

## ISSUE ONE

# The Responsibility for School Crisis Intervention

*Whose Job Is This, Anyway?*



*Early Friday morning, Sheila Andrews, a second-year principal at Marden Elementary School, hears police sirens outside her school. As she hurries toward the front of the building, a frantic parent notifies her that a fourth-grade student has just been the victim of an attempted abduction. Fortunately, a police officer was summoned by an adult crossing guard, and an arrest is being made. Several other officers responded and assisted with the arrest.*

*Although the student was safe, the attempted abduction and subsequent chaos occurred in full view of approximately 150 students who had congregated before school on the playground. The majority of the students are visibly shaken. Three hysterical students have been brought to the nurse's office due to painful eye irritation as the result of the pepper spray used by the police officers. Teachers have already begun requesting assistance because their students are extremely upset.*

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*After contacting district officials, Principal Andrews meets with several staff members whom she selected to provide crisis support. The assistant principal immediately begins to cry, as the victim is one of her student assistants. She appears upset and unable to take the lead as planned. The principal relates her concern that many students have witnessed the incident and crisis intervention may be warranted. She now looks to her first-year guidance counselor to spearhead the crisis intervention efforts, but is shocked to hear the counselor comment, "I'm not really comfortable in situations like this." The school psychologist has 20 years of experience but little crisis intervention training. Though he is very willing to become involved, Principal Andrews is not comfortable with the school psychologist's skill level in the area of crisis intervention. During a crisis the previous year, his overexuberance interfered with the provision of services.*

*As the morning progresses, Principal Andrews is relieved that her school has stabilized due to the timely arrival of two guidance counselors, a social worker, and a human relations specialist from a neighboring middle school. At the conclusion of the long day, she consults with her general director and notes that the student population was at a disadvantage during the incident due to her staff's hesitation, refusal, or inability to provide crisis intervention services.*



School districts differ in regard to how they define crisis intervention procedures. Ideally, the district will detail procedures and provide district-level support. Some districts have school-based crisis intervention teams to provide physical safety and psychological support to students. These teams might be responsible for on-site planning for crisis response or members might be involved on a crisis planning team. Districts probably won't specify size or membership, but will cite the need for various staff to participate on the team

(e.g., school nurse, school psychologist, teachers). The responsibility for the crisis intervention team ultimately falls to the school to develop its own specific plan and to identify personnel who will conduct crisis intervention activities. School administrators often assume the task of planning and identifying crisis intervention duties.

Before we examine the intricacies of crisis intervention, let's look at a most basic question: "Within a school setting, who should actually be required to provide crisis intervention services?" Some staff members might respond, "We all should! It's our responsibility!" Others might answer, "I would be willing to provide crisis intervention, if I knew it was one of my duties and I had adequate training." Still others could opine, "Crisis intervention just isn't my job." As these responses reflect, the simple question, "Who should provide crisis intervention?" often presents a lot of confusion.

## WHO SHOULD PROVIDE CRISIS INTERVENTION?

Optimally, all school personnel would share a sense of responsibility regarding the provision of support during a crisis, but, unfortunately, this isn't always the case. Hesitation is often evident and the question remains: "Is school crisis intervention actually every staff member's responsibility?" It seems that two separate positions are prevalent regarding this important issue. One camp steadfastly maintains that all school personnel are indeed obliged to render support during a crisis-related event. Using a somewhat dramatic analogy, if an Army platoon comes under attack, all of the soldiers within that platoon, whether rifleman, medic, cook, or communications officer, take up arms to defend their position. There is no consideration that "This isn't really my job!" On the other hand, there are those who feel that, regardless of their position, they cannot be forced to become involved in such an intense task as crisis intervention. As one teacher explained, "I don't ask you to teach, so please don't expect me to do crisis intervention."

