

WARNING SIGNS OF AGGRESSION IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND THE ISSUE OF THEIR PERCEPTION AND EVALUATION

Tibor A. BREČKA¹

Abstract: *This paper provides a theoretical analysis of violent behavior within school environments, synthesizing relevant literature to describe key aspects of aggression and its manifestations. It explores the challenges of perception, interpretation, and timely evaluation of warning signs, focusing on the factors that influence recognition and response to signals indicating potential risks. By presenting a comprehensive framework, this study aims to enhance theoretical understanding and offer insights into improving awareness and evaluation techniques. These findings contribute to fostering a safer and more protective school environment for students and staff.*

Key words: *School aggression, Warning signs, Psychology of perception, Educator awareness, School safety.*

1. Introduction

Warning signs are changes in behavior, physiology, and communication that precede and signal an impending incident (Brečka, 2024b). These are events and behaviors that precede an extraordinary event or attack, and timely identification of them can minimize or completely avert an attack. The topic of warning signs in the school environment pertains to the detectability and predictability of critical incidents (e.g., an active shooter) and socially pathological phenomena (e.g., bullying) in educational institutions. To define and understand the causes, development, and function of warning signs, it is necessary to first define a range of terms related to the concept of warning signs.

Furthermore, examining warning signs requires reflection on risk factors and triggers that may contribute to the emergence of crisis situations. These factors include, for instance, stressful family situations, poor social background, or previous experiences with violence. Understanding these phenomena is key to creating effective preventive strategies that can minimize the risk of extraordinary events in the school environment.

Additionally, it is important to consider how these signals should be perceived, interpreted, and responded to. The process of evaluating warning signs requires an

¹ *Department of Health Sciences and Population Protection Faculty of Biomedical Engineering CTU in Prague, tibor.brecka@seznam.cz corresponding author*

interdisciplinary approach, combining pedagogy, psychology, sociology, and crisis management. Only through such a comprehensive approach can effective prevention and intervention be achieved, protecting the health and safety of students and staff in schools.

This process also includes educating and training school staff to recognize and respond appropriately to signals indicating potential risks. Part of this training should involve familiarization with modern methods of crisis communication and safety protocols, such as procedures in the event of an active shooter attack. All these aspects are crucial to ensuring a safe school environment that supports not only the educational process but also the overall development and well-being of students.

2. The Emergence and Causes of Warning Signs

Warning signs are changes in behavior, physiology, and communication that precede and indicate an impending incident. What causes these changes, or what lies behind the emergence of warning signs? Since these changes occur on behavioral and physiological levels (and in communication, which can be understood as part of behavioral expression), the key lies in the concept of emotions. Emotions are the primary triggers of these changes, as they manifest on three main levels: physiological, intrapsychic, and behavioral. Warning signs are, in essence, the outwardly observable manifestation of an individual's internal change, accompanied by emotions. Like nonverbal communication, warning signs originate from emotions and are primarily visible on physiological and behavioral levels.

Emotions can trigger various physiological reactions, such as increased heart rate, sweating, muscle tension, or changes in breathing, which can be initial indicators that something is happening. On the behavioral level, emotions can manifest as changes in behavior, such as increased aggression, withdrawal, shifts in communication patterns, or an inability to respond to stimuli in the usual way. These behaviors can be the first indication that an individual is experiencing an internal crisis that might escalate into a critical incident.

It is acute, dynamic, and particularly toxic behavioral changes that can help structure a professional assessment, indicating that an individual who raises concerns now poses a threat—whether or not an actual target has been identified (Meloy et al., 2011). These changes are often the complex result of a combination of psychological stressors, disrupted emotional regulation, and external influences, which can escalate into a crisis.

To better understand the issue of warning signs, it is also necessary to understand the origins of the phenomena they signal—i.e., incidents. Incidents, especially those involving aggression and violence, often stem from deeper psychological and social issues experienced by individuals. These issues may include chronic stress, traumatic experiences, a sense of helplessness, or external pressures that disrupt mental balance (Brečka, 2024b).

