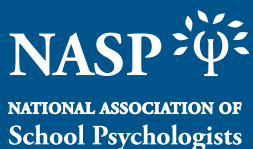


BEST PRACTICE GUIDANCE FOR

# SCHOOL SAFETY AND LOCKDOWN DRILLS:

PREPARING FOR ACTIVE THREATS



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# Executive Summary

The National Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of School Resource Officers, and Safe and Sound Schools have collaborated to provide this guidance on preparing for and responding to various security threats. In this document, we refer to the associated procedures and protocols as school safety drills, lockdowns, and active threat responses. This document provides guidance on factors schools must consider when conducting school safety and lockdown drills. It updates our guidance released in 2014 and subsequently revised in 2017 and 2021. This 2026 revision:

- broadens the scope from armed assailants to any active threat,
- emphasizes the importance of institution-wide standard response protocols,
- offers further considerations regarding individualized response options, and
- provides additional guidance for developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed approaches.

It does not constitute an endorsement of a particular approach to training or specific training programs.

## OVERVIEW

Schools have engaged in training designed to respond to active threats for decades, most traditionally referred to as lockdown drills. More recently, within the context of these drills, there has been an increased emphasis on options-based training, such as what the U.S. Department of Education et al. (2013) refer to as “Run, Hide, Fight.” While these drills have the potential to empower staff and save lives, if not implemented correctly, they can cause harm. Available research supports the effectiveness of nonsensorial lockdown drills conducted by calmly walking and talking through the procedures, with no simulation of a real-life event (e.g., they do not include dramatic enactments, simulated gunfire, smoke, injuries, or immediate danger) implemented according to best practices (Nickerson & Schildkraut, 2024; Schildkraut et al., 2024). While this is especially true for developmentally younger students, simulation-based and sensorial drills have the potential to be harmful to all school community members (students and staff); therefore, this type of drill is not recommended for use with students (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025).

## THREAT PREPAREDNESS APPROACHES AND PLANNING

- A. Discussion-based activities (e.g., discussions, seminars, table-top activities) should be the foundation of active threat preparedness. Threat preparedness activities should be placed on a hierarchy, with simple discussion-based exercises taking place before operations-based drills.
- B. Options-based approaches allow participants to make critical decisions in evolving situations based on available information. Lockdown protocols should continue to be an essential component of an options-based approach.
- C. All threat preparedness activities, including lockdown drills, should be nonsensorial.
- D. Schools should not use simulation techniques with students, and activities should be appropriate to the participants’ developmental levels and physical abilities.
  - While we do not recommend sensorial exercises with students and staff, if sensorial exercises are conducted with staff, they must include informed consent, and the tactics being used must be explicitly identified in advance of agreeing to consent. Adult participants must be informed of the use and purpose of props and simulation aids prior to the drill. Drills should never involve props that simulate physical harm (e.g., paint balls, rubber bullets) or physical contact with participants. Mental health supports must be available on-site during and after such exercises.
- E. Regular practice, using a nonsensorial approach, helps participants develop readiness, quickly access, and appropriately apply knowledge, while reducing the potential for trauma impact.



## DEVELOPMENTAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

- A. Students' threat perceptions are influenced by adult behavior (this is especially true for early learners). Consequently, effective drills require the presence of staff who are calm and confident.
- B. It is critical that participation in drills be appropriate to developmental level and physical abilities, and that they take into consideration prior traumatic experiences, special needs, and students' temperaments.
- C. School mental health professionals who are school crisis intervention team (SCIT) members should be involved in every stage of drill preparation.
  - *Prior to the drill*, staff should be trained to recognize common trauma reactions.
  - *During the drill*, adults should monitor participants and remove anyone exhibiting signs of traumatic stress.
  - *After completion of the drill*, staff and students should have access to mental health/ SCIT support.
- D. Except when required by law, student participation should never be mandatory, parental notification should be provided, and alternative methods to teach skills and develop readiness should be available.

## STEPS FOR CONDUCTING SAFE, EFFECTIVE, AND APPROPRIATE DRILLS

- A. Create a multidisciplinary school safety team (including an administrator, school mental health professional, school nurse, school resource officer, school security personnel, teachers, parents, and, at the high school level, students) that provides input to facilitate coordination with law enforcement and emergency responders.
- B. Conduct a needs assessment of the school community (Nickerson et al., 2026).
- C. Implement a cost-benefit analysis that considers **all** emergency preparedness needs and options, prioritizing more probable and day-to-day safety needs.
- D. Customize drills to the context and unique vulnerabilities of the school environment.
- E. Create a plan that builds upon a foundation of simple, low-cost training (e.g., tabletop drills), identifies obstacles and goals, and establishes a timeline.
- F. In addition to knowledge and skill acquisition, drills and preparedness activities must ensure physical and psychological safety.
- G. Develop a communications plan that gives participants warning of all drills, the ability to select an alternate form of preparation, and the opportunity to provide feedback.
- H. Establish a long-term follow-up plan to support sustainability that includes assessing ongoing or changing preparedness training needs.

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# Best Practice Guidance for School Safety and Lockdown Drills: Preparing for Active Threats

## INTRODUCTION

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), and Safe and Sound Schools (SASS) represent key stakeholders in school safety and crisis preparedness. This includes school mental health professionals, school security, and law enforcement (e.g., school resource officers [SROs]), school administrators, other educators, and families. NASP, NASRO, and SASS all have expertise and extensive first-hand experience with the most effective approaches to keeping students and staff safe before, during, and after school-associated threats. These organizations are committed to supporting school communities' understanding and implementation of best practices related to school safety, school mental health, and crisis response.

This document updates and builds on the guidance released by NASP and NASRO in 2014, and updated in 2017 and 2021. Neither this document nor the author organizations endorse a specific approach to active threat training (also known as armed assailant, active shooter, or intruder training) or any particular training program. However, **we advocate against high-intensity, hyperrealistic, or sensorial drills involving students and staff.** Furthermore, we assert that the standard lockdown protocol should remain a central component of these trainings and that there should be a hierarchy of training that offers a variety of safe and appropriate options.

Our goals in this document are to provide best practice information that **helps schools (a) determine to what extent they need active threat training and (b) conduct training that makes best use of resources, maximizes effectiveness, and minimizes physical and psychological risks.** We acknowledge that these trainings include a range of activities, from orientation activities, workshops, and tabletop drills, to drills and full-scale exercises (adult only). Equally important, this document is not intended to provide specific guidance on *how* to conduct school safety and lockdown drills; instead, it strives to provide guidance on issues that must be considered when planning for and implementing these trainings. The specifics of any training should be determined locally by appropriately trained school administration, school safety and mental health personnel, and local law enforcement.

Please note that the appendices in this document contain important decision-making information and guidance on how to conduct developmentally appropriate safety education and active threat training.

The term *active shooter drills* has become an unhelpful catch-all for what are very different types of drills, in particular, conflating lockdown, options-based training, and full-scale exercises involving public safety, mental health, and emergency response agencies. These drills are not the same but rather exist on a continuum of teaching and training activities that school districts consider in safety preparedness planning. This conflation causes

confusion among the public, school leaders, and even law enforcement and risks undermining effective school safety planning. Further confusion surrounds the use of practices such as opt out, consent, and parent notification.

To avoid unintended consequences and confusion, it is important to understand the distinctions between the following terms related to the active threat response, listed in alphabetical order.

**Access and functional needs** (commonly referred to as special needs) refers to any unique instructions or accommodations students and staff may require (i.e., due to physical, sensory, or other disabilities) during a drill or real-life event.

**Active threat** (see also armed assailant) refers to any form of threat to the safety of individuals within the school (e.g., armed assailant, weather event, toxic chemicals). An active threat could lead to various responses depending on the type of threat posed.

**Announced drills** are preceded by an announcement and may involve rehearsal of emergency responses and protocols. All participants are notified that it is not a true emergency.

**Armed assailant** (See also active threat) is defined as an armed person who attempts to use deadly force on others, typically in a confined and populated area. A related term, *active shooter*, refers to those assailants who use firearms, as opposed to knives or other weapons. In this document, we are using the more inclusive term of active threat.

**Evacuation** requires students and staff to leave the school building or facility using predetermined evacuation routes. Students and staff then relocate to a predetermined, alternative setting, sometimes off school grounds. *It is commonly used for fires, HAZMAT situations, and security threats inside the school building.*

**Full-scale exercises**, or “live” exercises, are complex, costly, and involve role-playing and sensorial components. These full-scale exercises often include public safety partners (e.g., police, fire, emergency management personnel). *It is commonly used for interagency training and practice.*

**Hold** (also called hold in place) is used when students and staff remain in their current location until the “all clear” is given. Movement in the hallways and common places is temporarily suspended. *It is commonly used for disturbances (e.g., an upset student), emergency medical responses, and locker searches.*

**Incident Command System (ICS)** provides a common organizational structure for responding to emergencies among schools, first responders, and agencies. It clearly delineates crisis response roles and responsibilities among school personnel and collaborating organizations.