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It's also understandable that one's position in a school might play a big role in predicting willingness to become involved in crisis support efforts. For instance, it would be reasonable to assume that a seasoned guidance counselor might be more equipped to become involved in the provision of crisis intervention services than a first-year teacher or librarian who has never been exposed to a schoolwide crisis. (Of course this is not to say that the aforementioned individuals might not be more than willing and able to play a critical role during a school crisis.) Although it is typically the school's responsibility to put together its own team, the team's functions are often dictated by district policy and predetermined procedures. According to the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2005), "In most instances, the district's administration will have provided the school with detailed guidelines for handling major disasters during the emergency itself and in the immediate aftermath" (p. 6).

Not surprisingly, the more detailed a district plan is, the more likely the school-based crisis intervention team is to feel comfortable and confident in its abilities to provide services to students. If a principal or site administrator establishes a "schoolwide support" mentality regarding crisis response and makes clear the value of the crisis team, then team members will in all likelihood be well aware of the expectations placed on them when a crisis does occur. As is so often the case, the attitude that comes from the top down has much influence over the effectiveness of those "on the ground."

No school can afford not to respond to a crisis, and so a carefully selected, diverse, and well-prepared intervention team is critical to creating safe and healthy schools.

### REASONS FOR RELUCTANCE

Why are some staff members more than willing to become involved in crisis intervention efforts whereas other staff members remain reticent and uncomfortable during these situations? Let's look at five reasons why staff members might hesitate to become involved in crisis intervention efforts.

## 1. Crisis Intervention Is an Intimidating Task

This point almost goes without saying, but it's nevertheless an important one to keep in mind. Crises occur on different magnitudes, and we all have a level of comfort that varies depending on the circumstance. Crises can be situational (such as an earthquake) or developmental (such as when adults experience what's commonly known as a *midlife crisis*). We typically and understandably associate crises with negative events, such as death, injury, disaster, or accident. On occasion, a seemingly positive event can lead to an emotional crisis in a student's life, as with a parent's remarriage or job relocation. These events can all have a dramatic impact on students, and possibly trigger a crisis during school hours.

Some faculty members have no desire to be in the middle of a hurricane in which little good is blowing. Are these individuals wrong when they hesitate or even refuse to participate in intervention efforts? Of course not. Crises can be intimidating, no matter the scale. Yet while some people avoid participation or involvement in relief efforts, others seem to be drawn to these situations, possessing a "help at all cost" attitude.

An interventionist's first assignments or "call outs" in a crisis can be very unsettling. Though it's difficult to be comfortable while others are experiencing misfortune, this "scariness" or discomfort can be diminished to some extent through adequate training and experience. The acquisition of both can greatly increase confidence when the call for assistance comes.

## 2. Crisis Intervention May Not Be in the Staff Member's Job Description

Very often, crisis intervention duties are not included in the job descriptions of most types of school personnel. However, the majority of school-based personnel can assist in some manner during crisis responses. For example, though guidance counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers traditionally play a major role during crisis situations—especially in the areas of crisis counseling—I've also

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witnessed janitors arranging rooms for impromptu counseling sessions, cafeteria workers providing much needed refreshment for the exhausted, office personnel directing “traffic” as students descend on guidance suites, nurses providing medical attention, and school resource officers securing campus perimeters. A crisis counseling component may not be evident in every job description, but most staff members do have an opportunity to provide valuable support in some manner. Some principals demand that all staff be involved in a crisis response, and other administrators choose to let a specialized team of interventionists address the needs in their schools. Regardless of each school’s expectations, it is imperative that every staff member knows what his or her responsibility is in relation to crisis-related events. This awareness can only serve to prevent confusion when the unfortunate occurs.

### **3. Many Staff Members Lack Knowledge About Crisis Intervention**

Talented interventionists can provide effective support because they are secure in their knowledge of crisis response. As a result, they can effectively offer “psychological first aid”—that is, mental health services to help address upsetting psychological reactions and “create and sustain an environment of (1) safety, (2) calming, (3) connectedness to others, (4) self-efficacy—or empowerment, and (5) hopefulness”—during and in the aftermath of a crisis (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2005).

