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Children of alcoholics: Intervention strategies for the school counselor

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Children of alcoholics: Intervention strategies for the school counselor

Abstract

An estimated 15 million children are being raised in alcoholic homes in the United States today (Black, 1981). "Parental alcoholism is a form of psychological maltreatment of children" (Tharinger & Koranek, 1988, p. 166). Black (1981) stated that the words which describe living in an alcoholic family are inconsistency and unpredictability. The rules in alcoholic families are described as "inhuman, rigid, and designed to keep the system closed" (Wegscheider, 1981, p. 81). The family rules are Don't Talk, Don't Trust, and Don't Feel (Black, 1981).

CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS: INTERVENTION
STRATEGIES FOR THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

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by

Lois Stuedemann Youngblut

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An estimated 15 million children are being raised in alcoholic homes in the United States today (Black, 1981). "Parental alcoholism is a form of psychological maltreatment of children" (Tharinger & Koranek, 1988, p. 166). Black (1981) stated that the words which describe living in an alcoholic family are inconsistency and unpredictability. The rules in alcoholic families are described as "inhuman, rigid, and designed to keep the system closed" (Wegscheider, 1981, p. 81). The family rules are Don't Talk, Don't Trust, and Don't Feel (Black, 1981).

Morehouse and Scola (1986) noted that children of alcoholics have fewer peer relationships, higher truancy rates, difficulty in trusting, poor self-concept, and greater likelihood of tantrums, fighting with peers, and trouble in school. These children always feel shame and embarrassment. Children of alcoholics are a neglected population in need of treatment. Tharinger and Koranek (1988) stated that this neglect has been the result of several obstacles including cultural denial, ignorance about the effects of parental alcoholism on children, avoidance of professional responsibility for these children, fears of painful consequences and legal ramifications, and resistance by children and families of alcoholics themselves.

Black (1981) emphasized that "the bottom line is: ALL CHILDREN RAISED IN ALCOHOLIC HOMES NEED TO BE ADDRESSED. ALL CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED" (p. 23). The logical place for these children to receive help is within the school system because it may be the child's only contact outside the family system. While some may feel that it is not the function of the school, action needs to be taken because parental alcoholism often interferes with a child's educational progress and social adjustment (Morehouse & Scola, 1986).

Since the school is the logical place to meet the needs of children of alcoholics, the school counselor is the trained professional to serve these students. Black (1981) stressed that "becoming a resource to the child of an alcoholic is perhaps the first step in treatment for both the child and his or her alcoholic parent" (p. 178). Fisher (1989) stated that the school counselor can be of help by designing counseling interventions and by suggesting teacher strategies. Intervention strategies for the school counselor include teacher workshops, classroom guidance lessons, individual counseling, and small group sessions.

Intervention Strategies

Teacher Workshops

Morehouse and Scola (1986) recommended that a workshop on how parental alcoholism affects students be held so that

school personnel would be in a position to identify children of alcoholics, be more sensitive to their needs, and to confront their own attitudes about alcoholism. The school counselor can design and implement these workshops; information should include characteristics, family roles and rules, and identification of children of alcoholics. Education creates awareness; and teachers who are caring, listening, and aware can make the school a stable, secure setting for these children (Harrington, 1983; Weddle & Wishon, 1986; Reynolds, 1987).

Campbell (1988) listed seven classroom strategies for helping children of alcoholics. They are:

1. Establish routines that lend structure and stability to the child's school day.
2. Empower the child with a sense that he's in control of at least some of his waking hours.
3. Help the child see learning as a safe journey.
4. Allow time for the child to do homework during the school day.
5. Arrange for some "controlled" socializing.
6. Help the child relax and just be a kid.
7. Support school alcohol-education programs. (p. 47)

Teachers may be the only adults, other than parents, who have consistent contact with children from alcoholic homes; this places the teacher in a position to be a

significant source of help (Morehouse & Scola, 1986) and a referral agent for the school counselor.

Classroom Guidance Lessons

Alcohol education in the early primary grades is an important first step for the school counselor to implement through classroom guidance lessons. The counselor can provide information, address fears, and make the entire topic of alcohol use less stigmatizing so that children will be more open to discussion and advice (Davis et al., 1985). Their program, Cambridge and Somerville Program for Alcoholism Rehabilitation (CASPAR), emphasized to the children that they are not alone, your parents' drinking is not your fault, alcoholism is a disease, alcoholics can and do recover, and you are a person of worth who needs and deserves help for yourself.

Newlon and Furrow (1986) concluded that the use of classroom guidance lessons on alcoholism and the family was the most efficient and least threatening method of identifying children from alcoholic homes. They used lecture, film, group discussion, imagery, and handouts to present two 1-hour sessions to each class. The general concepts presented were (a) alcoholic versus responsible drinking behavior, (b) alcoholism as a family illness, and (c) children of alcoholics: characteristics and effects. The main purpose of the guidance

sessions was to (a) help the children understand alcoholism as a family illness, and (b) help them see the necessity for every member of the alcoholic family to seek help regardless of what the alcoholic chooses to do.

Individual Counseling

Black (1981) stated that children of alcoholics grow up never having shared their closest thoughts or feeling with even their best friend. The school counselor can be a vital source in helping these children withstand the pressures of the confusion in their alcoholic family. "Resource people should never underestimate the amount of difference they can make in the life of a child of an alcoholic no matter how hopeless the situation may appear" (p. 176). McAndrew (1985) said that children of alcoholics should not be seen just as victims but also respected as survivors who skillfully endure adverse conditions.

