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# School and Family Counselors Work Together to Reduce Fighting at School

*To address the problem of fighting in four urban middle schools, school and family counselors collaborated to provide school-based multifamily counseling as an alternative to the mandatory 3-day external suspension program. Supported by district leaders and local school principals, the program was successful in reducing fighting recidivism rates. This article provides an overview of program organization and implementation, along with the achieved outcomes.*

The role of the school counselor in providing violence prevention and intervention programs has received a tremendous amount of attention in the counseling literature over the past several years (e.g., Riley & McDaniel, 2000; Sandhu, 2000). In 1999, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) developed a position statement for counseling students at-risk. Included in ASCA's definition of *at-risk* were students "exhibiting behaviors that may be harmful to self and/or others" (Para. 2). A primary role of the school counselor was to "identify and intervene before they (the students) move through a continuum of self-destructive behavior" (Par. 3). Among ASCA's suggested interventions were responsive programs that included short-term individual, group, and family counseling.

Looking for ideas beyond zero tolerance policies, metal detectors, and security guards, administrators in many school districts have turned to school counselors for leadership and guidance. One example occurred in a northern Louisiana school district as area administrators noticed an increase in the number of fighting incidents occurring in their schools. After a series of meetings to get acquainted, brainstorm, and plan, school officials decided that a district-wide program was needed to address the personal and social concerns of the fighting students and their families. By the time the planning phase had ended, a school-based, multifamily counseling program, involving family counselors from the community, was born. Administrators, teachers, and counselors were enthusiastically hopeful that the inclusion of the family in the intervention process

would aid in the reduction of fighting incidents at school. The purpose of this report is to document the program that was implemented, describe the outcomes, and encourage other school counselors to consider the value of utilizing school-based family counseling.

The concept of including school-based family counseling as a direct component of the school counselor's program will require a paradigm shift for most. Family counseling has never been a traditional role and function of the school counselor and has only recently received attention in the professional literature as a vital, school-based service (Davis, 2001; Fine, 1992; Fine & Carlson, 1992; Hinkle, 1993; Hinkle & Wells, 1995; Mince, 2001). However, research has provided much evidence supporting the effectiveness of including school-based family counseling interventions to address a variety of school-related problems, including fighting at school (Caffery, Erdman, & Cook, 2000; Evans & Carter, 1997; Sayger, Horne, & Glasser, 1993). The Caffery et al. study reported positive changes in student behavior when a university counseling center teamed with the local school district to provide family counseling. Evans and Carter discussed the benefits one public school system received after developing a collaborative relationship with a local university's counselor education program. Through the university-based program, master's level interns in a school-based family counseling training program were placed in area K-12 schools. Reports of improved classroom behavior, academic achievement, and attendance soon followed. Lastly, the facilitation of a school-based multifamily social learning program was successful in reducing the aggressive behavior of elementary school boys (Sayger et al.). These examples only highlight the value of school-based family counseling.

Few school counselors would deny the benefits of working with a family versus the individual student when addressing school-related problems. However, many school counselor education programs provide extensive courses or clinical experiences in systems

theory and practice, leaving many school counselors feeling unprepared to conduct family counseling (Hinkle & Wells, 1995; Kraus, 1998). A lack of administrative support has also made the inclusion of family counseling in K–12 programs very difficult (Davis, 2001; Doerries & Foster, 2001; Evans & Carter, 1997; Hinkle & Wells; Kraus; Mince, 2001; Rotter & Boveja, 1999; Sayger, 1996). Furthermore, the academic, career, and administrative counseling responsibilities of many school counselors often monopolize their schedules, leaving little if any time for individual or family counseling (Ballard & Murgatroyd, 1999; Caffery et al, 2000; Evans & Carter; Nicoll, 1992).

Alternatives have been proposed for meeting the immediate school-based family counseling needs of students and their families when the school counselor is unable to do so directly. Several authors (e.g., King, Randolph, McKay, & Bartell, 1995; Mince, 2001) have advocated for the creation of new family specialist positions within the school system. Others have presented studies describing the effectiveness of utilizing outside agencies such as university counseling centers and counselor education program interns (Caffery et al., 2000; Evans & Carter, 1997). Regardless of who provides school-based family or multifamily counseling services, important evidence suggests that family counseling can be essential when assisting students with school-related problems (Becvar, Canfield, Becvar, 1997; Doerries & Foster, 2001; Kraus, 1998). A prerequisite to providing school-based family or multifamily counseling is a thorough knowledge of systemic thinking and systems interventions. Therefore, school counselors who find themselves unable to facilitate these services directly should pursue the necessary partnerships that would provide for school-based family counseling as part of their school counseling programs.

