CALIFORNIA - An audience of educators and law enforcement officials received tips on how to spot students who may have violent tendencies toward others or themselves during this year's security conference at California University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Emily Sweitzer, who teaches in Cal U's Department of Justice, Law and Society and is a former school psychologist, said knowing a child's history is a vital part of evaluating any threat. Sweitzer said that while there is no clear profile of classroom shooters because of the relatively small number of cases, they do share some common characteristics.

"Most of them have witnessed some violent event that qualifies them for post traumatic stress disorder," Sweitzer said. She said most have a high IQ, allowing them to prepare a detailed plan effectively. Most are not psychotic. And most have some serious family maladjustment.

"The difficult part with that one is, it's not readily visible," Sweitzer said.

Sweitzer said the students who carry out school shootings can be divided into two groups: shooters and avengers. She said shooters tend to have uncontrolled anger and depression and blame others for their problems.

"Even when the truth is confronting them, they continue to blame others. They make threats of violence and these should be taken seriously. They often have a detailed plan," Sweitzer said. "They are isolated and rejected by their peers and that is by their own behavior. They want to rectify their perceived wrongs. Violent tendencies are always clearly communicated. They take this assignment seriously."

Avengers, she said, are not as overt about their anger.

"They are overwhelmingly depressed and overwhelmingly suicidal," Sweitzer said.

Sweitzer said the avengers generally are kids who aren't found in the principal's office. Discipline by a parent or school official may precede and precipitate their violent action.

Sweitzer said the student's intense friction with their parents will be seen in their journals, blogs, drawings and locker decorations, though not necessarily in their behavior.

"They have no history of delinquency. Remember, they are flying under the radar," Sweitzer said.

Sweitzer said the avengers generally have been exposed to a stressor two weeks to 24 hours prior to acting out.

"If you have a disciplinary action against someone you don't normally see, keep an eye on them," Sweitzer said.

Sweitzer said students who have carried out school shootings have usually communicated their intentions to someone else prior to the incident, but the warning went unreported.

Sam Lonich, who chairs the Psychology Department at Cal U, treats suicidal children.

"We're looking at aggression turned inward," Lonich said of suicide.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents, with significant increases in the suicide rate for children ages 10-14 since 1981. Firearms are the leading method of choice in the adolescent suicides, with hanging a close second. Lonich said that in 2007 17 percent of all high school students in America said they had thought about killing themselves.

"The more an individual thinks about committing suicide, the more likely they are to do it, even if they haven't formulated a plan," Lonich said.

Lonich said students in 9th grade have the most suicide attempts, teen pregnancies and problems with alcohol. He said they are dealing with physiological and social changes while facing new academic pressures and concerns for their future and the fear that life is only going to get worse.

"What we are asking our kids to do from a very young age is to use coping skills they really don't have. By ninth grade, they're on emotional overload," Lonich said.

Lonich said people with a strong social network tend not to commit suicide. The demographic group with the lowest suicide rate is elderly African American women. Lonich said that is because they tend to have a strong religious background and an extended family.

"Since we know firearms are the primary means of adolescent suicide, there is a move to limit access. Let me tell you, that works. Teens are very rigid. If the use of firearms is the means and that means is limited, they aren't that creative. Don't automatically assume they will shift to another plan. It doesn't necessarily work like that," Lonich said.

Lonich said 35 percent of the children who commit suicide do so within 24 hours of a crisis.

"A crisis to them may be an argument with mom or dad, failing a test, not making a team or breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. They are impulsive," Lonich said.

Lonich said schools need to teach social skills and both parents and teachers need to be better educated on developmental stages and what to expect of children at each of those stages in order to better equip children to deal with stress without hopelessness.