

BTAM: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF PARENTS

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In 2014, the US government selected three major cities in which to pilot a local approach to preventing terrorism and targeted violence,¹ predicated on the idea that local community involvement can improve the design of such approaches [2]. Since then, these efforts have become more common as local actors—states, cities, and counties—have passed legislation related to behavioral threat assessment, adopted prevention strategies aimed at terrorism and targeted violence, and implemented programming to address such violence.²

We present this series of papers—informed by a year-long evaluation of the violence prevention efforts underway in Wood County, Ohio³—to shed light on a local effort and assist other actors in building their own networks.

On Tuesday, November 30, 2021, school administrators at a high school in Michigan called a student's parents in for a meeting after the student was observed with drawings of a gun, bullets, and the words "the thoughts won't stop, help me" [3]. His parents opted not to remove him from school for the day, or to check his bag for a weapon, and two hours later the 15-year-old opened fire, killing four people and wounding seven others. His parents were ultimately convicted of involuntary manslaughter for the role their inaction played in the resulting massacre [3].

It is impossible to predict what might have happened if the parents in this case had made different choices, but the case exemplifies the critical role parents play in preventing terrorism or targeted violence and, more broadly, in the threat assessment and management process.

Our evaluation of the violence prevention efforts in Wood County highlights the many ways in which parents can support or impede the assessment and treatment of at-risk youth. Even though our interview protocol did not include any questions about parents, they were mentioned 88 times across 21 of the 27 interviews we conducted with county stakeholders.⁴ Analysis of these interviews and reviews of case data make clear that parents have *significant* influence in the threat assessment and management process because of their power to decide whether to provide history and context to stakeholders, sign releases of information, pay for services, and bring their child to services. As one school administrator we interviewed told us, "If you get a combative parent, there is nothing you can do" [4].

¹ The US Secret Service defines *targeted violence* as "a premeditated act of violence directed at a specific individual, group, or location, regardless of motivation and generally unrelated to other criminal activity" [1, p. 12].

² For example, a range of activities is underway in states including Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Ohio, New York, and Texas.

³ Our evaluation focused exclusively on Wood County's efforts serving juveniles.

⁴ We searched all interview notes for the terms *parent, guardian, mom, dad, grandmother, grandfather, and grandparent*. For context, the police were mentioned at a similar rate of 87 times across 18 of 27 interviews (we searched all interview notes for the terms *law enforcement, police, cop, and sheriff*).

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Identify

- Parents may reach out to ask for help for their child.
- Parents may call a tip line to report a concern about their child.

- Parents could refuse to provide information.
- Parents might prevent the school from interviewing their child.

Manage

- Parental consent may be required for referrals or to release information.
- Parents can advocate for their child's care.

Assess

Source: CNA.


Parents play a critical role that spans the threat management process (Figure 1).

Identification of the problem. Parents may be the first to recognize a concerning behavior in their child and thus may be one of the first to reach out to schools or service providers to express worry about their child and ask for help.

Behavioral threat assessment. Parents may be asked to provide information to assist a threat assessment. The Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines include a specific parent/guardian interview form [5]. Parents can obstruct an assessment by insisting their child is fine, refusing to share information with the school, or preventing the school from interviewing their child. For example, in one case in Wood County, the parents hired a lawyer to prevent the school from conducting a threat assessment, and the school ultimately had to expel the student [4]. Parents can also choose to remove their child from the school and withhold information about the incident of concern from their child's new school [4].

Behavioral management. Parents can influence clinical care and behavioral management. They can permit or restrict communication between mental health providers and schools, choose whether to enforce their child's treatment or safety plan, and influence their child's access to care through financial and logistical means. In one case, the school had to expend significant effort to convince the parents to take their child for a forensic psychological evaluation. In another case, the Wood County Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Services (WCADAMHS) Board provided parents with information on crisis resources and asked them to participate on a voluntary basis, but the parents never followed up to obtain services [4].

Importantly, in nearly all cases, parents are simply trying to advocate for their child. That parents have a distinct sense of the best path forward makes them no different from others participating in the behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) process (in which, for example, a mental health provider and a school resource officer may also have different ideas about the best path forward).



Moreover, parents can also be powerful allies. They may be willing to make the difficult choice to report concerns their child might be a threat, navigate complex systems to secure services for their struggling child, or provide transportation to a specialized service not available locally. For example, one mom called every facility in the county to try to get her child a mental health assessment [4]. In another case, a youth's parent proactively reached out to the WCADAMHS Board to see what resources they could provide and ensure that her child was getting the help he needed [4].

IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL POLICY-MAKERS

Because of the outsized influence parents have on the behavioral threat assessment and management process, it is critical that BTAM teams, school administrators, and community mental health providers work to educate and engage parents.

1. PROACTIVELY EDUCATE PARENTS ABOUT THE BTAM PROCESS

Schools should prioritize educating all parents about both the school's responsibilities (as laid out in state legislation, if applicable) and the parents' rights, as they relate to behavioral threat assessment and management. Schools should publicize their behavioral threat assessment protocols and host information sessions at the beginning of each school year so that the entire school community understands what BTAM is and what they might expect if the process is initiated for their child. These efforts should make clear to parents when in the process (or if) they will be notified that their child is the subject of a threat assessment, what information they might be asked to provide, who will have access to that information, and how it will be used. Schools should also seek to destigmatize the BTAM process by communicating the goals and benefits of the BTAM program to both parents and the broader school community.

2. INVOLVE PARENTS IN THREAT ASSESSMENTS

The behavioral issues that warrant initiation of the BTAM process are often symptoms of a complex tangle of concerns that will require patient and sustained attention. Because resolving these issues can take months or years, it is critical that schools and community-based service providers maintain healthy and productive relationships with the parents of at-risk children when possible. As one example, schools are not legally required to notify parents when a BTAM assessment is occurring, or to obtain parents' consent before conducting an assessment [6]. Doing so, however, is considered a best practice.⁵ Frequent, transparent, and empathetic communication with parents should continue throughout the assessment and management phases of the process. BTAM teams should communicate to parents that their goal is to balance the well-being of the at-risk child with the safety of other students and to be sensitive to the fact that the parents will likely be more focused on the first of these issues.

"If you get a combative parent, there is nothing you can do."

⁵ Notably, this does *not* involve asking for the parent's consent to conduct the threat assessment. It is a courtesy notification, not a request.



REFERENCES

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