Edwards and Zander (1985) suggested strategies that can be useful for counselors:

1. Establish a trusting relationship by demonstrating consistent care and interest in the child.
2. Help the child overcome denial of parental alcoholism.
3. Explain and discuss alcoholism with the child.
4. Help the child to identify his or her diverse feelings and healthy ways to express their feelings.

5. Help the child develop positive relationships with others.
6. Incorporate a success component in the exercises and activities used with the child. In addition, the child should receive assistance in developing coping strategies to deal with failure.
7. Encourage opportunities that provide the child with recognition as a worthwhile person.
8. Provide the child with a sense of control and preparedness in facing family situations.
9. Discuss the prevention of alcoholism and family breakdown through education on the disease of alcoholism. (p. 124 & 125)

The roles played by alcoholic family members include the scapegoat, hero, lost child, and mascot (Wegscheider, 1981). Scavnicky-Mylant (1984) stated that these roles all contain many positive behaviors that our society rewards, and that it is only in adulthood that they may realize the useless aspects of their coping skills unless intervention takes place earlier. Fisher (1989) expanded on these roles by adding specific counseling techniques and recommendations for classroom teachers.

Fisher (1989) noted that the scapegoat serves the family function of diverting attention away from the alcoholic.

The counselor needs to stress personal responsibility and choice. The teacher should apply logical consequences. The scapegoat must learn social skills and be given help in forming appropriate friendships.

The hero's role in the family is to make up for the deficits in the family (Fisher, 1989). The teacher should limit classroom responsibilities for this type of child. The school counselor needs to help the child meet his or her own needs. Relaxation techniques, such as biofeedback with imagery, can be helpful.

Fisher (1989) stressed that the lost child is withdrawn and shy. The teacher should make sure that the child is attentive in class and redirect any fantasy into creative writing or art. The counselor should initiate self-concept activities, avoid being sympathetic, and encourage the development of social relationships.

The mascot diverts attention away from the alcoholic by being cute, funny, or mischievous (Fisher, 1989). The teacher should give attention for noncomical behaviors and withdraw it for attention-getting behaviors. The counselor needs to stress responsibility and use behavior management strategies with this child.

Manning and Manning (1984) stressed the use of bibliotherapy with children of alcoholics. Books help these

children identify with children in their same situations, resolve difficult aspects of their lives, and gain insight into methods of coping with parental alcoholism. Manning (1987) stated that "the four interdependent stages in psychotherapy include identification, projection, catharsis, and insight" (p. 37). Bibliotherapy is a method which can also be used very effectively in classroom guidance lessons and group counseling situations.

"A major key to unlocking the secret of parental alcoholism involves evidence of the caring adult's willingness to talk about the issue, to respond in a nonjudgmental fashion, and to be a supportive listener" (Wegscheider, 1986, p. 449). The school counselor can help children of alcoholics validate their feelings and experiences, help them develop simple, practical plans of action, and make community resources available to them.

Group Counseling

Group experiences reduce the isolation of children of alcoholics while offering support and confrontation when needed (Morehouse & Scola, 1986). The group gives students the opportunity to share feelings with their peers. Classroom guidance lessons, teacher referrals, and individual counseling sessions help to identify students that would profit from

group counseling (Davis et al., 1985; Newlong & Furrow, 1986; Fisher, 1989).

Morehouse and Scola (1986) recommended that prospective student members should be seen individually at least once prior to beginning group sessions. When the group starts, the purpose and rules should be set up immediately. If the students do not suggest a rule of confidentiality, the leader must make sure that it is included. The leader should encourage early participation by all members and may need to be very directive because these students are usually extremely ashamed, have poor self-esteem, and haven't shared their feelings with anyone else. The first sessions should create a feeling of safety and commonality, and subsequent sessions should include a discussion of student concerns.

There are several published programs with specific details for school counselors to lead small groups for children of alcoholics. The CASPAR program is set up for 8-12 participants for 10 weeks (Davis et al., 1985). It teaches students about alcoholism and general concepts referred to earlier in this paper. An Elephant in the Living Room is a six-session workbook with stories and activities for elementary children (Typpo & Hastings, 1984). These lessons cover drinking and drug problems, feelings, families, coping with problems, changes, and choices. P.E.P.S.: Psychological Education

Programs for Students (Vernon, 1988) includes an eight-week program for small groups which provides specific goals, objectives, activities, procedures, and content questions. The eight lessons are entitled Feelings, Expressing Them, Can't Fix It, Don't Like What They Do, Personalizing, How I Feel About Alcohol, There is Hope, and I Am Special. Campidilli's (1985) resource and curriculum guide, Children From Alcoholic Families, provides a 16-session program with information on goals, objectives, function of the leader, and specific activities for each session. Any of these or other available programs may be adapted or combined by the school counselor for use in small group sessions.

Conclusion

Intervention strategies for the school counselor to meet the needs of children of alcoholics include teacher workshops, classroom guidance lessons, individual counseling, and group counseling. Any school counselor that feels inadequate in this area should seek training as this is an immediate need in any school system today. With proper education and awareness school counselors can become advocates for children of alcoholics. They can help with the identification and interventions necessary for these children to receive the help they need. Counselors should not be

afraid to work with these students; basic listening skills, empathy, and establishing rapport and trust are a good beginning.

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