For the purposes of this work, the term “incidents” encompasses a broad range of socially pathological phenomena, such as bullying, violent conflicts, or the threat of an active shooter. The focus is primarily on various forms of aggressive incidents, which pose a serious threat to safety in the school environment. However, insights gained from

studying warning signs can be generalized and applied to other socially pathological behaviors not solely associated with aggression, such as self-harm, substance abuse, or extreme social isolation. Thus, warning signs can serve as a universal tool for identifying and preventing a broad spectrum of risky behaviors, thereby enhancing overall safety and well-being within the environment.

In connection with the issue of warning signs in the school environment, it is also essential to address topics such as aggression and aggressiveness, motivation and emotions in socially pathological and aggressive behaviors, and criminological theories and motivation theories related to criminal behavior. These topics are crucial as they provide a framework for understanding why and how behaviors that may pose a risk to the school environment occur.

Aggression and aggressiveness are often linked with risky behaviors that can lead to serious incidents; therefore, understanding their causes and manifestations is necessary for effectively identifying warning signs. Motivation and emotions play a critical role in how and why individuals act in specific ways, especially when it comes to socially pathological and aggressive behaviors. Understanding these aspects can offer deeper insight into the internal processes leading to the emergence of warning signs.

Criminological theories and theories of motivation in criminal behavior provide a broader societal and psychological context in which to analyze the behavior of individuals displaying warning signs. These theories help elucidate the mechanisms that lead to criminal actions and allow for a better understanding of the risks associated with various types of behavior in the school environment (Brečka, 2024b). Overall, addressing these topics is essential, as they provide key tools and knowledge for prevention and intervention when warning signs of potential risks emerge.

3. Factors of Warning Signs

In the field of prevention and identification of risky behavior in the school environment, it is essential to understand the factors that influence warning signs. These factors are crucial for their correct recognition and interpretation, enabling timely and effective interventions before potential incidents escalate. Warning signs preceding crisis situations can be analyzed based on several characteristics, such as intensity, timing, frequency, and coincidence with other signs. These characteristics play a decisive role in how easily signals can be perceived and interpreted and also influence the amount of time remaining before the onset of a crisis.

Distinguishing between personality-based and situational warning signs further allows for a deeper understanding of specific circumstances that may lead to risky behavior. Personality-based signals stem from an individual's characteristics, while situational signals are tied to specific circumstances and environments. This analysis provides essential tools for prevention, thereby contributing to a safer and more supportive school environment. Factors of warning signs are properties of these signs, allowing for classification and description.

The first factor is the intensity of the warning signal. Intensity originates from a particular emotion, which is the result of unmet or excessively met needs, and is also

linked to the seriousness of the decision following the action taken. The more intense and stronger the warning signal, the easier it is to perceive and interpret correctly; however, the more intense the warning signal, the shorter the time before the specific incident (referred to as time t_0). Conversely, the less intense or weaker the warning signal, the more difficult it is to perceive and interpret, but also the more time remains until time t_0 , assuming a linear progression of the incident. Thus, reaction time is generally inversely proportional to the intensity of the warning signal.

Another factor is timing—how long before time t_0 the signal appears. Unfortunately, this can only be determined with certainty after the event since time t_0 cannot be specifically identified beforehand. Timing, or the temporal dimensions of warning signs, also includes frequency of occurrence. The more frequently and longer a particular warning signal appears, the higher the risk of an incident occurring. However, in cases of affective aggression, a severe and intense change occurs unexpectedly and within a short time, often just a few seconds. Even there, warning signs may appear, but the time available for noting, evaluating, and intervening to minimize or eliminate the risk is very short. Dwyer (1998) distinguishes between early and immediate warning signs, though it is important to view time as a continuum and to consider additional factors of warning signs.

Coincidence of warning signs is also related to timing. Typically, an incident is preceded not by a single sign but by a series of different warning signs. The more different warning signs appear within the observed period, the higher the risk of an incident. Some warning signs may not be recognizable on their own or may be difficult to interpret accurately, but the combination of several similar warning signs over a period may indicate an increasing risk.

Warning signs can also be categorized into personality-based and situational, similar to victimogenic factors (Čírtková, 2014). This distinction and perspective fill a potential gap and address the short time frame for recognizing warning signs in affective behavior, as it provides a way to predict affective behavior and beyond. Personality-based warning signs relate to specific individuals and include factors such as age, gender, personality traits, psychopathology, language skills, personal history, etc. In contrast, situational warning signs are tied to specific situations, their nature, content, location, and timing.

