

## School Consultation

Health professionals can enhance child and adolescent health by interacting with school personnel in a variety of ways. Collaboration may range from communicating about a particular student to providing direct care or consultation at school. The number of school-based health centers, where health professionals provide on-site care, has increased dramatically over the last 25 years from less than 100 in the early 1980s to approximately 1,400 currently (Friedrich, 1999; Center for Health and Health Care in Schools, 2001). Approximately one-third to one-half of all visits to school-based health centers are related to mental health problems. Effective collaboration requires an understanding of the framework in which consultation will occur, and the development of consultation skills.

### UNDERSTANDING THE FRAMEWORK

Several key questions can help clarify a school's expectations for consultation.

- What is the school seeking from the health professional?
  - Input regarding a specific student, such as information about specific needs or illnesses, recommendations to improve a student's health, reassurance about safety concerns (see discussion of confidentiality below).
  - Consultation about broader concerns, such as advice regarding school health policies, education about particular health concerns (e.g., adolescent pregnancy, depression).
- Who will be involved in the consultation, and to whom will the health professional report?
  - Knowledge of the school's organizational structure is useful in avoiding potential areas of conflict and developing possible solutions (e.g., knowing which school personnel to approach to access school resources to meet a child's or adolescent's needs). Health professionals may work with a number of school personnel including school administrators, regular classroom teachers, special education teachers, school nurses, social workers, and school psychologists.
  - An awareness of the needs and interests of all parties involved in the consultation facilitates the development of effective interventions.

- What are the relevant ethical or legal issues?
  - Confidentiality of students and school professionals should be preserved.
  - When information needs to be shared, appropriate consent should be obtained.
- How can school personnel be empowered to address pertinent questions?
  - Encourage school professionals to consider relevant biological, psychological, environmental, and social factors for each student. School professionals may need help in identifying and understanding these factors.
  - Facilitate school professionals' efforts to develop a solution rather than having an outside party "fix" the problem.

### DEVELOPING SCHOOL CONSULTATION SKILLS

The following approaches can be helpful in consulting with school personnel:

- Develop a collaborative approach.
  - Assess what school personnel perceive as the problem. Appreciate their point of view. Recognize that they may be under numerous and sometimes competing pressures from school officials, parents, cost constraints, and state testing standards.
  - Remember that the primary function of schools is to educate children and adolescents. Placing your efforts in the context of helping the

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school to facilitate the child's or adolescent's ability to learn is a useful perspective.

- Always ask questions to gather further information and also to convey that you are attempting to understand all of the complexities of a given situation.
- Work with school professionals to collaborate on solving problems rather than issuing directives.
- When proposing interventions, adopt an approach that decreases potential resistance, for example:
  - "You've probably already tried or thought about . . ." (acknowledges effort made by the school professionals).
  - "This may be difficult to try, but . . ." (decreases fear of personal failure, and encourages school professionals to surpass expectations).
- Empower school professionals and support their abilities to handle concerns.
  - Validate school professionals' perceptions before proposing solutions.
  - Cultivate respect for everyone in the school system, including students, parents, teachers, support staff, and administrators.
  - Build connections among school personnel and among other community resources.
- Help school professionals recognize where they may be getting "stuck."
  - Help others see the student differently. Frame the problem so that school personnel can understand, empathize, and work with the student (e.g., a student who skips school to avoid feeling humiliated in class).
  - Explore where good intentions went awry. "Backtracking" to a well-intentioned effort made by a student, parent, or teacher, even if the effort led to a negative outcome, can clarify

important underlying issues and help identify alternative solutions. For example, a student who cheats on an exam because he fears doing poorly in class would benefit from recognition that he desires a good grade but may need more educational support to gain the skills and knowledge to do well on a test.

- If the involved parties are unable to work together toward a solution, reconsider possible underlying fears and biases. Unexpressed fears may lead to behaviors or reactions that appear irrational. Explore what concerns may be making them uncomfortable.
- Expand the school professionals' skills. Look for every opportunity to help school professionals solve their own problems and develop skills (e.g., teaching students how to negotiate disputes among themselves; educating teachers about what symptoms a student with a given illness or disorder may exhibit).
- Propose solutions that appeal to goals shared by all parties (e.g., how to support a student who is struggling academically but wishes to attend college).
- Clarify reasonable expectations for change. Often, consultees have unrealistic expectations of how quickly changes will occur; help them to reframe these expectations in a feasible context.

## REFERENCES

- The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (formerly Making the Grade). 2001. *School-Based Health Centers: Results from a 50-State Survey. School Year 1999–2000*. Washington, DC: The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (formerly Making the Grade). Web site: <http://www.healthinschools.org/sbhcs/survey2000.htm>.
- Friedrich MJ. 1999. 25 years of school-based health centers. *JAMA* 281(9):781–782.