**Lockdowns** involve moving into a secure location, locking the door, moving students and staff out of sight, and requiring all to remain quiet. *It is commonly used as a response to active or imminent security threats, including acts of violence.*

**Opt-out** means that a primary caregiver chooses not to have their child participate in a school safety drill. In these situations, alternative preparation should be provided.

**Options-based approaches** include a range of strategies (e.g., run, hide, fight; avoid, deny, defend) for responding to immediate school safety threats as an extension of other protocols (e.g., lockdown, evacuation, shelter-in-place, hold). *Such approaches are commonly used as a response to active or imminent security threats, including acts of violence.*

**Parent/caregiver notification** means that primary caregivers are notified of a drill, but no consent is asked for. Schools assume participation is granted unless parents assertively state otherwise.

**Parent/caregiver permission** requires primary caregivers to return a permission slip allowing their child to participate in a drill (which can be challenging to obtain).

**Passive consent** means that primary caregivers return a form only if they do *not* want their child to participate (i.e., they elect to opt out). If the consent form is not returned, it implies permission.

**Reverse evacuation** (also called return to building, or get inside, stay inside) requires students and staff to move from school grounds (e.g., the playground) into the school building (e.g., classrooms). This action may then lead to a lockdown, shelter-in-place, or secured perimeter. *It is commonly used for community threats near campus and sudden weather/environmental threats.*

**School crisis intervention teams (SCITs)** consist primarily of school-based mental health professionals who engage in school crisis planning and preparedness, help restore physical safety in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, and provide crisis interventions and supports.

**School resource officers (SROs)** are law enforcement officers with specialized training in school-based law enforcement and crisis response. They are sworn law enforcement officers who work collaboratively with one

or more schools, and their role often includes elements of educator, counselor/mentor, and law enforcement officer.

**Safety leadership teams (SLTs)** are responsible for comprehensive school safety planning and the development of school safety procedures. They focus on the big picture of school climate and culture and help link safety initiatives to academic and social–emotional programming to promote safe, supportive, and effective schools.

**Secure perimeter** (also called secure; formerly lockdown) requires that all exterior building doors be locked and secured. Blinds are closed. No outside activity is allowed, but inside activity and schedules are allowed, as authorized by school staff. Access into and out of the building is controlled and limited to authorized individuals. Any staff and students outside the building are returned to the building or another safe area. *It is commonly used for community threats outside of, but near, the school campus.*

**Shelter/shelter-in-place** requires participants to relocate to predetermined rooms that have minimal to no windows or vents. Windows and doors may be sealed with duct tape and plastic sheeting, and mechanical building systems (e.g., HVAC, gas, water) are turned off. It is commonly used for weather-related threats and events associated with chemical, radiological, and biological exposure.

**Simulation-based and sensorial drills** are structured to mimic real-life crisis scenarios, incorporating sensory experiences such as smells, sights, and sounds.

**Unannounced drills** take place without announcement or warning to rehearse real-time responses and protocols (e.g., lockdown, fire drill, or earthquake drills).

## PART I: OVERVIEW

Schools are responsible for protecting the physical and psychological well-being of students and staff. In fact, this has been identified as an ethical requirement (e.g., NASP, 2020) to include supporting positive school climates, preventing negative behaviors such as bullying and harassment, and being prepared to respond to threats such as weather emergencies, fires, and acts of violence. Effective crisis preparedness actions are essential for schools to meet this responsibility (Cowan et al., 2013; Nickerson et al., 2026). While an active threat on school property is rare, schools are increasingly being required to consider how to best prepare for and respond to these events.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2008), Blair and Schweit (2014), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2024), an *armed assailant* is defined as an armed person who attempts to use deadly force on others, typically in a confined and populated area. A related term, *active shooter*, refers to those assailants who use firearms, as opposed to knives or other weapons. In this document, we are using the more inclusive term of *active threat*. In the United States, it has been reported that at least 37 states are now requiring specific active threat drills for schools (to check the requirements in your state, see Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2025). However, decisions regarding these trainings are often left up to individual school districts (Churchill & Driel, 2024).

Effective school safety and crisis response must include a shared understanding of purpose and procedures among all participants, respect for each other’s roles and perspectives, and a shared commitment to ensure school safety and well-being. Schools should plan for the rare possibility of an armed assailant as part of comprehensive crisis preparedness efforts; however, the nature and extent of those preparedness activities must be based upon a risk assessment of the crisis events a given school is most likely to confront. How this training is conducted must carefully account for students’ developmental levels, physical abilities, school culture and climate, and features specific to each school community (e.g., geography, weather, crime, and environment). While one of the primary goals of crisis preparedness drills is to develop a sense of empowerment and control, poorly conducted safety drills may cause physical and psychological harm and negatively affect the overall learning environment. Administrators, SROs and police officers, and SCIT members must work closely together to develop staff and student training protocols that follow the best practice considerations below.

### A. Background

The 1999 Columbine High School shootings ushered in heightened attention to the need for schools—and law enforcement—to be better prepared to respond to armed assailants. Subsequently, schools focused primarily on lockdown practices (confining students and staff behind locked classroom doors). In contrast, law enforcement focused on improving tactics to find and stop assailants as quickly as possible. Following the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting, the U.S. Department of Education et al. (2013) recommended expanding the lockdown-only approach for schools to an options-based approach that allows school staff to make more independent decisions about how to protect their students depending on evolving circumstances (e.g., evacuate the building rather than stay locked in a classroom). These approaches include adapting the “Run, Hide, Fight” model initially developed

for adults in response to workplace violence (Fanning, 2016). This expansion spurred a range of techniques that we now refer to as active threat training, and it increased the number of schools conducting drills with varying degrees of intensity and involvement of school staff and students. In some instances, drills are conducted with insufficient consideration of the potential psychological impact or appropriateness of a particular drill, given the developmental level of students or participants' psychological risk factors (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025).

## B. Benefits and Concerns Associated With Active Threat Preparedness

**Costs versus benefits.** School-associated homicides are rare, accounting for only about 1% of all such deaths among school-age youth (Irwin et al., 2024). While an active threat, such as an attack by an armed assailant on school grounds, is possible—and can have a significant psychological and educational impact if it happens—it is not as probable as other types of crises. Schools must consider the cost of some drills (e.g., full-scale exercises) and whether such investment affects resources available for other critical safety activities, such as first aid and medical trauma training, prevention programs, environmental design and security measures, and staff development focused on comprehensive school safety efforts.

**Empowerment versus potential harm.** The primary purposes of active threat preparedness are to provide law enforcement and relevant school leadership and staff the opportunity to practice skills and protocols; and to identify and correct areas of weakness in knowledge, communication, coordination, and decision-making. The goal is to empower participants, to prepare professionals and staff for this role and responsibility, and ultimately to save lives. However, sensorial drills (e.g., use of simulated gunfire and role play), particularly as related to the threat of human violence, can be traumatizing for students and staff members. An individual's cognitive and developmental level, personality, trauma history, and psychological makeup are among the many factors that influence the potential for harm.

It is essential to include parents in discussions of their child's developmental level, education, and readiness for school safety and lockdown drills. Sensorial or simulation-based drills for students should never be conducted, are not recommended, and should never be mandatory (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016).

**Available research.** Practicing disaster response procedures has increased the probability of adaptive behavior during a crisis (Brock, 2025; Jones & Randall,

1994; Miltenberger et al., 2005; Nickerson et al., 2026; Schildkraut et al., 2020). Specifically, lockdown drills that do not involve a sensorial experience and are implemented according to best practices have been suggested to increase knowledge and skills of responding appropriately without elevating anxiety or perceived safety risk (Nickerson & Schildkraut, 2024; Zhe & Nickerson, 2007). At present, we have not found any high-quality empirical research supporting the benefits of school safety and lockdown drills that involve a sensorial experience. Conversely, we are aware of research suggesting this type of drill has unintended negative consequences (Huskey & Connell, 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025).

**Potential lawsuits.** The way some drills (e.g., unannounced, sensorial) are conducted at the workplace has resulted in lawsuits against employers because of the psychological and physical harm experienced by participants (Frosch, 2014; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025; Sawchuk, 2020). If multiagency full-scale exercises are to be conducted with carefully selected volunteers, they need to be constructed to avoid physical and psychological harm. Regardless of the projected benefits and perceived concerns, the fact remains that there is a lack of empirical research to support the use of sensorial drills with students or staff in schools (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025). Schools that conduct school safety and lockdown drills in response to an active threat or any full-scale exercise should use a multidisciplinary safety team (including parents and SCIT members) that educates and trains all participants in relevant curricula and protocols. With careful planning, data collection, and continual review of these programs, schools can begin to develop an approach that minimizes negative effects and improves preparedness.

