

Risk Detectors Save Lives!

A number of years ago, when I was principal at an elementary school, the fire captain came up to me after a fire safety presentation to the students. He commented on the students' participation in the presentations, particularly on how smoke detectors can save lives. He had told everyone that smoke detectors need to be checked regularly. He was impressed when one student enthusiastically raised his hand and shared, "My dad tests the smoke detector every week on Sunday morning when he burns the English muffins in the toaster!" We both had a good laugh when I told him that was my son.

I am very thankful that I've never had the smoke detector go off in my home for a reason of fire in the house. I know that there are many stories of how the smoke detector did go off, and people's lives were saved as a result.

Risk detectors work in much the same way for attendance. If the risk detectors can sound the alarm early enough, harm can be prevented. An early risk indicator at school can be attendance. Chronic absenteeism can be the tip of an iceberg of risk factors. By detecting the risk of harm early, caring adults can prevent harm and even save the lives of their students.

Imagine how much our students and their families would benefit from having caring adults in schools detecting risk to their well-being.

Here are a few things such adults can look for:

1. **Change in behaviour**

School staff or family members may notice a stark change in the behaviour, attitude or reactions of an individual that are not characteristic of that person, such as a sudden absence from school by strong student.

2. **Clustering of Needs**

Multiple needs may have a composite effect on the individual. Whereas one or two needs alone may be manageable, a clustering of needs may elevate risk considerably, such as family homelessness, crime victimization, alcohol addiction, or a chronic medical problem. A cluster of

needs or risk factors for students could include things like mental health, anti-social negative behaviour, criminal involvement, drugs, parent-child conflict.

3. Request for Help

Sometimes, students simply want help. They may be nearing a crisis, feeling helpless, or overwhelmed by the challenges in their life. Requests for help serve as a detection of risk. For example, a student who's regularly referred to the office for behaviour comes forward and asks for help.

4. Unusual Incident

Different from a change in behaviour, unusual incidents are those situations which typically should not happen, and may be the result of elevated risk in someone's life or family, such as children being left alone for a long period of time.

5. Crisis

Crises are situations in which it appears that everything has broken down and people have been or likely will be emotionally or physically harmed, with little means to help or protect themselves. For example, students who witness violence or are the victims of abuse may be in crisis.

6. Systematic Assessment

Schools do systematic assessment and use tools to assess the needs of students regarding academics or behaviour. It is quite possible that such assessments may reveal acute elevations in risk, such as a screening assessment for special learning needs. (#1 - 6 adapted from Global Network for Community Safety workshop presentation)

If you detect the risks of harm above, let someone know in your school administration, special education or guidance team. Being a risk detector can help prevent harm and benefit students and their families.

Connect with me about this article.

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Linked In Stan Baker

Check out some great restorative resources at www.restorative.ca

Stan helps schools and school districts address chronic absenteeism by the Keeping Kids in School service.

Keeping Kids in School service is for schools and district school boards. The service includes:

Step 1 - Setting the stage with helpful questions in order to understand the impact of chronic absenteeism

Step 2 - Identification and tracking of chronically absent students as well as those students who have a high probability of becoming chronic absentees.

Step 3 - Relational skills enhancement modules for caring adults to connect with chronically absent students using TWO BY TEN (spending 2 minutes per day for 10 days talking with a chronically absent student)

Step 4 - Video coaching follow up for caring adults involved in TWO BY TEN.

Step 5 - Review and evaluation of Keeping Kids in School service