Early Signs of Potentially Violent Children

It is not always possible to predict behavior that will lead to violence. In some situations and for some youth, different combinations of events, behaviors, and emotions may lead to aggressive rage or violent behavior toward self or others. A good rule of thumb is to assume that these warning signs, especially when they are presented in combination, indicate a need for further appropriate intervention.

None of these signs alone is sufficient for predicting aggression or violence. Moreover, it is inappropriate – and potentially harmful – to use the early warning signs as a checklist against which to match individual children. Rather, the early warning signs are offered only as an aid in identifying and referring children who may need help. The following early warning signs are presented with the following qualifications. They are not in order of significance and they are not presented in order of seriousness. Parents who see these signs in their own children should inform the school counselor or seek other professional help.

1. **Social withdrawal** often stemming from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness, or a lack of confidence may lead to aggression.
2. **Excessive feelings of isolation and of being alone** frequently signal a child who is troubled, withdrawn, or has internal issues. These children tend not to be violent. However, in some cases these children behave aggressively and violently.
3. **Excessive feelings of rejection** may foretell of possible violent behavior. Children who are troubled often are isolated from their mentally healthy peers. Some aggressive children then seek out other isolated children who in turn reinforce their violent tendencies.
4. **Children who are victims of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse** in the community, school or at home are at risk of becoming violent.
5. **Feelings of being picked on and persecuted** may be vented in inappropriate ways including violence. The youth who is picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule, and humiliated at home or at school may initially withdraw, but if not given support may turn to violence.
6. **Low school interest and poor academic performance** can be the result of many factors. A low achiever who feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and put down may act out aggressively. A child whose school performance makes a drastic change may be headed toward violent behaviors.
7. **Expressions of violence in writing and drawings** maybe a signal of emotional problems. Most children draw or write about violent themes at times. An over-representation of violence, directed at specific individuals, consistently over time, can be cause to question the child’s emotional status.
8. **A preoccupation with morbid, violent and destructive movies, music, books and/or games** may indicate that a child considers violence as a means to solve problems.
9. **Uncontrolled anger** that is frequent, intense and over minor irritants may signal the potential for violence.
10. Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors may escalate into more serious behaviors. These children are frequently cruel to animals as well as people.

11. A history of discipline problems may indicate that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These problems may set the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school and engage in aggressive behavior. These children frequently blame others when they get into trouble.

12. Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes when coupled with other factors may lead to violent assaults against those who are perceived as different.

13. Drug use and alcohol use reduces inhibitions and exposes children to violence either as perpetrators, or victims, or both.

14. Affiliation with gangs that support antisocial values and behaviors may lead to extortion, intimidation and acts of violence toward other students.

15. Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms puts a child at risk for violence.

16. Serious threats of violence are a reliable indication that a youth is likely to commit a dangerous act. Idle threats are a common response to frustration and need to be separated from detailed, specific threats to commit violence against oneself or others.