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Including preschool children in the school counseling program : classroom recommendations for counselors

Nancy A. Kriener
University of Northern Iowa

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Including preschool children in the school counseling program : classroom recommendations for counselors

Abstract

School counselors have long advocated including all children in their guidance programs. However, preschool children who attend public schools are often not a part of the school counseling program.

In light of the national trend emphasizing the importance of early childhood education, many public schools are assuming more responsibility for preschool education (Hohenshil & Hohenshil, 1989). As more and more preschools are being adopted by public schools, school counselors must be ready to extend their services to these children.

INCLUDING PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE SCHOOL COUNSELING PROGRAM:
CLASSROOM RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

A Research Paper

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and Postsecondary Education
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by

Nancy A. Kriener

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Terry Kottman

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Date Received

Michael D. Waggoner

Head, Department of Educational
Leadership, Counseling, and
Postsecondary Education

Mrs. Kleve is counseling an elementary aged boy regarding his parents' divorce. However, the boy's sister is not receiving such services. Why? She attends preschool.

Mr. Brown delivers classroom guidance to almost all of the rooms in his building. Which rooms are left out? He does not serve the preschool education classes.

School counselors have long advocated including all children in their guidance programs. However, preschool children who attend public schools are often not a part of the school counseling program.

In light of the national trend emphasizing the importance of early childhood education, many public schools are assuming more responsibility for preschool education (Hohenshil & Hohenshil, 1989). As more and more preschools are being adopted by public schools, school counselors must be ready to extend their services to these children.

When the elementary school counselor's role carries over into preschool education, many of the same services performed at the elementary level will be delivered to preschool children (Hohenshil & Hohenshil, 1989). However, most counselor training programs have not taught counselors how to incorporate preschool developmentally appropriate practices into their

classroom guidance activities.

Very little work has been published regarding school counselors serving preschool children. If counselors truly advocate for all children in their districts, then they must be equipped to extend their services to the preschool level. More research and articles need to be published on this topic.

School counselors must be ready to educate themselves in order to effectively deliver services to the preschool population. This paper will assist counselors to understand: (a) why guidance is necessary at the preschool level, (b) characteristics of preschool children, and (c) key aspects of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education as they apply to school counseling. Suggestions will be given for developing classroom guidance activities for preschool education.

Rationale

The social and economic conditions in which many American children live today heighten the need for programs to support children's social and emotional development (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992). Moreover, poverty, family disruption, community violence, and work/family pressures contribute to a changed ecology for the emotional development of many young children

(Hyson, 1996). Hyson (1996) noted early childhood professionals need better tools to work on these issues. In addition to early childhood professionals needing assistance, preschool children will require a full complement of support services as they are integrated into the public educational system (Hohenshil & Hohenshil, 1989). School counselors can effectively provide early intervention with proactive and developmental activities designed to address such topics.

Traditionally, early childhood programs have emphasized the selection of activities to meet children's emotional needs (Hyson, 1994, 1996; Hyson & Lee, 1996; Thomas, 1994). However, traditional emphasis on emotions has declined in recent years (Hyson, 1996). In an observational study conducted by Hyson, Hirsch-Pasek, and Rescorla (1990), one-third of 208 early childhood teachers were rated as "not at all likely" or "very unlikely" to talk with children about their feelings. At the same time that programs have turned away from emotions as the cornerstone of the curriculum, children have been arriving in child care centers with heightened levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional vulnerability (Hyson, 1996).

Increasingly, researchers and practitioners are

recognizing that early childhood programs have the potential to influence the direction of expression, understanding, and regulation of children's feelings (Feeny, Eder, & Rescorla, 1996; Hyson & Lee, 1996). Moreover, conversations about feelings are an important avenue for learning about emotions and how to express them (Kuebli, 1994). School counselors can play an instrumental role in reestablishing preschool programs as contexts in which children learn about and express emotions.

Developmental Curriculum

As school counselors attempt to bring emotional education back into preschool programs, they will need to structure classroom activities based on developmentally appropriate curriculum. All developmental guidance curriculums should be carefully planned and organized to stress cognitive, affective, and physical growth (Muro & Kottman, 1995).