## PART II: DRILL APPROACHES AND PLANNING

### A. Lockdown Versus Options-Based and Simulation Drills

**Lockdown drills** have been conducted for decades, do not involve sensorial components, and have been proven effective (Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2022). **They have become an essential part of school safety preparedness.** When done appropriately, they align with fire or dangerous weather drills in how they are conducted. Specifically, lockdown drills involve moving students out of sight to a secure location, locking the door, denying access to the room, and requiring students to remain quiet. In practice, lockdowns have a well-established history of keeping students and school staff members safe when presented

with actual threats of harm. These drills are designed to teach and practice essential skills, regardless of the imminent threat, by starting with the fundamental step of following the instructions of the trusted adult in charge. All participants should know beforehand that the drill will take place and what to expect, including what announcement will be made or what signal will be given to start the drill. It is recommended that parental caregivers be notified before lockdown drills. Additionally, caregivers should be offered the opportunity for their child to receive alternate teaching and training if they feel it is necessary for their child's well-being. For example, if a child, group of children, or school community has experienced trauma due to school violence, alternative teaching and training may be necessary to avoid further trauma exposure. While schools may call this an "opt-out" policy, *it is essential to clarify that this option should not be regarded as an exemption from safety preparation, but as an opportunity for appropriate substitute activities.* Emergency responders and law enforcement (other than the SROs) are not typically part of the on-campus drill, but they may be invited (or required) to observe the drill depending on state laws. These drills are appropriate for most students and staff members when done properly. However, attention should always be paid to students who might present specific vulnerabilities, such as those with previous trauma history or disabilities.

**Options-based approaches** provide students and staff with various alternative and additional strategies to save lives (i.e., evacuation, barricading doors). The premise of options-based strategies is to allow participants to make independent decisions depending on the situation, such as the nature of the threat, time of day, and the location of students. Options-based strategies are appropriate as long as careful attention is given to age, developmental level (see Appendix 3), and any trauma risk factors, as well as the physical layout of the school campus (e.g., ease of access to outside doors and proximity of places to hide other than classrooms). If the location of the threat is unknown, lockdown is the default action to take to ensure intended targets do not unintentionally put themselves in the path of a danger. If a school decides to teach options-based strategies for immediate threats, these options should be conducted in a nonsimulated, nonsensorial way. For example, strategies can be offered as classroom lessons, wherein students are told about the different options and offered tabletop or discussion opportunities to explore. All participants should be aware of when a drill will take place. Additionally, potential participants (and their parents) should be offered alternatives to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills if they deem it necessary for their well-being. In cases where schools wish to conduct drills at unexpected or unusual times to gauge adaptability and aptitude, we recommend conducting a short-term notice, such as 10 minutes before a drill, to ensure that all participants understand that the

activity is a drill and not an actual emergency. Furthermore, we recommend using the time after the announcement to discuss and review drill processes. While it is understandable that school leaders may prefer "the element of surprise," the risk of heightened anxiety and poor performance outweighs this potential benefit (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025). School SLTs and ICS teams, SROs, and local law enforcement may be involved in teaching techniques. At no point should students be given the instruction or impression that they are expected to act as heroes (e.g., fight, defend, counter) in a life-threatening situation.

**Full-scale multiagency simulation exercises, or live exercises**, are complex, costly, and may involve actors and sensorial components. They were initially designed for emergency responders and law enforcement, members of the school SLT and ICS team, and other public safety and school leaders responsible for implementing a response to an imminent threat. The primary purpose should be to help these adults test their protocols and identify possible gaps, and equip SLTs, ICS teams, and school leaders with the skills required to lead a response. It is not appropriate for students to participate in these drills. **Any staff involved should be volunteers and must be carefully selected.** For example, persons with histories of exposure to traumatic stressors should not participate. These exercises should be conducted during nonschool hours, and the school and broader community should be informed beforehand that they are taking place.

Being clear on the differences in these drill types and how to mitigate unnecessary negative consequences helps decision-makers focus on the appropriate drills for the purpose and participants intended, ultimately safeguarding the physical and psychological safety of all students and staff.

## **B. Hierarchy of Education and Training Activities**

Preparedness activities should be conducted in a series of steps that begin with basic activities and progress to more advanced drills and exercises as needed (Gay, 2025; Nickerson et al., 2026). Schools should start with simple, low-cost, discussion-based exercises (e.g., introductions to crisis responders, orientation activities, use of approved instructional media, or tabletop drills) and, if the school SLT determines it appropriate, work their way toward more complex and expensive, operations-based exercises (e.g., walk-throughs, specific emergency drills, and multiagency full-scale exercises; NASP, 2013; U.S. Department of Education REMS Technical Assistance Center, 2006a). **Appendix 1 summarizes this hierarchy of education and training activities (Gay, 2025) and provides an example of how school safety and lockdown drills as part of active threat preparedness could occur at each level.**

## C. Considerations

Schools must carefully consider the introduction and practice of options other than lockdown during an active threat. Crises are dynamic and evolving in nature, and critical decision-making takes practice and ongoing education. The goal is to prepare individuals to respond in the way that best enhances their safety based on current circumstances. However, students should be taught, first and foremost, to follow the direction of their teacher and how to make decisions if that teacher is incapacitated. Helping students and staff understand the decision-making criteria is crucial. It is also essential to consider the unique needs of students with disabilities, both in terms of a drill and the expectations for their functioning in the event of a real emergency (U.S. Department of Education REMS Technical Assistance Center, 2006b). **Appendix 2 provides additional information on students with access and functional needs.**

## D. Regular Practice

As part of the initial planning process for crisis preparedness, schools should identify how to integrate and reinforce the concepts taught during the drills. Introductions, orientations, walk-throughs, and tabletop exercises should continue to be integrated into ongoing crisis preparation activities so that learned skills are refreshed, rehearsed, and generalized. Varied practice, training, and discussion activities aid the development of readiness, providing staff and students with the means to access and apply their knowledge quickly. School leaders must balance the need to review knowledge and practice skills (consistent with state regulations) with other safety training, prioritizing the primary purpose of schools, which is teaching and learning. As conducting drills is not without its costs, including disruption to the learning environment and potentially increasing students' threat perceptions, we encourage careful consideration regarding the frequency of drills. The value of other preparedness activities (i.e., discussion-based introductions, seminars, tabletops, walk-throughs, orientations) should not be overlooked.

# PART III: DEVELOPMENTAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

## A. Impact of Adult Behavior on Children's Behavior

The behavior of an adult in an emergency directly affects the physical and psychological safety of students in crisis (Brock, 2025; Nickerson et al., 2026). Therefore, the

effectiveness of school safety and lockdown drills relies on educating and training adults carefully, responsibly, and continually. Students look to faculty and staff—the designated trusted adults on site—for direction and guidance. When adults are well trained and stay calm, the students are more likely to follow and gain confidence and ability.

## B. Developmental Levels of Safety Awareness

Developmental levels of safety awareness must be addressed (Gay, 2025). If schools opt to conduct options-based or more advanced drills for responding to an active threat, it is critical that those planning and facilitating the training consider the cognitive and physical abilities, as well as the emotional development of all those involved. Safety and security professionals (e.g., SROs) often lead in conducting drills. Still, they must work collaboratively with school administration and school mental health professionals who are SCIT members in joint planning to ensure best practice guidelines are followed. School districts, educators, and parents are encouraged to adopt policies and training programs considering their unique situations. Grade levels are not an absolute determinant. Individual levels may vary significantly due to cultural, developmental, educational, and personal profiles within a community or classroom. It is also imperative that schools consider the individual psychological backgrounds, previous trauma experiences (including community trauma history), access and functional needs (commonly referred to as "special needs"), and personalities of students and staff.

Regardless of training level, some individual personality types are better able to respond assertively than others in moments of crisis. **Appendix 3 offers developmental levels of awareness and understanding to assist schools in determining the capabilities and readiness of students and staff to participate in drills designed to prepare for an active threat** (Gay, 2025). Each level has a corresponding age range and examples of appropriate activities and instructions to provide general guidance when preparing for active threat training.

Schools must carefully consider the developmental appropriateness of safety vocabulary and verbiage. Terminology should be clear, direct, and developmentally appropriate. For example, opting for vocabulary such as "go," "get out," and "evacuate" (depending on developmental maturity) instead of "escape" or "run" may help support calm and orderly action and mitigate the psychological impact of the crisis. See Gay (2025) for additional guidance on developmentally appropriate language.

