakage/Writings/Online Behavior

Leakage occurs when a student communicates information about violent thoughts, intentions, fantasies, or plans to another person, through social media, writings, drawings, messages, videos, or other means. Interpret concerning material in context; it becomes more actionable when it includes targets, timing, methods, preparation, threats, or details that appear connected to real-world behavior rather than fiction or expression alone.

Hopelessness/Suicide/No Alternatives

Includes statements or behaviors suggesting the student feels trapped, desperate, unable to see a future, suicidal, or convinced there is no acceptable way out of the current situation. These concerns do not by themselves establish violence risk toward others, but urgency increases significantly when suicidal intent converges with revenge, a target, weapons, planning, or an intention to harm others before or during suicide.

Destabilization

Refers to significant changes or stressors that may reduce the student's ability to cope, such as major loss, relationship conflict, family disruption, academic failure, severe isolation, substance misuse, sleep disruption, or loss of important supports. These factors are generally context rather than evidence of violent intent, but they deserve greater attention when several occur together and coincide with grievance, threats, worsening behavior, or movement toward action.

Contextual Themes

Includes dehumanizing or misogynistic language, extremist grievance, identification with previous attackers or violent antihero personas, tactical costuming, or intense violent/weapons themes. These interests or expressions should not be scored as evidence of dangerousness in isolation; their significance increases when they converge with a specific grievance, target fixation, leakage, planning, preparation, weapons acquisition, or other movement toward violence.

After Completing the Checklist

Think of the checklist as a front door to the assessment process. It helps the school answer: Do we have enough concern to bring in the full multidisciplinary team and conduct a more comprehensive violence risk assessment? If yes, the online Pathways process provides additional structure for continued assessment, documentation, intervention, and case management.

If a full assessment is indicated:

- Notify the appropriate BTAM lead or administrator.
- Preserve relevant communications, posts, writings, drawings, images, videos, or other evidence.
- Gather information from appropriate school, family, clinical, and public-safety sources.
- Examine why any identifiable target was selected and consider the target's vulnerability, safety, and support needs.
- Clarify access to weapons or other means and take appropriate protective steps.
- Use the full Pathways process or the school's established comprehensive assessment protocol.
- Document immediate actions, assigned responsibilities, intervention and management measures, and follow-up dates.

Threat assessment is an ongoing process, not a one-time score. Reassess when new information emerges, behavior changes, interventions fail, access or opportunity changes, or the student's circumstances become more or less stable.

Managing High Volumes of Transient Threats

Schools may receive many reports of threatening language arising from frustration, peer conflict, impulsive statements, or unsuccessful attempts at humor. Transient threats represent a substantial share of assessed school threats: in an initial field test involving 188 cases across 35 schools, 70% were resolved as transient (Cornell et al., 2004, as summarized by School Threat Assessment, n.d.). This finding is specific to that sample, not a universal rate or a target percentage for closing cases. It supports a proportionate response in which every report receives timely screening while more intensive assessment is reserved for cases that warrant it.

A transient threat does not reflect a sustained or genuine intent to harm and can be credibly resolved through clarification and intervention. The classification follows an inquiry into the communication and surrounding behavior. A statement such as "I was joking," an apology, a calm presentation, or a low checklist score is insufficient on its own. The Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) directs teams to treat threats that cannot be clearly identified and resolved as transient as substantive (University of Virginia, n.d.). Use that distinction to guide judgment, but do not treat this checklist as a substitute for CSTAG training or the school's established protocol.

Use a brief, consistent first review

The following workflow is a practical implementation recommendation for this guide, not a validated screening instrument or a fixed time limit. Designate trained personnel, with a backup and ready access to the BTAM lead, to conduct the initial review under school procedures. Reporting staff should submit concerns promptly rather than decide on their own that a threat is "just transient." Emergency concerns require immediate protective action; other reports should receive prompt review based on urgency, without waiting for a scheduled team meeting.