Conversely, a lack of knowledge in the area of crisis intervention can work against school personnel by weakening their self-assurance. The intensity of a crisis coupled with a dearth of knowledge in the provision of support can understandably deter staff members from wanting to become involved in intervention efforts. Becoming well versed in the area of school crisis intervention first requires the acquisition of training, and then, actual experience. “Getting your feet wet” goes a long way toward improving how response procedures are implemented,

and in turn, these experiences go a long way toward building skill and maintaining poise.

#### **4. Past Negative Experience May Affect Willingness to Get Involved**

It is human nature to shy away from something that, on first experience, proved negative. For example, at an early age, a bad first visit to the dentist's office can set the stage for years of trepidation when toothaches occur and another appointment is necessary. Likewise, when school personnel become involved in a crisis response, a poor first experience might prevent them from being willing to become involved in subsequent interventions.

Few experienced crisis interventionists have ever applied their skills without being challenged. What makes these interventionists want to continue to provide crisis intervention? Interestingly, they'll reason that for every bad situation there are five good experiences where their presence made a real difference. It's important to identify the negative experiences immediately following those interventions and this is usually done in debriefings sessions. According to Jimerson, Brock, and Pletcher (2005), once the crisis response is over,

It is critical to ensure that all team members are given the opportunity to debrief. The primary goal of such activities is to ensure that crisis response teams are successfully able to return to their pre-crisis roles and responsibilities. In addition, it is important to recognize that every crisis response is a learning experience. (p. 287)

Any problems or concerns can be dealt with immediately and as a result, the interventionist's negative attitude toward crisis support might be altered.

#### **5. Liability Issues Are a Genuine Concern**

The possibility of saying or doing the "wrong thing," and its repercussions, is a legitimate issue for many teachers, counselors,

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psychologists, and others who may be involved in the intervention effort. Liability issues can be a real concern, but staff members who have been adequately trained in crisis intervention rarely voice this sentiment. This serves to underscore the importance of adequate and ongoing inservice training.

There is an extensive body of literature on crisis intervention strategies and techniques that has come out of school psychology (Brock, Sandoval, & Lewis, 2001; James & Gilliland, 2004; Pitcher & Poland, 1992; Roberts, 2005; Sandoval, 2001), but schoolwide training for all professionals involved in crisis intervention efforts is critical if school staff are to knowledgeably come together and act during crises.

Nevertheless, we might emphasize that tens of thousands of students and staff members are assisted each year in our nation's schools with a paucity of subsequent legal actions. According to Zirkel and Gluckman (1996), the key is to remain sensible. Becoming paralyzed by or paranoid from the fear of liability can be educationally and professionally damning.

### EAGER TO HELP BUT UNPREPARED

In contrast to staff members who hesitate or refuse to become involved in crisis intervention efforts are those who are more than willing to lend assistance, but shouldn't be included in the provision of certain services. These eager staff members can be divided into two categories: those adequately trained and experienced in crisis intervention and those, like Martin Thomas, who attempt to render support with little or no training and experience. Let's take a look at Martin's story.

#### **Only Fools Rush In**

School social worker Martin Thomas has recently been selected to be a member of his school district's non-school-based crisis intervention team. For years he had desired to participate on a crisis response team and, during a brief interview, Thomas explained to the team's supervisor that he was well versed in intervention techniques and possessed an abundance of crisis-related experience.

After several weeks, Thomas is assigned to a high school where three students had been critically injured in a car accident. It's soon evident that he possesses little knowledge and experience in school crisis intervention. After being asked to conduct small-group counseling in the media center, Thomas accomplishes little during the session and prematurely dismisses 15 students after ten minutes. The students do not return to their classes, disperse throughout the school, and in the process disturb ongoing classes. Thomas proceeds to the guidance suite and informs four female students that they have permission to go home for the day. It is later discovered that these students didn't know the victims and only wished to leave campus. Thomas exits the campus immediately after dismissal, missing the mandated debriefing session. He later explains that he was unaware of the mandate for debriefing.

