

# **SAMPLE A.R.M.S. APPROACH ASSESS, REFER, MONITOR, SUPPORT POST-THREAT—BEHAVIOR SUPPORT PLANS<sup>1</sup>**

## **Mitch**

### **Case Issues**

The threat assessment team encountered a variety of issues during Mitch's assessment: following of a team protocol when the administrator was absent; an angry and non responsive student during initial interview; suicide thinking; grief over losses; special education law intersecting with threat assessment procedures; parent choice on therapy

### **Background – Verbal Threat To Shoot Peers With Gun**

**M**itch is a 6<sup>th</sup> grade middle school student who has recently experienced two losses, death of a non-custodial father he had not seen since the age of four, and his much loved dog that recently died of cancer. Prior to these events, Mitch was a well-liked, well-behaved student with a 2.8 grade point average. He has received special education services in a resource program since 2nd grade for a mild learning disability affecting written language. ADHD is also in evidence, though Mitch shows no hyperactive behaviors in class at this time. Mitch became despondent and somewhat sullen after the losses his teachers reported. Two weeks after his dog's death and one month after his father's death, Mitch told a small group of peers that he saw no reason for living, and that he "might as well snuff myself and for that matter all of you with my dad's gun. I know where it is!" This statement was made immediately following 7<sup>nd</sup> period, following his receiving a reprimand for missing homework assignments in science class. Mitch had no history of acting out behavior and no history of making threats. The threat assessment team leader was the assistant principal, a designee—due to the principal being off campus. She viewed the threat as a very serious, substantive threat following Mitch's angry and non-responsive interview with her after school. Mitch was therefore suspended pending completion of an extended inquiry about his mental health status, referral and support needs.

### **Assessment Process**

Per the schools arrangement with local law enforcement for suspected serious/very serious threats, the police were notified prior to Mitch's parent picking him up at school. They chose to participate in the extended inquiry process, though ultimately no charges were made. Per school protocol, cell phone contact was made with all threat assessment team members to alert them of the current and future actions required. Suspension of 5 days occurred during the threat assessment process. Police notified parents of the students that a potentially very serious threat had been made, but later informed them that the assessment team was procuring assistance for Mike and did not feel he posed a threat to the safety of his peers. A district meeting was held and no recommendation to proceed to expulsion or recommendation for a change in placement was made, therefore no manifestation determination IEP meeting was initiated. No formal functional behavioral assessment was conducted either because Mike had not reached 10 days of suspension in a school year.

## Findings and Recommendations

Upon reviewing the facts gathered from interviews, review of records and a structured interview concerning both threat and suicidality by the school psychologist as well as police interviews, the threat team leader (the site principal) requested the IEP team consider meeting to develop a Behavior Support Plan to monitor future behaviors and codify school based support for Mitch through this difficult time. The entire team concurred with this recommendation. The team consensus was that Mitch was not a safety threat to others and had no plan to harm others, but rather felt his threat was the act of a despondent student making a plea for help. No other mental health issues or suspected diagnoses were discovered. The police counseled the parent to safeguard the firearm Mitch had referenced. The parent agreed to take Mike to the private therapist to address his grief issues and suicide ideation and was an active participant in planning support for Mike. Although Mike admitted to some suicide thinking, he denied a plan or intent to carry out this plan. The offer of in-school counseling session was declined by the parent who wished to use a therapist from their own faith community. The behavior support plan reflects parental agreement for some progress report between therapist and school.

## Ramon

### Case Issues

This case illustrates a variety of issues the threat assessment team addressed: Gang activity, special education law intersecting with threat assessment processes, inadequate IEP yet placement change was achieved via an involvement of a probation officer, lack of remorse, history of aggressive behavior, student poses a real threat

### Background – Verbal Threat by One Gang Member to Another Gang Member

Ramon is an 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school student with a mild reading disability who has received special education services since 4<sup>th</sup> grade. His parents are non-English speaking immigrants. Ramon has had 17 office referrals in two years and has had numerous physical fights on campus and in the community in the last two years. Offenses have been refusing to do work, improper clothing, swearing at teachers, failing to suit out for PE, physical fighting and reportedly sexual harassment of a 6<sup>th</sup> grade girl off campus. These offenses have increased in intensity since entering middle school as a 6<sup>th</sup> grader. There were no offenses prior to middle school and he has been in the same district since 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. His grades in elementary school were “B”s and “C”s. In middle school his grades have dropped to an average of “D+” and he was well known to disciplinary staff. There has been no behavior support plan for Ralph, though he did participate in a bi-weekly “motivational” group with the counselor. Ramon made a verbal threat to “have my homeboys kill you” to a peer reputed to be a member of a rival gang.

### Assessment Process

Following an initial inquiry by the threat team leader, the police joined the school-based threat assessment team. This threat was determined to be a very serious substantive threat given reported gang activity in Ramon’s community recently. Ramon was placed in an interim alternative placement for 45 calendar days as the threat assessment and special education processes occurred. Although initially arrested, it was determined by the police that no crime had yet to occur. Ramon and his parents were counseled and released.

The IEP team held the required manifestation determination meeting to proceed to expulsion for “dangerousness.” During this process the IEP team determined that this recent threat was an extension of previous milder threats and aggressive behavior on campus that should have been addressed sometime over the last two years. They concluded that no “supplementary aids and supports” for his increasing behavior problems had been provided (i.e., a behavior plan component of his IEP) and therefore at the time of the behavior, the IEP in place was inadequate.