### C. Mental Health Support and Considerations

We recommend that school mental health professionals who are members of the SCIT be involved in all stages of school safety and lockdown drill preparation. Participation in active threat and lockdown drills may lead to stress or traumatic reactions in some members of the school community. Staff should also be taught to recognize common trauma reactions to help identify when students, fellow staff members, or they themselves need to be removed from the drill. Additionally, drills should be conducted early enough in the day to allow participants to reflect, provide feedback, and obtain support for any adverse reactions. Educators should monitor their own reactions as well as those of other school community members during the drill and have a means to quickly notify drill coordinators if a person exhibits physical (e.g., asthma or panic attack) or counterproductive emotional reactions. Such reactions would necessitate removal from the drill for immediate support. SCIT members should be available during the drill and offer assistance as needed. Emotional or physical reactions can be delayed following a simulation drill. School staff and students should have access to SCIT members after the event to provide additional assistance if needed.

### D. Balancing Requests to Opt-Out From Potentially Trauma-Activating Experiences With the Need for Preparedness

Participation in a drill that simulates an active threat should never be required for students or staff. If the drill could serve as a trauma activator, opting out of live practice should be an option. However, completely opting out of any training could put individuals at risk. Thus, the essential information and training should be provided through alternative discussion-based approaches such as a tabletop activity, as outlined in the hierarchy of education and training activities (Gay, 2025).

### E. Parent Consent

All forms of school safety and lockdown drills that require active participation (and emergency preparedness activities that involve direct engagement of students) should require parent notification and, in some cases, consent. This may be in the form of:

- Parent permission—parents return a permission slip allowing their child to participate.
- Passive consent—parents return a form only if they do NOT want their child to participate; no form returned implies permission.

- Parent notification—parents are notified (e.g., via newsletters, email communications, parent handbooks), but no consent form is used; thus, schools assume participation is granted unless parents assertively state otherwise.

Regardless of the type of consent, parents must always be fully informed of how the training will be conducted and, if necessary, how their child will receive alternative methods for learning emergency procedures if they deem it is not in their child's best interest to participate. Again, an alternate form of preparation must be provided for students whose parents choose to opt their child out of any safety drill or related activity.

## PART IV: STEPS TO CONDUCTING SAFE, EFFECTIVE, AND APPROPRIATE DRILLS

1. Utilize the school and district SLT, ICS team, and the SCIT to plan for appropriate drills:
  - Include on the team an administrator, at least one school mental health professional (i.e., school psychologist, school counselor, school social worker), school nurse, general education teacher, special education teacher, SRO or security personnel, facilities/custodial staff, and IT representatives. A parent and student representative or a venue for parent and student input must be incorporated.
  - Identify a lead person to coordinate school safety efforts, including drills.
  - Establish and communicate the roles and responsibilities during drills and in real-life crises.
  - Identify the most appropriate preparedness activities for the school.
  - Provide ongoing professional development and training as needed.
  - Ensure that the school's policies comply with state laws and school board policies and are trauma-informed.
2. Assess the school community to:
  - Identify the types of crisis events most likely to occur.
  - Consider the current school culture and climate.
  - Identify the existing resources and capacities of school personnel or school SLTs, and identify any related policies that should be considered in the planning of drills.
  - Identify potential community trauma history.

3. Implement a cost–benefit analysis to:
  - Consider financial costs in relation to the likelihood and potential impact of a particular crisis.
  - Prioritize what resources, activities, or preparedness training must be conducted to address the crises identified by a vulnerability assessment (Nickerson et al., 2026).
  - Balance the need to empower school staff while minimizing potential harm to students and staff.
  - Consider the current knowledge and identified needs of the staff.
  - Consider requirements (e.g., state law, governing board policy) for conducting practice exercises. While many states have passed laws requiring drills preparing for active threats (i.e., armed assailants or active shooters), as well as lockdown drills, in some cases, these laws prohibit sensorial drills (e.g., *Cal. Educ. Code § 32289.6, 2024*; Rock, 2024).
4. Tailor drills to the context of the school environment, taking into consideration:
  - The primary goal of the drill (e.g., training for law enforcement versus staff and/or students)
  - Age, cognitive, physical, and developmental levels of awareness of students
  - Students and staff with access and functional needs (i.e., physical, sensory, or other disabilities) that may require unique instructions or accommodations during a drill or real-life event
  - The capacity, comfort level, and trust among staff
  - Administrative support
  - Timing, including time of year, day of the week, and time of the day
  - Relationships with external partners, law enforcement, and other first responders
  - The layout of the school building and campus
5. Create a plan of progression that
  - Considers whether any previous training activities have been conducted in the school
  - Starts with simple, low-cost, discussion-based exercises
  - Considers the full range of preparedness activities (e.g., orientations, tabletops, walkthroughs, drills)
    - Identifies specific objectives and goals for the drills
    - Identifies a timeline and metrics to help determine whether more complex exercises are needed
6. Prepare for the logistics of the drill to ensure that
  - Previous traumatic experiences of those involved are considered
  - School staff learn to recognize stressful reactions to drills
  - Methods exist to opt out (for staff and students) or remove someone from a drill, including parental consent/notification if students are involved
  - Methods exist for alternative education and preparation for students and staff who opt out of drills
  - School mental health professionals who are SCIT members are available to support those experiencing adverse reactions to the drill
  - Adequate follow-up is available for students or staff with questions
  - Appropriate methods to evaluate outcomes are implemented
7. Develop a communications plan that
  - Informs members of the school community of planned drills and what they will entail
  - Facilitates open communications with families, including translated materials and opportunities for family members to talk with relevant staff about concerns
  - Provides opt-out and alternative options for staff (as permitted by state law) and students
  - Encourages feedback and evaluation by participants after the fact
8. Establish a long-term follow-up plan to support sustainability that considers:
  - What additional training is required?
  - How does the drill integrate with vulnerability assessments, school safety plans, and crisis prevention efforts?
  - How can current and previous training and knowledge be maintained and built upon?
  - When should follow-up be conducted, and how often?

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## CONCLUSION

Training exercises and drills to prepare for active threats (also known as active shooters or other armed assailant drills) should be based on each school and community's specific needs and context. Schools must recognize that this type of drill is just one component of comprehensive crisis preparedness efforts that include crisis prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery (Louvar Reeves et al., 2019). Schools should consider the most cost-effective method of preparing students and staff for an active threat situation while balancing the physical and psychological risks associated with such drills. Regardless of the nature of the drills a school chooses, school SLTs, SROs, and SCITs must be integrally involved in the planning and evaluation process to ensure appropriate implementation. **Appendix 4 offers a list of questions to guide decision-making when considering drills for responding to active threats.** Lastly, schools must have a clearly defined evaluation process that identifies areas of strength and areas in need of improvement as the school community continues to refine ongoing comprehensive crisis preparedness and response plans.

## LIST OF APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: Hierarchy of Training and Education Activities
- Appendix 2: Considerations for Students With Access and Functional Needs
- Appendix 3: Developmental Considerations Associated With School Safety Procedures, Activities, and Drills
- Appendix 4: Questions to Ask When Considering Active Threat Training
- Appendix 5: Considerations for Conducting Active Threat Drills With Populations Who Have Trauma Histories
- Appendix 6: Considerations for Schools That Have Experienced Targeted Violence

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National Association of School Psychologists,  
[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

National Association of School Resource Officers,  
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Safe and Sound Schools, [www.safeandsoundschools.org](http://www.safeandsoundschools.org)

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## APPENDIX 1. HIERARCHY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING ACTIVITIES

Based upon an assessment of risk and preparedness priorities, crisis drills and exercises should be conducted in a progression of steps that begins with basic activities and, if needed, progresses to more advanced drills and exercises.