4. Warning Signs, Risk Factors, and Triggers

In the field of prevention and safety in the school environment, it is essential to distinguish accurately between warning signs, risk factors, and triggers. Though closely related, these terms represent different aspects of risky behavior, and understanding them is crucial for effective identification and intervention. Warning signs often indicate an immediate threat, while risk factors may represent longer-term predispositions to problematic behavior. Triggers can suddenly activate these risk factors and precipitate a crisis.

Differentiating between these concepts is not always straightforward and can create significant uncertainty when deciding on appropriate actions. Factors typically regarded as warning signs may, in other contexts, fall under risk factors or be viewed as triggers. This ambiguity and overlap present a major challenge for educators and other professionals in the school environment, who must often make quick decisions with limited information.

The following text examines these distinctions in detail and discusses their implications for school practice, focusing on how to identify these factors and work with them effectively to ensure student safety.

Warning signs and risk factors are closely interrelated terms. Warning signs are manifestations of specific behavior, primarily on behavioral and physiological levels. Risk factors, meanwhile, are elements that constitute a threat in themselves and increase the likelihood of risk. Often, it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between whether a phenomenon falls under warning signs or risk factors. A useful tool for differentiation is the temporal dimension, that is, whether the phenomenon is ongoing and short-lived (suggesting a warning sign) or occurred in the past or is long-term and continuous (indicating a risk factor).

The term “trigger” is also used in the literature on this topic (Sinai, 2016). In a psychological and social context, “trigger” often refers to an activating event that can cause a reaction or situation, particularly in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (ICD-10 Code: F43.1; WHO 2016), (DSM-5, Code: 309.81, APA 2013). In this sense, a trigger describes an event or factor that may act as a catalyst for an individual who decides to commit an attack with a firearm. For example, something may be labeled as a trigger for an active shooter if it provokes or causes them to decide to commit a violent act. In this context, a trigger may involve a complex combination of factors, including mental health issues, social isolation, traumatic events, or extremist views, which can lead to violent acts.

A valuable framework for understanding risk factors is the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY) (Borum et al., 2020). SAVRY is a tool for assessing violence risk in adolescents. It focuses on various areas, including social skills, family environment, school behavior, and psychopathology.

SAVRY provides a structured framework for assessing factors that may influence youth violence risk. This type of assessment is valuable for professionals in psychology, law, and social work who work with youth and assess the risk of antisocial behavior. Categorized under category A in Testcentrum Hogrefe’s method classification (Hogrefe.cz, 2020), SAVRY consists of 24 risk items (historical, social/contextual, and individual/clinical) based on research and literature on adolescent development, violence, and aggression. It also includes six protective items, each assessed using a three-point rating scale (low/medium/high), while each protective factor has a two-level rating structure (present/absent).

SAVRY is designed as a “guide” for professional risk assessment and intervention planning for managing youth violence risk, helping assess risk in adolescents aged 12-18. Although it can be administered to slightly younger or older individuals, caution is necessary since the SAVRY items are primarily based on research with adolescents within this age range (Hogrefe.cz, 2020).

SAVRY is one of the Structured Professional Judgements (SPJ) approaches, a methodology used to assess the risk of recurring or severe violence in individuals. This approach combines professional knowledge with specific information about an individual to provide a structured and systematic risk assessment for future aggression.

SPJ typically involves several steps or domains used by professionals to gather relevant information and assess various aspects of risk. These steps may include assessing the history of aggressive behavior, social factors (such as living situation and relationships), psychological characteristics (such as impulsivity or emotional regulation), and other relevant factors. The goal of SPJ is to provide a structured and objective way to assess the risk of aggressive behavior, which can assist professionals in criminology, psychology, social work, and other areas in making decisions about interventions and preventing aggressive behavior in individuals.

SAVRY divides risk factors into past risk factors, social/contextual risk factors, and individual/clinical risk factors. For this study, the following factors are identified as critical for school professionals to understand and monitor.

Past risk factors: history of violence, history of non-violent problematic behavior, self-harm or suicide attempts, exposure to domestic violence, and poor academic performance.

