

Early Warning Signs

*An excerpt from "The First 'R': Reflective Capacities"**

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There are early warning signs of student/youth distress of which we need to be aware (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998). Consciously or unconsciously, students who are in trouble virtually always let others know of their unhappiness. Through a "joke" about suicide or homicide, a paper for English class that leaks pain, rage and desperation; or through changes in behavior, students try to let us know. No one wants to be left in pain.

We need to listen and, when in doubt, to turn to colleagues (for example, the principal or school counselor) for intervention. It is OK— indeed, important— for us to worry about a child or an adolescent exhibiting early warning signs, not because such signs necessarily indicate a serious problem, but because they signal a need to find out about the student's experience and the extent to which it has become a source of anxiety.

Educators can increase their ability to spot signs of trouble by establishing caring, responsive and supportive relationships with their students. Our reflective capacities determine how soon and how well they are able to recognize the warning signs. This decoding of their concerns, on the teacher's part, forms the platform on which caring, responsive and responsive relationships are built; relationships that students long remember. These relationships, in turn, become the platform for all learning, for meaning, and for the child's interaction with others.

Early Warning Signs of Troubling Behavior

Social withdrawal

Excessive feelings of isolation, loneliness, or rejection

Being a victim of violence

Feelings of persecution

Low school interest and poor academic performance

Expression of violence in writings and drawings

Uncontrolled anger

Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors

History of discipline problems

History of violent and aggressive behavior

Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes

Drug or alcohol

Affiliation with gangs

Inappropriate access to, possession of, or use of firearms

Serious threats of violence

--Adapted from Early Warning, Timely Response: A guide to Safe Schools, available online

(www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html)

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*Note: This following information is not included in the original article **

The SAMHA's National Mental Health Information Center gives the following sample plan that individuals, including children, could use to take action when feelings and signs of distress arise:

- Do the things on my daily maintenance plan, whether I feel like it or not
- Tell a supporter/counselor how I am feeling and ask for advice. Ask him or her to help me figure out how to take action
- Peer counsel at least once each day
- Do at least three, 10-minute relaxation exercises each day (simple exercises described in many self-help books that help you relax through deep breathing and focusing your attention on certain things)
- Write in my journal for at least 15 minutes each day
- Spend at least 1 hour involved in an activity I enjoy each day
- Ask others to take over my household responsibilities for the day

(I also might, depending on the circumstances)

- Check in with my physician or other health care professional
- Read a good book
- Dance, sing, listen to good music, play a musical instrument, exercise, go fishing, or fly a kite

(Adapted from the SAMHA National Mental Health Information Center, available online at <http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/SMA-3720/early.asp>)

As parents you could help your child in accomplishing these guidelines and achieving these tasks. It is important that you recognize, support and encourage your child in his/her attempt at gaining control over their own distress and their attempt at resolving and decreasing the symptoms as well as the source of distress, whenever possible.

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