DISCUSSION-BASED EXERCISES		
	DESCRIPTION	ACTIVE THREAT TRAINING EXAMPLE
Introductions	Brief reviews of the school's crisis response procedures appropriate for all developmental levels (students as well as staff). Activities involve simply introducing and familiarizing the school community to professionals who will help them during a crisis, what they might look like, what they do, and what kinds of tools they carry as helpers.	Introduce students and staff to a police officer who would discuss (a) how they would keep students and teachers safe in the event of an armed assailant situation and (b) how the school can best support their actions.
Orientations	More involved and concrete reviews of the school's crisis response procedures, which can be made appropriate for all developmental levels. All students and staff should have some familiarity with all parts of the school campus, even (as indicated) with areas that are typically off limits during normal school days (such as the staff lounge, behind the front office counter, and other connecting halls and doors that may be needed for evacuation, lockdown, or shelter during an emergency).	Teachers use orientations when they tour the classroom and building with students or hold scavenger hunts to familiarize students with school exits, the location of the telephone, first aid materials, light switches, go bags <sup>a</sup> , and bathroom passes (all of which provide resources that may be needed in an active threat situation).  Building and campus field trips can be used to orient students and new staff members (including substitute teachers) to the layout of the school and campus.
Seminars/ Workshops	Instruct staff on safety protocols and crisis response procedures, and provide safety information in an objective and calm manner to children. Instructional media can also be used. It is critical when developing any materials for students that a multidisciplinary team is involved in developing the visual materials, representations, or dramatizations of emergency scenarios, and that there is agreement on the content and appropriateness of the material. Materials that may be appropriate for adult staff members will not be appropriate for younger students. Further, parents should be given the opportunity to preview these materials and allowed to opt their children out of such presentations.	Reading the students a storybook, telling a social script, or showing a video that incorporates crisis response messages. Appropriate for the active threat training would be messages linked to the so-called "stranger danger" or "unsafe person" concepts.

<p>Tabletops</p>	<p>Low-stress opportunities to talk through safety scenarios in small discussion groups. Tabletops may assign roles to each group member using a vignette, requiring them to cooperatively discuss, solve problems, and report back to the larger group. Tabletops can be used by crisis team leaders and teachers and are easily modified for a variety of developmental levels that can span from elementary-age children through to adult staff members.</p>	<p>Reading the students a storybook, telling a social script, or showing a video that incorporates crisis response messages. Appropriate for the active threat training would be messages linked to the so-called “stranger danger” or “unsafe person” concepts.</p> <p>Young children’s tabletops can be formatted like a game, such as “What Are Sammy’s Stay-Safe Choices?”</p> <p>Young adults can engage in more involved strategic discussions. A seated discussion format enables participants to brainstorm and solve problems in a small group, allowing mental preparation, improved awareness, active discussion, and evaluation of readiness for potential emergencies.</p>
<p>Walk-Throughs</p>	<p>A way to act out the steps or actions that might occur during an emergency. School crisis teams and local emergency professionals can conduct a joint walk-through to understand each other’s roles. This is not a timed or rushed activity. A walk-through can be thought of as a slow-motion drill, one that allows for questions and discussion along the way. Schools commonly use walk-throughs to prepare students for fire drills.</p>	<p>Students walk through or rehearse the actions they might take if a person entered the building who was a risk to their safety. They are given permission to ask questions. Evacuating to an off-campus evacuation site can also be practiced during this walk-through.</p>

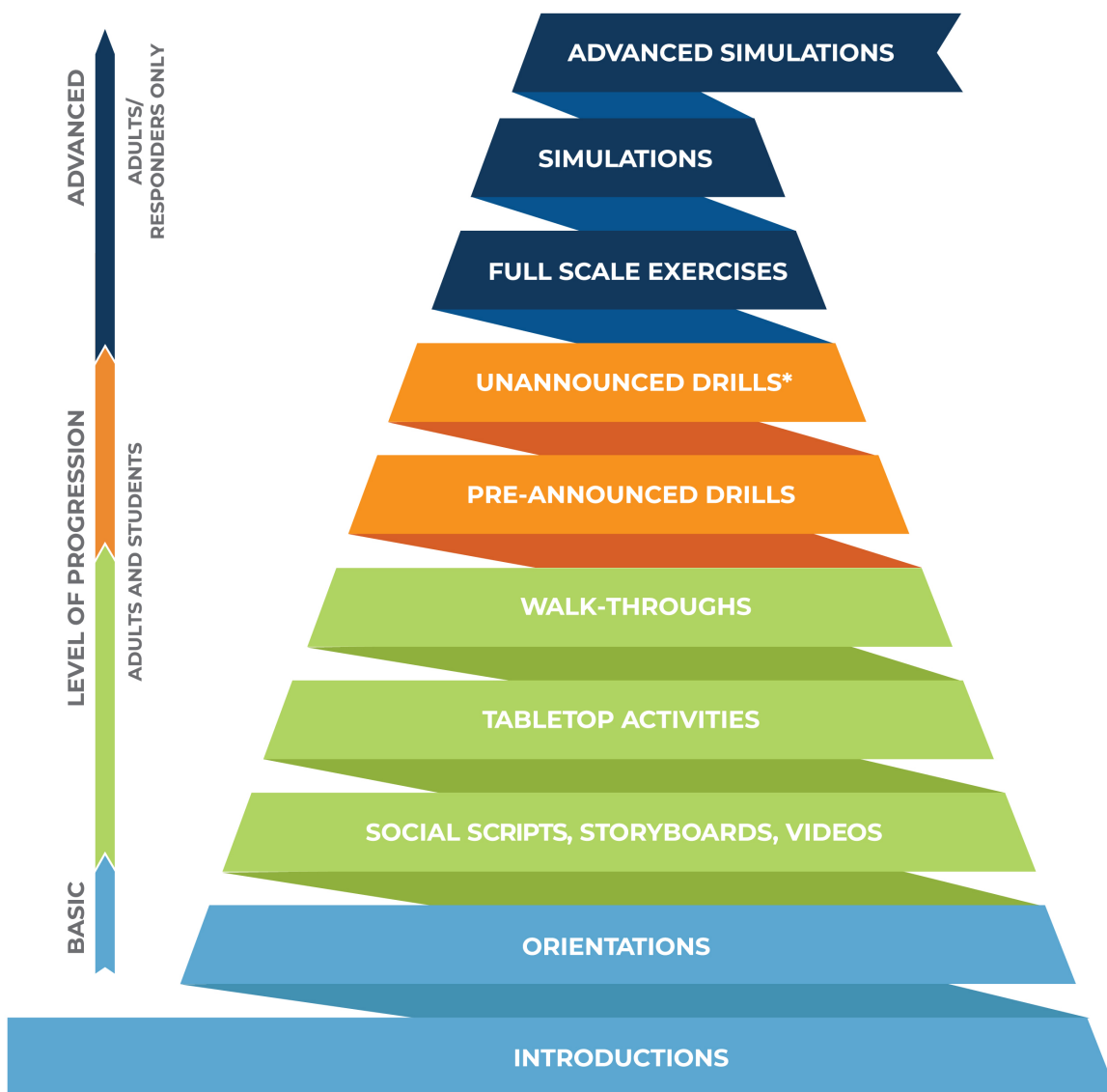
## DRILLS AND EXERCISES

	DESCRIPTION	ACTIVE THREAT TRAINING EXAMPLE
Preannounced Drills	This type of drill is an announced rehearsal of emergency responses and protocols, and it occurs in real time. All participants are notified that it is not a true emergency, and that the drill will occur at some point within a given time frame.	Active threat drills should be disclosed to all participants, as there is too much risk for students and staff to believe an unannounced drill is a real crisis, causing unnecessary fear or strong physical reactions to defend oneself. These drills should always be preceded by an announcement such as: "This is an emergency drill. It is not an actual emergency. This is a drill. We are now practicing our response for an unsafe person in the hallway; please lock down and take the appropriate actions." This should be practiced in a nonsensorial manner.
Unannounced Drills	We recommend against drills that take place without announcement or prior warning in order to rehearse real-time responses and protocols (e.g., lockdown, fire drill or earthquake drills).	Active threat drills should <b>never</b> be unannounced. Unannounced drills can cause unnecessary fear and strong emotional and physical reactions (e.g., students texting their parents saying they are going to die, jumping out of windows, mistaking—and potentially harming—a perceived attacker).
Full Scale Exercises	These exercises involve students, staff, and first responders practicing a variety of emergency protocols. They typically include multiple emergency response agencies (e.g., police, fire, paramedics, local emergency operations centers) and school district-level support. Multiple emergency response protocols are often practiced within a given exercise (e.g., evacuation, reunification, and threat- and hazard-specific protocols, such as bomb threat).	Full scale exercises typically involve school, police, fire, first responder, and community response agencies (including mental health). They are <b>options-based</b> trainings, which give participants permission to make independent decisions. The school district and first responder agencies plan the complexity of the scenario and advertise to students, staff, and the community the date of the exercise to avoid confusion and unnecessary stress.
Simulations	This training element can be part of a full-scale exercise. They involve simulated emergency conditions and stimuli to condition participants to the emergency environment, as well as to rehearse emergency response. They are designed for emergency responders and, as a rule, do not include students or staff. If nonemergency responders are included as role players, they need to volunteer and be carefully screened to ensure there is no trauma history for which the simulation experience could be a trauma activator. This intense exposure and practice may empower participants with experience, options, and a sense of control. However, this type of drill may be emotionally traumatic (Frosch, 2014), and participants have filed lawsuits with claims of physical and emotional harm.	The local police department assigns an officer to role-play an armed assailant who has entered the building. Actors may be told to scream to simulate real emotions, and a public announcement or electronic communications may involve graphic information and be delivered in a way that causes panic.