Begin with the exact words or behavior, the circumstances, and the student's explanation. Speak separately with the reporting person, the student, and the intended recipient or relevant witnesses as needed to verify the account. Review relevant messages and prior concerns. Use developmentally appropriate language and needed communication accommodations. Keep the inquiry focused on these questions:

- What exactly was said or done, to whom, when, and in what context? Preserve the original message or other available evidence.
- What did the student mean, what did they intend to happen, and what do they intend to do now? Does the explanation fit independent information?
- Is there any indication of continuing intent, attack planning, preparation, approach behavior, or access to means connected to this threat? Resolve material gaps rather than assuming these concerns are absent.
- Is this an isolated incident or part of repeated threats, an unresolved grievance, targeting, intimidation, or escalating behavior?
- What has actually resolved the immediate conflict, what safety or support needs remain for those involved, and who will follow up?

Close the threat inquiry when the evidence supports resolution

A brief review may be sufficient when the accounts and available evidence support a situational explanation, no continuing intent or credible critical trigger is identified, material contradictions or safety gaps have been resolved, and a practical response addresses remaining needs. Document why the threat was classified as transient. An intended recipient's concerns should inform the review, but neither their reassurance nor their continuing fear alone determines the classification. Do not require forgiveness, a face-to-face meeting, or acceptance of an apology as a condition of closure.

Closing the threat inquiry does not mean closing access to help. Address the precipitating conflict, bullying, classroom difficulties, emotional regulation, or other identified needs through appropriate school supports. Apply behavior expectations and school procedures proportionately. Assign a responsible adult and a follow-up date suited to the situation, including a check on the affected student's safety and access to school activities. A resolved transient threat does not automatically require a lengthy report, a full-team meeting, or a comprehensive violence risk assessment.

Escalate uncertainty and substantive concerns

When continuing intent is possible, accounts conflict on safety-relevant facts, or important information about preparation or means is missing, keep the inquiry open and obtain prompt BTAM consultation. Establish interim protective measures and assign someone to resolve the unanswered questions. Do not allow an unresolved case to sit in a routine backlog. Under this guide, any credible critical trigger requires a full assessment regardless of score; immediate danger requires emergency action first. An apology cannot cancel evidence of planning, preparation, or other critical warning behavior (Burnette et al., 2018).

Repeated reactive threats deserve a review of the cumulative pattern even when earlier incidents were resolved as transient. Repetition alone does not prove attack intent, but increasing frequency, persistence toward the same target, failed interventions, new means, or movement toward action changes the assessment. Reopen a closed inquiry when new evidence, renewed threats, retaliation, or worsening behavior undermines the original resolution.

Manage the workload without weakening the review

- Use one intake log and one case owner. Link duplicate reports about the same incident to a single record, while preserving each source and any new information. Distinguish multiple reports of one event from multiple threatening events.
- Prioritize by urgency and unresolved safety questions. Route imminent danger immediately, escalate substantive or uncertain cases promptly, and manage resolved transient cases through assigned school supports. Volume must not raise the escalation threshold.
- Use concise documentation. Record the exact threat, context, sources checked, relevant history, critical-trigger findings and unknowns, resolution rationale, actions, owner, follow-up date, and reopening conditions. Expand the narrative when complexity warrants it.
- Reserve full-team discussion for cases needing multidisciplinary judgment, unresolved concerns, or reassessment, consistent with school requirements. Give the BTAM lead visibility into brief dispositions so recurring patterns are not lost.
- Review workflow quality. Track time to first review, overdue inquiries, repeat incidents, completed follow-up, and staffing demands. Periodically review a sample of closed cases for consistency. Do not set quotas for transient classifications or reward closure speed at the expense of adequate inquiry.

Example of a brief disposition note

Illustrative example: "After a disputed game, the student told a peer, 'I'll punch you.' Separate accounts from both students and the supervising adult supported an immediate expression of frustration. The student explained the remark, described a nonviolent response to future conflict, and showed no continuing intent to harm. Review of the incident and relevant school history identified no planning, preparation, connected weapon concern, or material unresolved safety question. The threat was resolved as transient. Staff addressed the conflict, checked the peer's support needs, and assigned the counselor to follow up with both students the next school day. Renewed threats, retaliation, or new contradictory information will prompt renewed BTAM review." Use this structure only when the documented facts support it; it is not a script to copy into unresolved cases.

Evidence Base

The checklist draws on established behavioral threat assessment principles, including the distinction between transient and substantive threats, pathway warning behaviors, leakage, target selection, preparation, capability, and movement toward action. These principles support examining behavior and context rather than relying on profiles or isolated characteristics. The sources below provide additional background.

References

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