Social/contextual risk factors: peer delinquency, peer rejection, difficulties coping with stressful situations, inconsistent parenting, lack of personal/social support, and pathological phenomena in the community.

Individual/clinical risk factors: dissociative attitudes, risk-taking/impulsivity, substance abuse, difficulty managing anger, lack of empathy/insensitivity, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, reduced cooperation, and low engagement in school.

Sinai (2016) lists the following triggers: emerging psychosis, experiences of victimization or injustice, feeling of marginalization or exclusion, being a bullying target, academic failure or inadequacy, family/friendship disruptions, unresolved or impending criminal proceedings, financial problems, hostility toward specific individuals or institutions.

An analysis of 37 school shootings (Doss & Shepherd, 2015) shows findings such as 54% of attacks targeting teachers, 44% of attacks targeting more than one person, and 73% of attacks showing hostility toward the target. Other notable findings include: 41% of perpetrators had excellent academic performance, 12% had no close friends, 34% were described as loners, 63% rarely or never had school problems, 56% showed no changes in school ratings, and 71% felt bullied or victimized. These findings highlight complex, interwoven risk factors, triggers, and warning signs associated with violent incidents.

Based on this data, Doss & Shepherd (2015) identified traits and behaviors considered risky, such as "leakage" (the release of information about a planned action), low frustration tolerance, poor coping skills, low resilience, interpersonal relationship breakdowns, "injustice collector" mentality, depressive symptoms, narcissism, alienation, dehumanization of others, lack of empathy, strong sense of entitlement, and increased or pathological need for attention.

The 2018 FBI study (Silver et al., 2018) also lists similar triggers and risk factors, referred to as stressors: mental health issues, financial pressure, workplace conflicts, conflicts with colleagues or friends, marital problems, alcohol and drug abuse, school conflicts, physical injury, conflicts with parents or other family members, sexual frustration, criminal problems, personal issues, and the death of a close one.

Meloy's typology (Meloy et al., 2011) outlines factors indicating an increasing or accelerating risk of targeted violence, based on data patterns, theoretical formulation,

discussions with colleagues who perform threat assessments, and the authors' casework experience. The proposed eight warning behaviors for threat assessors include pathway warning behavior, fixation warning behavior, identification warning behavior, novel aggression, energy burst, leakage, last resort behavior, and directly communicated threat.

In practice, educators often rely on a range of warning signals, such as worsening academic performance, increased absenteeism/illness, changes in appearance and dress, injuries or scars, alcohol and substance abuse, changes in friendships, social media behavior, and changes in interests.

These findings underscore the interconnection between warning signs, risk factors, and triggers. Recognizing these factors, coupled with understanding their situational context, is essential, as it is not merely about what someone is going through but how it connects to the individual and the specific situation. Based on the above and additional research (Brečka et al., 2023a; Brečka et al., 2023b; Sladký et al., 2022) a total of 44 warning signs were identified (Brečka, 2024).

5. The Issue of Perception, Interpretation, and Evaluation of Warning Signs

Perception, interpretation, and evaluation of warning signs are essential processes that determine timely and effective responses to potential risks within the school environment. While previous sections focused on the factors of warning signs, such as intensity, timing, and coincidence, it is also crucial to understand why some warning signs go unnoticed or are misinterpreted. This text examines various barriers that may hinder accurate recognition and evaluation of warning signs, from physiological limitations of perception to psychological and social factors that affect our ability to act.

In a school setting, where the safety of students is a priority, it is critical to understand how our perception and decision-making can be influenced and why we sometimes fail to respond to warning signs. Such failures can have serious consequences, which is why it is essential to analyze not only the processes of perception and interpretation but also the factors leading to delayed response times or decisions to take no action. Understanding these aspects is key to developing effective strategies that ensure warning signs are accurately recognized, interpreted, and appropriately addressed.

Various factors influence our perception of warning signs. First, physiological limitations of our sensory receptors play a role. Additionally, our capacity for conscious attention and memory is finite, making it impossible to perceive everything around us. Human perception is selective and subjective, leading us to notice only parts of our surroundings—often based on what we deem important, which is influenced by unmet or overly fulfilled needs, personal interests, or professional roles, as well as by our desire to focus on specific things. The theory of figure and background also applies, suggesting that when we focus on one object, it becomes the figure while everything else fades into the background.