Advanced Simulations	The most advanced type of training exercises are the advanced simulations, which are designed for highly trained and often specialized emergency responders (e.g., a SWAT team). They simulate the unique emergency conditions and the stimuli encountered in an emergency. As with full-scale exercises, these exercises require careful planning, can be costly, and should be conducted in a manner that minimizes physical and psychological harm. These exercises should not include students or staff.	Advanced simulations might include specific armed assailant simulations that call for specialized skill sets, such as those possessed by a SWAT team.
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**Note.** Adapted from Hierarchy of Education and Training Activities (Gay, 2025).

<sup>a</sup> Go bag includes essential materials a classroom would take with it (e.g., student medications) if forced to evacuate.



**\*Although schools have historically conducted fire drills as unannounced in the past, we recommend conducting all safety drills with clear, prior announcement for consistency, safety, and to prevent potential trauma-impact.**

## APPENDIX 2: CONSIDERATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH ACCESS AND FUNCTIONAL NEEDS






When planning for active threat drills, it is critical that the school crisis planning team consider the unique needs of students, staff, and volunteers with access and functional needs. If available, the school ICS team should consider including a disability specialist as a member of the team or as a consultant when planning for these types of drills. School psychologists who are members of crisis teams can provide both mental health and disability expertise. There are several federal policies (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act; Individuals with Disabilities in Emergency Preparedness, Executive Order 13347; Individuals with Disabilities Act) that require public entities, including schools, to consider the needs of individuals with disabilities in any type of crisis preparedness training. Consideration for access and functional needs, as outlined in the teaching and training guide associated with the *Especially Safe* curriculum, includes (Gay, 2021):

- Transportation and mobility
- Emotional, mental, and behavioral health
- Auxiliary communication
- Medical health
- Security and supervision

Challenges to be addressed within individual safety plans include (but not an exhaustive list) physical disabilities that might impede mobility, access to instructions (e.g., hearing or sight impairment); sensory disabilities that might heighten a distress reaction or impede response to instruction (e.g., autism); or cognitive disabilities that might impede understanding a situation or instructions.



## TEAMS FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE SAFETY PLANNING

Support Category	Definition	Examples of Need
 <b>Transportation &amp; Mobility</b>	Accommodations necessary to support an individual's movement to safety, alternative location, or protective position during and after a crisis.	Individuals in wheelchairs (manual and electric), with crutches, requiring lift or stair equipment, medically fragile individuals, pregnant individuals, etc.
 <b>Emotional, Mental, &amp; Behavioral Health</b>	Accommodations, personnel, procedures, services, or specialized preparation required to ensure an individual's emotional well-being and behavioral health during a crisis.	Individuals with ADHD, sensory disorders, anxiety, emotional challenges, trauma history, PTSD, cognitive or intellectual impairment, etc.
 <b>Auxiliary Communication</b>	Accommodations, personnel, equipment, or specialized training required to assist an individual to receive, understand, and relay information during a crisis.	Individuals with speech or cognitive disabilities and impairments, visual impairment or blindness, deaf/hard of hearing, individuals who speak a language other than English.
 <b>Medical Health</b>	Medicine, medical care, specialized training, equipment, or medical protocols required to ensure an individual's safety during a crisis.	Individuals with medical conditions such as asthma, allergies, diabetes, medical fragility, seizure disorders, traumatic brain injury, physical injury or impairment, etc.
 <b>Security &amp; Supervision</b>	Additional equipment, training, protocols, and personnel are required to maintain accountability and security of an individual during and after a crisis.	Individuals for whom traditional lockdown presents a physical, sensory, or emotional challenge, those who cannot remain quiet or stationary, individuals who are known to elope (run away) or initiate self-evacuation in a crisis, etc.

Safe and Sound Schools' "*Especially Safe*" curriculum and training program (Gay, 2021) provides in-depth guidance on how to ensure emergency preparedness incorporates access and functional needs accommodations, and also provides guidance on developing individual safety plans. Additional resources are also listed below. School teams are also encouraged to consult district leaders to ensure compliance with local, state, and federal requirements.

### Reference

Gay, M. (2021). *Especially safe: An inclusive approach to preparedness in school settings*. Safe and Sound Schools. <https://www.safeandsoundschools.org/especially-safe>

## INDIVIDUAL SAFETY ACCOMMODATIONS AND SUPPORTS

Support Category	Examples of Need
 <b>Transportation &amp; Mobility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Procurement of relevant adaptive equipment and/or vehicles to facilitate safe transport (wheelchairs, sleds, stair chairs, etc.)</li> <li>• Staff training with adaptive equipment</li> <li>• Training and introduction opportunities for emergency responders and individuals</li> <li>• Additional practice opportunities for individual, assigned support staff, and emergency responders</li> </ul>
 <b>Emotional, Mental, &amp; Behavioral Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior preparation, instruction, and practice opportunities for required emergency procedures and activities (See companion Especially Safe Teaching &amp; Training Guide)</li> <li>• Identification and practice of calming/regulation strategies</li> <li>• Designated quiet spaces or separate locations for individual during emergency procedures such as lockdown, reunification, etc.</li> <li>• Cueing mechanisms, tools, or strategies to facilitate appropriate response/reduce stress when practicing/enacting emergency procedures</li> <li>• Comfort items such as books, headphones, fidgets, quiet toys, etc.</li> <li>• Staff training to support individual before, during and after emergency practice and crisis situations</li> </ul>
 <b>Auxiliary Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translation of emergency information via digital, auditory, pictorial, or braille signage</li> <li>• Use of lighted or vibrating alert systems</li> <li>• Augmentative communication device/technology</li> <li>• Signage and directions provided in individual's first language</li> <li>• Translators for individual and family members</li> <li>• Staff training in alternate/augmentative communication</li> </ul>
 <b>Medical Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal Go-Kit located on or near individual</li> <li>• Staff training for administration of medication, first aid, care, and monitoring of individual's medical condition</li> <li>• Staff training with required medical equipment or protocols for individual</li> <li>• Toilet accommodations/accessible restrooms</li> </ul>
 <b>Security &amp; Supervision</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designation of multiple, specific, securable locations for lockdown (lockable from inside with ADA/fire code compliant hardware) and shelter-in-place</li> <li>• Door open alarms, location monitoring devices for individuals who may elope/wander</li> <li>• Training for designated staff/personnel assigned to individuals at risk of elopement/wandering or with difficulty enacting lockdown</li> <li>• Use of service animals to deter and detect wandering</li> <li>• Designated quiet spaces or separate locations for individuals during emergency procedures such as lockdown, reunification, etc.</li> <li>• Additional practice opportunities for individual and assigned staff</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 3. DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL SAFETY PROCEDURES, ACTIVITIES, AND DRILLS

Schools must target crisis training activities to the developmental and awareness levels of students and also take into account the role and awareness levels of staff. Awareness levels are for general guidance purposes only. Individual awareness and capacity will vary depending on individual factors.

Awareness Levels	Developmental Levels	Developmentally Typical Knowledge/Understanding	Developmentally Typical Capabilities	Developmentally Appropriate Safety Explanations/Activities
<i>Early Awareness</i>	<i>Preschool–Kindergarten Students</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate basic understanding of “danger.”</li> <li>• Require adult guidance to determine what is, and is not, dangerous.</li> <li>• Have difficulty distinguishing probable dangers from all possible dangers, and between reality and fantasy.</li> <li>• Understand:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Get Out” or evacuate;</li> <li>▪ “Hide Out” or stay out of sight with lights off;</li> <li>▪ “Keep Out” (i.e., that adults will lock and barricade classroom doors to keep danger out and students safe).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependent on adult management and direction during emergencies.</li> <li>• Able to follow basic safety directions (e.g., “Get-Out” or evacuate; and “Hide Out” or stay out of sight with lights off).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain that adults at school work hard to keep school safe.</li> <li>• Offer concrete examples of common dangers that adults address (e.g., a stray dog on campus and not knowing if it is a good or sick dog).</li> <li>• Use the word safety when describing/conducting drills (e.g., use “Get Out Safety Drill” to describe an evacuation).</li> <li>• Practice following atypical adult directions associated with elements of safety drills (e.g., during art, ask students to quickly line up at the door).</li> <li>• Conduct “Get Out” and “Hide Out” safety drills.</li> </ul>
<i>Developing Awareness</i>	<i>Early Elementary Students</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate evolving understanding of “danger.”</li> <li>• Require some adult guidance to determine what is, and is not, dangerous.</li> <li>• Have difficulty distinguishing probable dangers from all possible dangers, and may have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy.</li> <li>• Understand: “Get Out,” “Hide Out,” and “Keep Out.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need adult management and direction during emergencies.</li> <li>• Able to follow basic safety directions.</li> <li>• Can provide assistance with simple safety tasks in an emergency (e.g., following adult direction to turn off lights, close blinds).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain that teachers and school staff members always work to keep school safe.</li> <li>• Offer concrete examples of common dangers that adults address.</li> <li>• Use the word safety when describing/conducting drills.</li> <li>• Practice following atypical adult directions associated with elements of safety drills.</li> <li>• Conduct “Get Out” (evacuations) and “Hide Out” (lockdown) safety drills.</li> </ul>

