

School Social Work

Personal Safety

Guidelines

When Conducting

School Business

in the Community



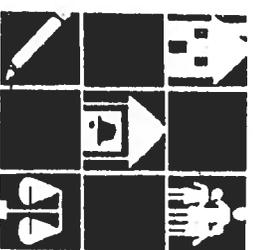
Personal Safety

Incidents reported in local and national media have brought a heightened awareness of violence and the potential for victimization in school and community environments. School social work has a long history of conducting community outreach activities to students, families, and resource providers. Thus, personal safety issues are of increasing concern to school social workers and their administrators.

The School Social Work Association of America offers the following personal safety precautions as preventive measures to assist school social workers and other educational personnel in avoiding problems and increasing their awareness of actions promoting personal safety. Guidelines can not be constructed to address every conceivable situation, therefore school social workers are urged to rely on individual and professional judgment as the best assurance for promoting personal safety in any situation.

Before You Leave

- Always inform a responsible school employee, such as an administrator or secretary, of your destination(s) and anticipated time of return. Maintain and leave a readily accessible schedule including names, addresses and telephone numbers (if available) where you can be reached.
- Leave a complete and detailed itinerary with your office.
- Confirm appointments ahead of time to remind the person you are about to visit.
- Obtain clear directions to your destination and keep current city and county maps in your car.
- Research and utilize the safest route. If you get lost, do not make it obvious. Be very discreet and careful when asking directions.
- Conduct visits with another school staff member when you have reason to believe that personal safety may be at risk.



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- Arrange for the school to maintain your car license plate number and description if you use your vehicle for conducting community contacts.
- Carry a pre-programmed cellular telephone with you if at all possible and set your quick dial options to include 911.
- Request nearby police surveillance if you think a significant degree of risk may be present.

Walking

The immediate surroundings hold a wealth of obvious and subtle clues to an observant individual. Traveling on foot in a new or less frequented environment can, in and of itself, cause a person to feel less comfortable.

- Be actively aware of your surroundings.
- Always appear confident and purposeful.
- Carry keys and money in a pocket rather than in a purse or wallet.
- Ignore individual(s) who verbally harass you and immediately distance yourself from them.
- Turn around and make it obvious to anyone you sense following you that you are aware of their presence. Immediately move to a less isolated area where other people are present.
- Call your office to announce a safe arrival at each destination, if possible.

Driving

Traveling in a vehicle can provide a false sense of security especially when driving in a new or less frequented environment. It is even more important to practice safe driving habits under these conditions.

- Drive with the doors locked and the windows closed, whenever practical. Lock doors prior to leaving school property.
- Keep wallets, purses, and any other valuables out of view.

- Remain in your vehicle if someone "bumps" you from behind. Motion to the other driver to follow you to a police station.

- Park in open areas, routinely check for suspicious persons in the area before exiting your vehicle, and always lock all doors as you exit.

- Call your office to announce a safe arrival at each destination, if possible.

- Be prepared to unlock the driver's door by placing the car key firmly in your hand prior to returning to your vehicle.

- Look underneath your vehicle while approaching it. Walk around the exterior of your vehicle checking both the front and rear seats for intruders before entering. Lock the doors prior to departing.

Assessing Danger

School social workers are trained to be sensitive to and aware of the social dynamics of various social situations. Trust your instincts and apply this skill in unfamiliar or new situations.

- Avoid locations and buildings that appear unsafe. Those that are dark, isolated and obstructed or where individuals are loitering and/or disorderly should not be entered.
- Avoid family owned or neighborhood dogs. Ask the family to put their pet in another room or ask to keep the pet leashed.
- Identify yourself readily as a school employee conducting school business. Offer your school business card or identification card.
- Avoid moralizing, resorting to blame, and/or presenting ultimatums. State your purpose clearly. Always leave an "out" for the other individual(s).
- Share information in a respectful, sensitive manner. As a school employee, you are a guest in their environment. Remember that many individuals and families you work with are experiencing considerable emotional stress and that you may be

relaying information which will increase their level of stress.