Factors such as physical and mental state, fatigue, stress, age, personality structure, and past experiences also play significant roles in perception. Perceiving a warning sign is only the first step; the next is rational interpretation of the perception. This process is a subjective interpretation of objective reality, often shaped by individual systems and

structures each person has developed. In cases of ambiguity, we tend to favor interpretations that align with our worldview and require minimal action from us.

Interpretation of warning signs involves both conscious and unconscious levels. The term “cognitive dissonance” refers to the conflict between existing beliefs and new information that challenges or disrupts these beliefs. In situations of cognitive dissonance, one may be aware of a warning sign but avoid acting on it due to conflicts with existing mental frameworks or beliefs. This phenomenon can lead to a “fetishistic denial”, where one knows yet chooses not to acknowledge the warning sign, described by the phrase, “I know, but I don’t want to know, so I don’t know” (Kristeva, 1982; Žižek, 2015).

Another factor impacting the perception of warning signs is the “bystander effect,” which suggests that the presence of more people reduces the likelihood of action, particularly when the warning sign’s urgency or clarity is low, leading to multiple interpretations. The bystander effect has been well-documented (Čírtková, 2000), highlighting the inverse relationship between the number of observers and the likelihood of intervention.

Even when a warning sign is perceived and interpreted correctly, decision-making on how to respond can extend response time. Cognitive dissonance or a lack of clear options can further delay reactions, increasing the likelihood that emotional discomfort will prompt avoidance behaviors. For example, defense mechanisms like rationalization may be used to justify inaction (Freud, 2006).

A useful model for understanding perception, interpretation, and subsequent actions is the “contact cycle” (Brečka, 2009). Originating in Gestalt therapy, this cycle describes phases of interaction between an organism and its environment: 1) sensation, 2) awareness, 3) excitement (energy mobilization), 4) action, 5) contact, and 6) withdrawal (Zinker, 2004). If any phase is disrupted, problems arise, requiring identification of where the break occurred to seek solutions. This cycle can be applied to understanding how we perceive, interpret, and respond to warning signs.

Finally, trust in the system is crucial in evaluating warning signs. Even when a warning sign is perceived, interpreted, and evaluated, individuals may hesitate to report it due to distrust in institutional responses (school administration, police, child welfare authorities). The fear that institutional intervention may cause more harm than it prevents is a complex and interdisciplinary issue that requires careful attention.

The issue of perceiving, interpreting, and evaluating warning signs is complex, involving physiological, psychological, and social factors that may influence our ability to respond appropriately and promptly to potential threats. While warning signs may be present, they are not always perceived or correctly interpreted. Selective perception, cognitive dissonance, fatigue, stress, and other factors can lead to missed or misjudged signals.

In a school setting, ensuring the safety and well-being of all students requires an understanding of these barriers and the development of strategies for effective responses to warning signs. Trust in the system and the courage to act on recorded signals are essential in preventing potential threats. Without addressing these challenges and improving the process of perceiving and interpreting warning signs, we risk missing opportunities to avert serious incidents. Therefore, it is vital to continue researching this issue and incorporating findings into school practices to ensure safety as effectively as possible.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding and responding to warning signs of aggression in the school environment is a complex, interdisciplinary issue that requires awareness, knowledge, and proactive intervention. Despite the availability of warning signs, factors such as cognitive dissonance, selective perception, fatigue, and stress can interfere with their timely identification and correct interpretation. Addressing these barriers is essential to develop effective preventive strategies that safeguard student well-being and school safety.

Educators and other school professionals play a vital role in perceiving, interpreting, and acting on warning signs, yet this responsibility is often hampered by limitations in perception and evaluation processes. Thus, incorporating evidence-based training and clear protocols into school practices is fundamental to enhancing the capacity for early intervention. Furthermore, fostering trust in institutional responses is critical to ensuring that concerns about potential threats are communicated and addressed appropriately.

By strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration among educators, parents, psychologists, and the community, schools can create a safer, more responsive environment where risks are identified and mitigated effectively. Future research and continued refinement of practices are essential for advancing the understanding of warning signs and ensuring that schools remain safe and supportive spaces for all students.

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