<b>Awareness Levels</b>	<b>Developmental Levels</b>	<b>Developmentally Typical Knowledge/Understanding</b>	<b>Developmentally Typical Capabilities</b>	<b>Developmentally Appropriate Safety Explanations/Activities</b>
<i>Practiced Awareness</i>	<i>Upper Elementary Students</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require limited adult guidance to determine what is, and is not, dangerous.</li> <li>• May have some difficulty distinguishing probable dangers from all possible dangers.</li> <li>• Capable of understanding why school safety drills are conducted.</li> <li>• Understand all safety directions and instructions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need adult direction during emergencies.</li> <li>• Able to follow all safety directions and instructions.</li> <li>• Can assist with many safety tasks during an emergency (e.g., following adult direction to turn off lights, closing blinds and doors, moving furniture, barricading doors, calling 911).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain that teachers and school staff members always work to keep school safe.</li> <li>• Offer examples of common dangers that adults address.</li> <li>• Teach the difference between possible dangers and common dangers.</li> <li>• Use the word safety when describing/conducting drills.</li> <li>• Conduct “Get Out” (evacuation), “Hide Out” (lockdown), and “Keep Out” (barricade) safety drills.</li> </ul>
<i>Proficient Awareness</i>	<i>Intermediate, Junior High, and Middle School Students</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have all <i>Practiced Awareness</i> knowledge and understanding.</li> <li>• Able to distinguishing probable dangers from all possible dangers.</li> <li>• Capable of understanding why school safety drills are conducted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefit from adult direction, but able to perform practiced actions independently during emergencies.</li> <li>• Can assist with most safety tasks during an emergency.</li> <li>• May or may not demonstrate the ability to disrupt the actions of an intruder.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in discussions regarding the need for school safety procedures.</li> <li>• Allow students to generate examples of common dangers that school safety procedures are designed to address (verify understanding of the difference between probable and possible dangers).</li> <li>• Use the word safety when describing/conducting drills.</li> <li>• Conduct evacuation and lockdown safety drills.</li> <li>• If indicated, conduct options-based safety drills (e.g., drills wherein the option to lockdown, barricade, evacuate, or fight back/encounter are considered).</li> </ul>

<b>Awareness Levels</b>	<b>Developmental Levels</b>	<b>Developmentally Typical Knowledge/Understanding</b>	<b>Developmentally Typical Capabilities</b>	<b>Developmentally Appropriate Safety Explanations/Activities</b>
<i>Independent Awareness</i>	<i>High School Students, Adult Students, and Volunteers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have all <i>Proficient Awareness</i> knowledge and understanding.</li> <li>• Have knowledge of a range of emergency safety actions and can match them to the appropriate situation (e.g., know the situations that require evacuation versus lockdown).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefit from adult direction, but able to perform practiced actions independently during emergencies.</li> <li>• Able to help identify probable dangers confronting a school.</li> <li>• Able to assist in the development of school safety protocols.</li> <li>• Able to appropriately adapt safety actions to a range of dangers.</li> <li>• Can assist with all safety tasks during an emergency.</li> <li>• May or may not demonstrate ability to disrupt the actions of an intruder.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in discussions regarding the need for school safety procedures.</li> <li>• Engage in discussions regarding the specific types of school safety procedures required at a given school.</li> <li>• Use the word safety when describing/conducting drills.</li> <li>• Conduct evacuation and lockdown safety drills.</li> <li>• If indicated, conduct options-based safety drills.</li> </ul>
<i>Advanced Awareness</i>	<i>Professionally Trained School Staff Members</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have all <i>Independent Awareness</i> knowledge and understanding.</li> <li>• Have knowledge of the probable dangers confronting a given school.</li> <li>• Have detailed knowledge of all school emergency safety protocols.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to identify probable dangers confronting a school.</li> <li>• Able to develop school safety protocols.</li> <li>• Able to direct student safety actions and leading others in an emergency.</li> <li>• Capable of independent decision making during an emergency.</li> <li>• Have first aid training and skills.</li> <li>• May or may not demonstrate the ability to disrupt the actions of an intruder.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct threat assessments to identify the specific dangers specific schools confront.</li> <li>• Engage in conversations about the specific school safety protocols needed.</li> <li>• From threat assessment data, develop specific school safety protocols.</li> <li>• Engage in advanced training in the selected school safety protocols.</li> <li>• Engage in first aid training.</li> <li>• Practice managing and directing the selected school safety protocols (e.g., conduct evacuation, lockdown, and options-based safety drills).</li> </ul>

<b>Awareness Levels</b>	<b>Developmental Levels</b>	<b>Developmentally Typical Knowledge/Understanding</b>	<b>Developmentally Typical Capabilities</b>	<b>Developmentally Appropriate Safety Explanations/Activities</b>
<i>Professional Awareness</i>	<i>First Responders and School Safety Professionals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have all <i>Advanced Awareness</i> knowledge and understanding.</li> <li>• Have knowledge of tactical responses and counterattack measures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capable of high-level decision-making during an emergency.</li> <li>• Trained and equipped to provide tactical response and counterattack measures to protect self and others in an emergency.</li> <li>• Trained and equipped to provide advanced emergency medical assistance to others.</li> <li>• Have the ability to disrupt the actions of an intruder.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a process to screen potential school-based law enforcement officer's decision-making ability in high stress events.</li> <li>• Provide training in specific tactics for confronting and ending an active shooter event.</li> <li>• First responders should be trained in tactical first-aid strategies.</li> </ul>

**Note.** Adapted from Developmental Levels of Safety Awareness (Gay, 2025).

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## APPENDIX 4: QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CONSIDERING ACTIVE THREAT TRAINING

### Emergency Operations Plan Development/Revision

1. How does this fit into a comprehensive school emergency operations plan (EOP)?
2. Have all relevant interest-holders been consulted and involved in reviewing possible programs/approaches?
  - a. Superintendent and district leadership staff
  - b. Law enforcement (district and community law enforcement agencies; school resource officers)
  - c. District safety and security officers
  - d. Mental health professionals (school psychologists, counselors, and social workers)
  - e. Health services
  - f. Principals and teachers
  - g. Parents and students (as age appropriate)
  - h. School board members
  - i. District legal representation
  - j. District insurance company
3. Is this supported by a vulnerability/site assessment that determined the most likely crises to occur given the location and vulnerabilities of the school (i.e., near a train track that carries hazardous materials, winter weather conditions, science lab with chemicals)?
4. Has a cost-benefit analysis of the potential training been done, considering financial costs in relation to the likelihood of a particular crisis?
5. What evidence is there that the procedures being considered have been evaluated for effectiveness?
6. What evidence is there that the procedures are aligned with the guidelines of the U.S. Department of Education et al. (2013) and allied professional organizations (National Association of School Psychologists, National Association of School Resource Officers, Safe and Sound Schools)? Note: The U.S. Department of Education does not mandate school districts to conduct armed assailant/active shooter exercises. Furthermore, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2025) advocate against high-intensity, hyperrealistic, or sensorial drills involving students and staff.
7. Are the procedures in compliance with state laws and school board policies?

### Designing and Selecting the Types of Threat- and Hazard-Specific Exercises and Drills

1. Does the training teach multiple types of response protocols to respond to an active threat scenario (e.g., lockdown, evacuation) and the special considerations before making a decision on response protocol (e.g., to evacuate, need to know the location of the threat to ensure not evacuating toward the threat)?
2. Does it follow a hierarchy from simple, low-cost, discussion-based activities to operations-based activities?
  - a. Orientations
  - b. Workshops
  - c. Tabletops
  - d. Drills
  - e. Advanced simulation drills and exercises (adults only)
3. Have the readiness and trauma histories of the staff members and students been assessed before determining what drills are most appropriate?
4. How will substitute teachers be informed of response protocols and actions to be taken? How will they be notified of drills? How will their own vulnerabilities be assessed and opt-out provided, if necessary?
5. How will the types of drills to use with students be selected? Was multidisciplinary team input obtained?
6. What accommodations will be made in the drills for students, staff, and volunteers with access and functional needs?
7. If simulations are to be used with carefully selected and willing staff and student actors, has the district consulted with their legal team and insurance provider to identify possible risks and liabilities (i.e., there have been lawsuits filed by school staff for physical injuries and emotional trauma as a result of forced participation in armed assailant/active shooter exercises)?
8. Have memoranda of understanding be established with cooperating agencies outlining roles, responsibilities, and coverage of costs, to include any damage that may be done as a result of drills and simulations?