Implementing a developmentally appropriate preschool curriculum requires a knowledge of developmental characteristics and an understanding of appropriate practices. When school counselors are called on to deliver preschool classroom guidance, they must have a solid educational base of these developmental areas.

Developmental Characteristics

When planning a program, educators must foremost consider child development, which should guide decisions regarding curriculum, instruction and assessment (Goldberg, 1997). Before school counselors can structure a developmentally appropriate preschool curriculum, they must have an understanding of the typical physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development of preschool children.

Physical development. All preschool children are busy refining and enhancing a number of fine and gross motor skills. However, it is important to remember the many individual differences in physical growth which occur during these years (Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995). All children grow and develop at their own rate. A developmentally appropriate curriculum allows children to express themselves at their own developmental level.

In a classroom, the gross motor physical development of preschoolers is centered around movement. Young children are total body learners (Wardle, 1998). "Since movement is one of the child's earliest modes of communication, adults need to support this natural means of expression in the preschool years" (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995, p. 411). The High/Scope Educational Foundation suggested eight key movement experiences to

incorporate into a preschool program: (a) moving in non-locomotor ways, (b) moving in locomotor ways, (c) moving with objects, (d) expressing creativity in movement, (e) describing movement, (f) acting upon movement directions, (g) feeling and expressing a steady beat, and (h) moving in sequence to a common beat (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995). School counselors can plan preschool classroom activities centered around these movement principles.

The fine motor development of preschool children develops at different rates. It is important for school counselors to remember that many preschool children may have limited exposure to fine motor activities such as cutting and drawing. Therefore, most preschool children would experience little success with traditional paper and pencil activities.

Intellectual Development. The intellectual development of preschool children is multifaceted. Between ages 2 and 5, children begin to represent their actions mentally, to anticipate consequences, to develop some idea of cause and effect, and to realize there is more than one way to solve a problem (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995; Shure, 1993; Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995). Cognitively, children construct their own reality, which develops over time in response to new experiences and

exposure to other viewpoints (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995). In general, preschool children have vivid imaginations, are concrete thinkers, blend intuitive and scientific thought, focus on one thing at a time, and judge by appearance (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995; Paulu, 1993; Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995). This period of intellectual development also encompasses an increase in verbal communication skills and interest in language (Miller, 1998; Paulu, 1993; Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995).

School counselors must consider all aspects of the intellectual development of preschool children when planning classroom activities. Because children at this age love to play with language, school counselors should develop a repertoire of fingerplays, songs, stories, rhymes, and riddles to use in the classroom. Through the use of language, school counselors can also capitalize on the imaginations of the preschool children. Moreover, counselors must utilize very concrete teaching strategies and materials when presenting lessons.

Social development. The social development of preschool children centers around relationships. Many developmental psychologists suggest that socialization skills and the development of positive self-concepts are the most appropriate skills to be learned in preschool

programs (Hohenshil & Hohenshil, 1989). Vernon and Al-Mabuk (1995) noted peers and play were necessary contributors to social development. Moreover, Kantrowitz and Wingert (1989) stated preschool children are increasingly interested in activities outside their immediate family, are interested in playing in groups for longer periods of time, and could learn lessons in cooperation and negotiation. Experts noted that children should be encouraged to work in groups rather than individually so that teachers can spot children who may be having problems with socialization (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1989). In regard to social development, Paulu (1993) pointed out that preschool children enjoy more group activities, may be aggressive in their play, form cliques, and may change friendships quickly.

Hohmann and Weikart (1995) outlined four key social experiences for preschool children: (a) being sensitive to the feelings, interests, and needs of others; (b) building relationships with children and adults; (c) creating and experiencing collaborative play; and (d) dealing with social conflict. Many of these key social experiences are met in developmentally appropriate programs. A school counselor can help to educate preschool children about feelings, relationships, and conflict. In addition, classroom guidance lessons can

be designed to provide relationship-building experiences and social education.