- When encountering a parent or other person who appears under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, advise the individual(s) that you will contact them at another time and leave your school business card and/or telephone number. Try to remain between the exit and the individual.
- Be especially cautious when contacting individuals who have a previous known history of violent or criminal behavior. Strongly consider interacting by telephone, in a public location (such as a mall, coffee shop, or place of employment), and/or asking another school staff person to accompany you. Where possible, sit between the client and the exit doorway.
- Do not enter a known drug house. When an emergency arises at school, such as a sick or injured student, school employees should attempt to conduct the necessary interactions/notifications by telephone. When telephone access is not available, the school system should have a policy delineating proper procedures to follow.
- Reschedule your business when you find yourself in a potentially unprofessional and/or compromising situation. For example, persons are not fully clothed or when confidentiality can not be ensured.
- Listen and observe attentively when encountering an individual who states and/or indicates that you are unwelcome. Do not argue or insist on a visit.

Working With Agitated Persons

The following behaviors can help in calming a distraught and/or agitated individual during your interactions.

- Remain calm and observant. Attend to reducing your own fears and stay in control of your emotions.
- Be aware of your body language and personal space needs of the client.

Agitated or potentially violent persons should not have their personal space threatened or violated. Even if your intentions are good, moving closer may raise the person's level of anxiety. Being closer than 2-3 feet, even in nonthreatening situations, is generally uncomfortable.

- Request the upset individual to be seated or remain seated. Locate yourself between the person and the exit doorway, and at eye level with the agitated individual.
- Have your cell phone easily accessible in case you need to call 911.
- Speak clearly and directly regarding your intended reason for interacting with the agitated individual. Avoid language which could in any way be construed as argumentative, demanding, or demeaning. Do not touch the agitated individual.
- Speak clearly and respectfully utilizing a low, calming tone of voice. Ask the distraught individual to speak clearly and at a normal pace so that he/she can be understood. Do not patronize the individual.
- When the level of agitation becomes personally threatening, focus the remainder of the interaction on the immediate problem. Alter your original agenda as needed.
- Listen attentively and respectfully allowing the distressed individual to talk. Clearly communicate that your desire is to help the person solve problem(s) which are upsetting them.
- Terminate your interactions if the distraught individual remains in an agitated state or becomes increasingly agitated, uncooperative, verbally abusive, threatening, or displays a weapon. Exit promptly if any such circumstance arises and immediately report the situation to your supervisor and/or school security personnel, and local law enforcement when needed.

If You Are Victimized

Experience dictates that it is extremely unlikely that a school employee will be victimized while conducting official school business. In the unlikely event that you are victimized or threatened you should act quickly to do the following:

- Access emergency medical services when necessary.
- Report the incident to local law enforcement and your supervisor and/or school security personnel.
- Document the incident thoroughly including the interactions, time, place and individual(s) involved as soon as possible. Complete written documentation is essential for accurate recall and any potential law enforcement action.

Guidelines When Providing Transportation Assistance on the Job

At times, transporting student and/or families by car has been an expected and encouraged school social work service. Unfortunately in today's climate of litigation transporting students can put the school social worker in jeopardy. SSWAA believes school social workers need to be aware of possible legal ramifications and make an informed decision before agreeing to transport students and/or families as a part of school employment. SSWAA recommends the following steps be taken by school social workers who provide occasional transportation assistance for students and others.

If providing transportation is expected on the job, then:

- Child and parent transportation expectations should be addressed in job descriptions and in collective bargaining agreements (when applicable). The purpose is to protect the school social worker.

- The LEA should provide liability insurance specifically covering employee transportation of students and others. School social workers should periodically review their district's policy.

- School social workers should contact their personal auto insurance carrier to determine the extent of liability coverage for accidents which may occur when providing transportation while on the job.
- If the school social worker has professional liability insurance through the employer or by individual purchase, a statement regarding transportation liability coverage should be obtained from that insurance provider.

If providing transportation is not expected on the job, then:

- School social workers should check with the employing LEA to find out if providing transportation violates any LEA rule, regulation, policy or practice.
- School social workers should contact their personal auto insurance carrier to determine the extent of liability coverage for accidents which may occur when providing transportation while on the job.

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