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## Designing Student Instruction

1. Is there a lesson plan for providing developmentally appropriate training for students?
2. Are instructional experts and school mental health professionals involved in designing and implementing developmentally appropriate curricula for elementary, middle, and high school students?
3. Does the plan identify potential training goals, objectives, measurable outcomes, and obstacles?
4. What accommodations will be made in the lessons for students with access and functional needs?
5. How will teachers receive critical background information, including:
  - a. Considerations for students with trauma histories, physical, sensory, or other disabilities
  - b. Developmental guidelines for instruction and drills (i.e., typical knowledge/understanding; typical response capabilities; age-appropriate explanations, procedures, activities, and drills)
  - c. Recognizing common trauma reactions to help identify when a student, fellow staff member, or oneself needs to be removed from a drill
  - d. Identifying someone who needs mental health support before, during, or after the drill
  - e. As indicated, use of calming strategies, before, during, and after the drill

## Physical and Mental Health Considerations

1. Does the training balance the need to empower school staff while minimizing potential harm (e.g., minimizing the activation of stress or trauma reactions)?
2. What are the considerations to mitigate potential physical and emotional harm during drills?
3. What financial and medical support are available to address potential physical damage during the drills?
4. What are the mental health supports to mitigate potential psychological harm, such as identifying prior traumatic experiences in participants?
5. What emotional supports will be in place during and after drills for students and staff?

## Opt Out Options

1. How can students or staff members opt out of drills or simulations?
2. If staff or students opt out, how will they receive comparable instruction?
3. How will volunteers be notified of drill practice, and also have the ability to opt out?

## Communication

1. What is the parent and community education and communication plan prior to implementing the training?
2. What is the parent and community education and communication plan whenever drills are conducted?
3. How will parents and the community receive communication during an actual active threat crisis?

## Evaluation

1. What is the feedback and evaluation process from participants and parents?
2. How will the knowledge and training be maintained and built upon?
3. How will new staff members and students be trained?
4. What is the evaluation process for determining the efficacy of the training and assessing ongoing or changing preparedness training needs?

## Resources

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2025). *School active shooter drills: Mitigating risks to mental, emotional, and behavioral health*. <https://doi.org/10.17226/29105>

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students. (2013). *Guide for developing high-quality school emergency operations plans (K-12)*. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oshs/rem-s-k-12-guide.pdf>

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## APPENDIX 5: CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING ACTIVE THREAT DRILLS WITH POPULATIONS WHO HAVE TRAUMA HISTORIES

The following are special considerations when conducting emergency drills with individuals who have trauma histories. This includes minimizing retraumatization, using developmentally appropriate language, and ensuring a supportive environment.

### Trauma-Informed Approach

- Awareness: Recognize the impact of trauma on individuals' responses to stress and fear.
- Safety and Trust: Create a safe and supportive environment by being respectful, compassionate, and patient.
- Avoid Activators: Identify and minimize potential stimuli such as loud noises, realistic simulations, or language that may remind you of prior trauma experience.
- Clear and Calm Communication: Provide clear, direct, and developmentally appropriate instructions.
- Empowerment: Allow individuals to make their own choices and participate to the extent they feel comfortable.
- Choice and Control: Offer choices and allow for control in the situation whenever possible.
- Collaborative Planning: Involve individuals, families, and relevant professionals in the planning and execution of the drills. Drills should never be unannounced, particularly with this population.
- Deescalation: Utilize trauma-informed deescalation techniques and anxiety-reducing calming strategies when needed.

### Specific Drill Considerations

- Minimize Simulation: Nonsensorial drills (discussion-based) should be used; simulations should be avoided as sensorial stimuli can serve as a reminder for prior traumas.
- Language: Use developmentally appropriate language, avoid alarming terms (e.g., AR-15), and explain the drill in a calm and reassuring manner.
- Structure and Sequencing: Start with simpler, less overwhelming drills (discussion-based) and gradually increase complexity as appropriate (nonsensorial walk-through practice).
- Pre-drill Preparation: Prepare individuals with a clear explanation of the drill, its purpose, and what to expect.

### Training and Practice on the Specific Response Strategies

- Postdrill Support: Provide opportunities for debriefing, processing emotions, and reinforcing positive coping mechanisms.
- Extra Support: Ensure adequate mental health support is available during and after the drill, including access to trained professionals.
- Buddy System: Encourage anxious individuals to "buddy up" with those who are calmer and more focused.
- Coping Strategies: Remind individuals of their coping strategies and provide resources if needed.
- Ongoing Monitoring: Continue to monitor individuals for signs of distress in the days following the drill.
- Respect for Individual Differences: Acknowledge that individuals respond to trauma differently and adjust responses accordingly.

### Professional Collaboration

- Mental Health Experts: Involve mental health professionals in the planning and execution of drills to ensure trauma-informed practices.
- Collaboration With Families: Work with families to understand individual needs and preferences.
- Ongoing Training: Provide ongoing training to staff on trauma-informed care and practices. Remember the four Rs:
  1. *Realize* the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths to resilience and resistance.
  2. *Recognize* signs and symptoms of toxic stress and trauma in participants during all phases of engagement.
  3. *Empower* individuals and communities to respond to toxic stress and trauma by providing foundational knowledge about trauma.
  4. *Avoid* perpetuating or worsening trauma through actions, language, or systems by selecting approaches that actively resist retraumatization.

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## APPENDIX 6: CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOLS THAT HAVE EXPERIENCED TARGETED VIOLENCE

Following a tragedy, it may not be appropriate for an impacted school to continue with its regular schedule of drills, especially in the first year. Additionally, some alterations to the drill procedures may be needed to minimize the traumatic impact. The following considerations can help guide schools after experiencing targeted violence:

### 1. Plan for modifications to drill procedures.

- Start with discussion-based and tabletop exercises, moving on to drills only when students and staff are ready. It can be helpful for the administrator to walk staff and students through their first discussion-based training via the intercom. The administrator must have a calm and reassuring demeanor. This helps take the pressure off the teacher/staff in case discussing the protocols is still overwhelming.
- If state law mandates specific types or numbers of drills per year, consider requesting an exemption to allow modifications/alternate training methods. For instance, one district opted not to conduct any practice drills for the year following; instead, it discussed the protocols.
- Meet with community responders to discuss a trauma-informed approach for practicing response protocols.
- Change the sound of the emergency alert to distinguish it from the original sound when the tragedy occurred.
- Ensure that staff who were impacted by the targeted violence are not required to teach the emergency protocol (or have someone else in the room while teaching/practicing).
- Do not conduct a drill during the same period during which the violent incident occurred.

### 2. Provide communication and support.

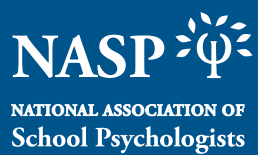
- Before holding a drill, ensure students and staff know where to access support if they become overwhelmed during the drill (e.g., a comfort room). Preteach and practice coping and calming strategies.
- Complete a community circle after the drill to talk about the experience and allow opportunities for students to provide feedback to facilitate improvement.
- Utilize a trauma recovery coordinator to plan for and be present during drills. Schools that have experienced a tragedy are assigned a trauma recovery coordinator via the National Mass Violence Center.
- Inform teachers that students may miss instruction if they require support after a drill.
- Hold information sessions for parents to review what drills are required by law, what trauma-informed approaches will be employed, and what alternative options exist for their child to receive training.
- Provide parents with information on how to report concerns before or after a drill, so appropriate modifications can be made.

### 3. Discuss security measures.

- If a school employs new security measures (i.e., night locks, door barriers) after the incident, talk through and practice using the tools (in a nonsensorial way) so staff and, if age appropriate, students feel confident using them.
- Take proactive measures to increase the sense of security. For example, SROs may make rounds daily to ensure required doors are locked.

### 4. Address the extended impact.

- When other subsequent events occur that are trauma activators, ensure mental health supports are available.
- Consider how to document trauma exposure so schools are aware as the students move through the upper grade levels—those schools need to engage a trauma-informed approach.
- If first responders live in the community, their children might have also been vicariously impacted, so coordination with their schools may be needed.
- District-level accountability measures should ensure all schools utilize a trauma-informed approach.



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