Emotional development. During the preschool years, children develop a better understanding of their own and others' feelings and behaviors and become more capable of controlling their emotions (Kuebli, 1994; Lillard & Curenton, 1999; Paulu, 1993; Shure, 1993; Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995). Kuebli (1994) stated preschool children show an increased capacity to verbally reflect on emotions, use emotional language in pretend play, and can talk about causes and consequences of some emotions. However, Vernon and Al-Mabuk (1995) noted preschoolers are still rather limited in verbalizing their emotions, and as a result, will often express feelings behaviorally.

One of the counselors' roles at the preschool level is to assist in the emotional development of the children. The school counselor can provide many opportunities to discuss emotions and expressions with preschool children. Hyson (1994) outlined six key ingredients for building an emotion-centered curriculum. These principles included: (a) emotional engagement, (b) warm adult-child relationships, (c) direct expression of feelings, (d) individuality, (e) attunement to others, and (f) emotionally relevant activities. School

counselors can utilize these foundations when planning their preschool curriculum.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

In 1987 the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published its position paper on developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in early childhood programs. Since its first publication, the guidelines have become the most influential document guiding the field of early education today (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997). The DAP approach is meant to provide guidelines for what is appropriate educational practice, relative to young children's current and future development (Charlesworth, 1998). DAP emphasizes the whole child, while taking into account gender, culture, disabilities, socioeconomic status, family factors, and any other important elements in order to meet the individual child's needs, developmental level, and learning style (Charlesworth, 1998). Moreover, developmentally appropriate teaching strategies are based on knowledge of how young children learn (NAEYC, 1986). Dunn and Kontos (1997) noted developmentally appropriate practices enhance children's social skills and create a positive classroom climate conducive to children's healthy emotional development. A complete discussion of

DAP is beyond the scope of this document. For more specific information on NAEYC's position on DAP, see *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*, edited by Bredekamp (1987).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children published appropriate practices for 4- and 5-year-old children in 1986. Some of the specific appropriate practices suggestions relevant to school counselors included:

1. Experiences are provided that meet children's needs and stimulate learning in all developmental areas—physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.
2. Interactions and activities are designed to develop children's self-esteem and positive feelings toward learning.
3. Teachers prepare the environment for children to learn through active exploration and interaction with adults, other children, and materials.
4. Children select many of their own activities from among a variety of learning areas the teacher prepares.
5. Children are provided concrete learning activities with materials and people relevant to their own life experiences.

6. Teachers move among groups and individuals to facilitate children's involvement with materials and activities.

7. Teachers facilitate the development of self-control in children by using positive guidance techniques such as modeling and encouraging expected behavior, redirecting children, and setting clear limits.

8. Children are provided many opportunities to develop social skills such as cooperating, helping, negotiating, and talking with the person involved to solve interpersonal problems.

9. Children develop understanding of concepts about themselves, others, and the world around them through observation, interacting with people and real objects, and seeking solutions to concrete problems.

10. Children have daily opportunities for aesthetic expression and appreciation through art and music.

By reviewing and implementing these guidelines, school counselors can create guidance activities which are developmentally appropriate. In addition, counselors must consider the importance of play and active learning to DAP curriculums. Children learn best through active exploration and concrete, hands-on activities

(Bredekamp, 1987; Charlesworth, 1998; Hohmann & Weikart, 1995; Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1989; Rasmussen, 1998), which are a part of DAP curriculums. Play is one example of active learning. High quality early childhood programs structure activities so that child play leads to child learning (Rasmussen, 1998). Play helps children learn social skills, promotes their emotional development, assists in resolving conflicts, helps children gain a sense of competence, and allows them to exercise their creativity (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1990; Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997; Rasmussen, 1998).

Classroom Considerations

Understanding the development of preschool children is crucial to providing a program which is developmentally appropriate. In order to implement a high quality program, school counselors must incorporate developmentally appropriate practices into their preschool guidance activities. Counselors can be advocates for preschool children, collaborate with teachers, join in free-play time, and present formal lessons which are developmentally appropriate. Through these practices, counselors can help to ensure preschool children are served in an age-appropriate manner.