As evidenced by this example, ill-equipped and overeager members of the crisis intervention team, can interfere on the most basic level with the overall provision of services during the crisis response. They do not have an opportunity to learn "on the job." Some didactic component must be made available before the interventionist can effectively engage in actual crisis intervention services. Are these overly enthusiastic staff members to blame? No. Not even Thomas, who for all intents and purposes lied to the crisis team's supervisor. His qualifications should have been assessed before he was permitted to render services, no matter how eager he appeared or how qualified he said he was. Thomas's inexperience did not have dire effects, but the fact remains that in a very short period, he:

1. Managed to disturb the school environment when he dismissed students prematurely
2. May have placed four students at risk when he permitted them to leave campus
3. Disregarded team policy by not attending the mandated afterschool debriefing session where some of his mistakes could have been identified and possibly remedied

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Throughout all of Thomas's oversights and mistakes, the responsibility for his poor performance remained with the individual who actually supervised the crisis team of which he was an active member. Whether superintendent, principal, or crisis team leader, individuals in leadership positions are ultimately responsible for the provision of a thorough training component. Failure to offer adequate training is to invite a new interventionist an opportunity to provide services haphazardly. A thorough training and internship can act as a safeguard through serving to increase the interventionist's knowledge base and exposing the interventionist's weakness and strengths.

**Figure 1.1** Roles and Responsibilities of Crisis Intervention Team Members

<i>Role</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>
Crisis Coordinator <i>Usually the principal or a designee, commonly a school or guidance counselor</i>	<i>Oversees crisis intervention activities, i.e., consults with school/district personnel, provides assignments, conducts debriefings</i>
Medical Liaison	<i>Provides medical care, consults with other medical personnel (school based/non-school-based)</i>
Security Liaison, School Resource Officer, or designee	<i>Secures campus, provides information, addresses volatile individuals</i>
Media Liaison	<i>Provides information and conducts interviews with media personnel</i>
Family/Parent Liaison	<i>Acts as contact between family and school</i>
Counseling Liaison	<i>Coordinates counseling efforts with district-level crisis intervention team</i>
Campus Liaison	<i>Communicates the specifics of the crisis to school-based faculty</i>

SOURCE: Adapted from the School District of Volusia County, *Crisis Intervention Manual*, revised for the 2005/2006 school year, p. 10.

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### Helpful Tips

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- Address the issue of school crisis intervention early in the school year by establishing a “school crisis response team, a team leader, and a crisis response manager” during preplanning staff meetings (Jimerson et al., 2005, p. 280). At the beginning of the school year, staff interest is usually piqued. Establishing a crisis intervention team early in the school year also serves as a safeguard against being unprepared for a crisis that might occur in August or September. Specific training needs should also be addressed at this time.
- Create a visual chart that illustrates crisis intervention responsibilities. This chart should be posted in a highly visible place, such as a teacher work area. Information on this chart should be readily accessible to all faculty and staff.
- Be aware of the issue of liability, but don’t let it affect your decision to become involved in crisis intervention. Talk to your administrators and get answers to some of your questions before deciding not to participate on the team.

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### Questions for Discussion

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1. If a crisis situation affected your school today, who would respond? How long did you have to think about your response? If your response took a significant time, maybe this issue should be brought to the attention of the school administration before a crisis occurs.
2. Do you know school personnel who have shied away from crisis intervention? In your opinion, what were the main reasons for their hesitation or refusal? Do you consider their reasons valid?

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3. Does the administration at your school consider crisis intervention an important service? If not, how could you play a role in helping the administration look more favorably on the provision of crisis intervention?