When Online Spaces Glorify Violence

A Guide for Educators and School Staff

ADL®

Understanding Targeted and Mass Violence Involving Youth

What's going on? Young people's online experiences can shape what they talk about, create, and share, including at school. Most of it is ordinary, but some online spaces normalize violence, hate, or cruelty. Encountering harmful content does not mean a student will cause harm, but for some young people who are already struggling, these communities can deepen feelings of isolation, distress, or an unhealthy fixation with violence. In some cases, that can contribute to a pathway toward violence.

Educators are often among the first to notice when a student is struggling or when concerning behavior begins to emerge. Knowing what to look for, and who to share a concern with, can help connect a student with support before a situation escalates.

Understanding the Online Landscape

True Crime Community (TCC): An online subculture where some people admire, glorify, or imitate mass killers. It differs from mainstream interest in true crime, which often focuses on victims or justice.

The Com and 764: Loosely connected online networks that target young people for exploitation, including sextortion and pressure to harm themselves.

Gore sites: Websites and forums that share real footage of violence and death, often alongside extremist content.

Memetic violence: ADL's term for violence carried out mainly to gain attention, status, or notoriety within these online communities.

What is Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM)?

A team-based process many schools use to identify students who may be at risk of harming themselves or others, and helps provide them with support. The focus is on prevention, not punishment.

Making a Threat Isn't the Same as Posing One

A student who says something troubling may be communicating anger, distress, or a need for help. A BTAM team considers the whole picture, including the student's words, behavior, relationships, and access to support.

Making a Threat Isn't the Same as Posing One

Early reporting opens the door to support and intervention before a concern becomes a crisis. A U.S. Secret Service study of 67 averted plots against K–12 schools from 2006 to 2018 found that in 94% of cases, plotters shared their intentions with others through statements, messages, or online posts.

When to Share a Concern

No single interest, statement, or behavior means a student intends to harm anyone. Focus on patterns, changes over time, and the full context. Possible concerning behaviors include:

- Direct threats, statements, or "jokes" indicating an intent to hurt oneself or others.
- Creating, sharing, or collecting content that celebrate mass attackers or violence.
- A strong fixation on weapons, mass killers, or school shootings.
- Use of hateful language or symbols, including antisemitic, racist or misogynistic material.
- Withdrawal from peers, or sudden changes in mood, behavior, or appearance.

What You Can Do

Always follow your school's policies and protocols for raising concerns about student behavior. The steps below are meant to support them:

Know your school's protocols. Learn how to share a concern and who is part of your school's threat assessment or student support team.

Document what you observe. Write down what was said or done, when, and who else was present. Exact details matter; avoid speculation.

Respond with care. Help students connect with trusted adults, counselors, and other supports as appropriate.

Build a culture of reporting. Make sure students and families know how to report threats, violent content, a classmate in distress, or other concerns, including anonymously.

If you're concerned

Immediate danger
Call 911

Concern about a student
Your school's threat assessment team, an administrator, or counselor

Crisis, self-harm or suicide
Call or text 988

Online exploitation of a child
NCMEC CyberTipline
report.cybertip.org

Anonymous tips
FBI tip form: tips.fbi.gov

Sandy Hook Promise
Say Something tipline
1-844-5-SayNow

Scan to learn more
Research, warning signs & resources

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