It was discovered during the threat assessment process that Ramon had a probation officer from an unrelated shoplifting episode. He was invited to join the team and fully participated. The school psychologist concluded that Ramon demonstrated some remorse and empathy, but was easily led by more dominant peers. No other mental health issues were uncovered and the IEP team concluded there were no other areas of suspected disability, such as emotional disturbance.

The required special education provision of a functional behavioral assessment due to a contemplated change in placement recommendation were clear: Ramon’s behaviors were attempts to gain attention, recognition and status from peers who were gang involved. This had been true throughout middle school it was concluded. Ramon himself was discovered to be a member of a gang during this assessment.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

The threat team leader concluded, with team agreement, that Ramon posed a threat to others if he remained on this campus. The probation officer concurred as well. Although Ramon’s parents did not agree with this finding, they were pleased with the placement recommendation. The alternate setting recommended by the probation officer would be implementing a behavior support plan to attempt to alter Ramon’s gang allegiance and would be communicating with them regularly. The school district agreed that special education services consisting of provision of some academic instruction and counseling could be provided in this setting. Ramon’s placement was therefore changed due to unanimous agreement from probation, school district and parents that school safety and Ramon’s special education service needs required this move. Court restraining orders, involuntary placement change and other solutions to maintain a safe school were therefore not pursued. He was placed in a sheltered setting with former gang member mentors. The behavior support plan specifies addressing his need for peer acclaim as well as guidance for staff in monitoring dangerousness with systematic communication emphasized.

## **Carlie**

### **Case Issues – Physical threat gesture with a “weapon”, acculturation family stress, major mental illness, history of bullying**

#### **Background – Threatening Gesture with School Scissors**

**C**arlie is a 15 year old high school sophomore of Korean decent. She and her parents immigrated to the United States in her kindergarten year. Carlie learned English readily and earned As and Bs throughout her elementary and middle school years. She was popular with her peers and regularly attended play dates and sleepovers with a large group of girls through middle school. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Carlie saw the school counselor several times concerning parent/child conflict over differences in expectations for her social life. It was discovered that her parents utilized physical beatings when Cali lied to meet her friends at the movie theatre on several occasions. These episodes required child abuse reporting. Following the report, and a cross cultural child protective services interview by an employee familiar with

cultural issues surrounding her parents' use of harsh discipline practices, the parents agreed to discontinue the tactics. Subsequently, Carlie became increasingly despondent in school and her academic performance declined sharply at the beginning of her sophomore year. She complained of her parents expecting "old-world behavior" and that she felt "trapped between two cultures". Peers reported suicide ideation to the school counselor, and she was interviewed for suicide risk by the school psychologist. Carlie denied these feelings, claiming to be joking. She was referred for school counselor services to address "improving academic effort" and "to monitor her emotional status." Throughout Carlie's sophomore year, Cali made periodic deprecating comments about her skills in class, such as "I can't do anything right! I might as well be dead!"

The threat assessment process was initiated following the classroom comment, "Maybe you should be dead too!" Carlie also responded to a peer who "giggled" at her by pressing a pair of scissors hard against the classmate's stomach, laughing loudly and swinging the scissor around toward the teacher with a look on her face the teacher later described as a terrifying display of aggressive intent. This resulted in an out of school suspension recommendation for expulsion for brandishing a weapon.

## **Assessment Process**

The threat assessment process was begun on the second day of suspension. The site leader requested an extended assessment of a very serious threat. The police were notified, but declined to participate, stating the school could handle this inquiry without their involvement. The school psychologist conducted a preliminary assessment, suspected a clinical depression and referred the family to a clinic specializing in working with bi-cultural students. The threat assessment team concurred that given her current depression, Carlie may pose a threat to others. Carlie was subsequently hospitalized for several weeks.. It was discovered during the hospitalization that Cali was probably suffering from depression with potential psychotic features (auditory hallucinations were admitted during the hospital stay). She also described relational bullying by members of her peer group that had tormented her for months. This was corroborated by teacher reports of peer interaction difficulties across peer groups. Carlie began antidepressant and antipsychotic medication during this hospitalization. The district expelled Carlie during the hospitalization, but subsequently suspended the expulsion. Upon release from the hospital, Cali returned to the district. A special education assessment for "suspected disability" was initiated.

## **Recommendations and Findings**

After careful analysis, Carlie's special education assessment team felt a diagnosis of "Emotional Disturbance" was not yet warranted pending further information on Carlie's response to medication and further diagnostic information from on going psychiatric assessment. Therefore, no IEP was written. The threat team's conclusion was that Carlie did not pose a threat to her peers, and that she had returned to her earlier level of academic motivation and excellent social skills. They did, however, recommend a comprehensive behavior support plan to monitor and support Cali upon her return. Steps to address relational bullying of Carlie were begun and a school team to address systemic bullying developed.

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<sup>1</sup> Behavior plans will rarely, by themselves, be an adequate stand-alone support for a student with significant intervention needs. The behavior plans are to be used in conjunction with other agency's services and intervention plans. A behavior support plan is to address immediate and immediate-past situations and contexts in which troubling behavior has occurred and may occur again in the future. It informs teachers and other school staff about how to address the behavior if it occurs again and how to improve the immediate environment to best support the student who has demonstrated problem behavior. A behavior support plan is not designed to address longer-range problems and conditions which should be addressed through services such as behavioral health/mental health, probation, family support and interventions, and other community-based services. Rather, the behavior plan is a component of monitoring and support that described the coordination between home, school, family and providers