First and foremost, school counselors need to be

advocates for developmentally appropriate programs. Counselors should observe preschool programs to ensure children are receiving developmentally appropriate curriculums.

Second, counselors must collaborate with preschool teachers. Teachers and counselors can collaborate together to provide a caring and emotion-friendly environment. Counselors can work with the teachers to establish themes such as feelings, friends, families, or conflict resolution. Preschool teachers can work with counselors to incorporate guidance activities into already established themes such as farm life, community helpers, or nutrition. Through this collaboration process, guidance centers can be developed and placed into preschool classrooms for exploration. For example, during a farm unit, counselors could create farm animal cards in which the animals express different feeling faces. These cards can then be placed in a center for children to explore, tell stories about, and play with. Card games such as *Go Fish* or *Memory* can be played using the animal cards. Another center could be developed using farm seeds (corn, beans, soybeans, or peas), paper faces, and glue. Children could be invited to create a feeling face out of seeds by tracing a face with glue and placing the seeds on the glue.

Third, counselors must capitalize on free-play time. Counselors can be present during free-play to interact with different groups of children. Through this interaction, counselors can use their skills to assist preschool children by providing feedback about social and relationship issues. Interacting with children during free-play time allows the counselor to observe children and provides an opportunity to teach in context.

Lastly, counselors must provide formal activities which are developmentally appropriate. After collaborating with teachers, counselors will be ready to plan a guidance lesson centered around the classroom theme. Formal teaching activities should not be longer than fifteen minutes and should incorporate movement, language, and hands-on learning. A formal lesson is presented in the appendix. Ideally, the formal lesson should take place immediately before or after free-play time. This scheduling would allow the counselor timely opportunities to reinforce what will be or has already been taught.

Conclusion

With public schools recognizing the importance of early childhood programs, school counselors must be ready to serve preschool children. Counselors should

consider all developmental levels (physical, social, emotional, and cognitive) of preschool children when planning a program. Furthermore, counselors must adhere to developmentally appropriate practices when instructing preschool children. School counselors can effectively deliver preschool guidance activities by being advocates, collaborating with teachers, utilizing free-play time, and using developmentally appropriate activities during formal instruction.

Appendix A

Theme: Feelings

Objectives: Students will identify happy, sad, mad, and scared faces.

Materials:

a hand-held mirror for each child

(if these are not available, use a large mirror)

four large pictures of feeling faces

(one for each feeling - select pictures which are multicultural and gender fair)

bread

peanut butter

raisins

Procedure:

1. Display the four feeling faces and discuss the differences between the faces. Allow students to guess which feeling each face represents. Label the pictures as happy, sad, mad, and scared.

2. Distribute a hand-held mirror to each child.

Instruct the children to practice making the four feeling faces into the mirrors.

3. Collect the mirrors and sing:

Tune of: *Do You Know the Muffin Man*

"Do you know a happy face, a happy face, a happy face?

Yes, I know a happy face, I see one right there!"

(students point to someone or the feeling face)

Repeat with the sad, mad, and scared.

As students sing, they can move around to show a happy body, sad body, mad body, or scared body, along with their facial expressions.

4. Play "Feelings Corner"

Position the four feeling faces in the four corners of the area you are working. As you and the children clap and chant:

"Happy, sad,
Scared, or mad,
I pick you!"

the students walk to one of the feeling face pictures.

When the chant is done, point to one of the corners (pictures). The children in that corner demonstrate the feeling word which is represented on the feeling card.

5. Dismiss the group to free-play time. Interact with groups of children and use the four feeling words during play.

Collaboration Extension Activity:

During snack time, the students can use raisins to create feeling faces on peanut-butter bread.

Guidance Centers:

1. Leave the hand-help mirrors and four feeling faces in a center.

2. Create a memory card game with the four feeling faces. Place the feeling cards faces down. Students draw a card and try to find a feeling match or partner.
3. Create a deck of feeling faces so the students can play the card game *Go Fish*.

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