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National Preparedness Month – September 2008:

A NATIONAL CRISIS:

School Violence

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly necessary in today's world for schools not only to be prepared for natural disasters, fires, and terrorist activity, but also to protect students against violence by their peers. Tragedies such as those at Columbine and Virginia Tech have raised public awareness of the deadly serious problem of school violence. As school shootings become more and more frequent, parents and teachers are left wondering how to prepare for school violence and, more importantly, how to recognize the warning signs in order to *prevent* it from occurring.

How to Make Sure Your Community's Schools Are Prepared:

1. **Assess the situation.** Ask students directly how prepared they think their schools are. Ask questions like, "Do you know what to do if someone brings a gun to school?" or "What is your school's communication or signaling system in a crisis?" If children do not know the answers to these questions, it is clear that more work needs to be put into the school's Emergency Preparedness Plan.

2. **Instate Strict School Violence Prevention Policies.** Schools should have a zero-tolerance weapons, violence, and bullying rule. This rule should also apply to any threats of violence or carrying of weapons. Children should be made aware that words can often lead to actions, and threats should *always* be reported to school authorities.

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3. An Emergency Disaster and Violence Plan. Parents and teachers should work together to create detailed plans that are specific to each kind of crisis that could occur in schools. Plans should include a communication and signaling system that students and teachers are familiarized with. In addition, all students and faculty should regularly participate in lockdown and evacuation safety drills.

4. Form a Coordinated Community Response Team. Involve the fire department, police and medical emergency team in your plan. The police and fire department should review the school's emergency plan, as they may have tips on how to improve it. The more that local authorities know about a school's disaster plan, the more efficiently they will be able to assist in case of an emergency.

There is no foolproof way to create a profile of what type of student may commit a violent act in school. Sometimes peers will claim that a student who became violent was a "normal" kid. However, in many cases, there have been certain characteristics shared in common by students who have initiated school violence. Although these indications do not necessarily mean that a student *will* commit a school shooting or other violent act, teachers and administrators, as well as parents, should be aware of these signs. Children who fit these criteria are "at risk" of becoming violent, and should be given the help that they need before the situation worsens.

Seven Warning Signs of "At Risk" Kids:

1. **Social withdrawal.** Students who don't get along with other children, or who often get into arguments or fights may need help.
2. **Feelings of rejection, depression or uncontrollable anger.** Each of these feelings can lead to violent behavior. If a student shows signs of any of these strong inner emotions, they may need professional help to cope with them.

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3. **Involvement in any type of bullying activity.** This includes not only students who are bullies themselves, but also students who are bullied by others and may be motivated to strike back.
4. **Making threats of violence.** Students who threaten violence should *always* be taken seriously. They should be made aware that talk of violence is not a joke and that their statements won't be taken lightly.
5. **Using drugs or drinking; poor performance in school.** Students who are often disciplined in school for drug use, lateness, skipping class and other delinquent behavior may need counseling or other professional help.
6. **Absence of a caring adult.** Often, children who do not have good adult role models can lose their way and become mixed up in gangs or violence. When there is a lack of adult supervision, this can become especially dangerous.
7. **A history of violent behavior.** Students who have become violent in the past or who have a history of hurting people or animals should be watched closely by teachers, parents and administrators.

The importance of preparing for school violence cannot be overemphasized, and might actually prevent future tragedies from occurring. If parents and teachers educate themselves about the causes of school violence, they will stand a better chance of reversing the current acceleration of this alarming trend.

Resources on School Violence:

The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center

<http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/topics/school.asp>

The NYVPRC posts a webpage dedicated to the topic of school violence. This page offers the latest tools to facilitate discussion with children, to resolve conflicts nonviolently, to stop bullying, to prevent teen suicide, and to end violence committed by and against young people. Resources include fact sheets, best practices documents, funding and conference announcements, statistics, research bulletins, surveillance reports, and profiles of promising programs.

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Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com.**