In a coordinated effort, this study utilized two community licensed professional counselors (LPCs), who specialize in family counseling, to provide school-based multifamily counseling. Multifamily counseling is a family counseling strategy involving more than one family in a single group meeting (Sayger, 1996). As stated earlier, the impetus for such collaboration was the problem of fighting among students in four urban middle schools, grades six through eight, in a north Louisiana city. School leaders had already experienced what years of research had reported: External (out-of-school) school suspension is often ineffective in reducing school-related behavioral problems, including fighting (Costenbader & Markson, 1997; Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993; Yelsma, Yelsma, & Hovestadt, 1991). Therefore, district administrators and local principals were eager to work in coordination with school

counselors to implement an alternative program to the already existing 3-day mandatory external suspension program for fighting at school. The following description of the 1-year program provides school counselors with practical guidelines for implementing similar programs alone or in collaboration with others.

## METHOD

### Participants

Four urban middle schools (A, B, C, & D), comprising grades six through eight, in a north Louisiana city were identified by district administrators, principals, and counselors as facing serious problems with student fighting. Of their total enrollments, Schools A and C reported 11% involved in fighting, School B reported 18%, and School D reported 13%. Schools A, B, and C were randomly selected to participate in the multifamily counseling program, leaving School D as the comparison school, thus not receiving the multifamily counseling intervention. A total of 2,404 students was enrolled in Schools A, B, and C, and 334 were involved in a fighting incident during the school year. Of the 334 facing suspension, 87 elected to participate in the multifamily counseling program, entitled the Saturday Morning Seminar (SMS). At the request of school administrators, demographic information was not systematically collected on program participants. However, program leaders reported the majority to be Black, with the remaining minority being White. Although the attendance of only one parent or guardian was required, many students were accompanied by both parents and, on occasion, siblings and other relatives. Approximately an equal number of male and female parents attended. The group size ranged from 2 to 15 students with a mean group size of 5.71 students. The average group size each Saturday, including all family members and the counselor, was approximately 12.

### Procedures

The school district contracted with two local LPCs working in private practice and specializing in marriage and family therapy. A portion of the district's Safe and Drug Free School's grant provided funding for the counselors, who were paid for each SMS conducted. One school principal, counselor, or teacher was also paid a small stipend to monitor the school campus during the Saturday SMS, unlocking the school building and greeting and directing the students and parents. During the counseling session the school staff member would remain on campus, but in a location remote from the actual SMS site.

On the day a student was involved in a fighting incident, a letter was sent by the principal to the par-

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ents describing the standard policy of an immediate 3-day suspension with no possibility of making-up missed work. The letter also outlined the alternative choice of attending the SMS, (a multifamily counseling group), in lieu of the mandatory suspension. The letter explained that the 3-hour program would be held from 9:00 a.m. to noon on the following Saturday, and would be led by a licensed professional counselor who specializes in family counseling. It encouraged both parents to attend as well as any siblings or other relatives living in the household who might be available. Parents were asked to contact the school counselor with any additional questions or to register for participation in the alternative program. Parents unable to attend the following Saturday, worked with the school counselor to schedule an alternative date. Attendance by the student and at least one parent was required for the full 3 hours or credit would not be given, and the 3-day suspension would begin the following Monday. The SMS counselor was responsible for keeping the attendance record and giving it to the principals each Monday following the SMS. Because of School B's central location, it was chosen to be the host site for the SMS program.

#### **Intervention**

The format for conducting the multifamily counseling intervention consisted of both didactic and experiential components. The components were designed to increase the student's behavioral options when confronted with situations that had a high potential for responding with fighting behavior. The seminar began with an introductory disclosure exercise designed to set a non-punitive tone, establish rapport, and to acclimate participants to speaking openly in a group setting. For example, participants were often invited to share some activity enjoyed by the family or to describe a time when they felt particularly proud of themselves or a member of their family. In addition, counselors and parents were also invited to disclose any personal experiences with fighting as students. This element of self-disclosure, which was most often humorous, was found to be a crucial part of the program, since it seemed to lower the defensiveness of the parents and students. The activity also contributed to the succeeding playfulness between the adults and students for the remainder of the session.

The self-disclosure exercise was followed by the presentation of a behavior-consequence model (Corey, 1991) by the counselor. Participants, both parents and students, were asked to discuss the specific situation which culminated in the student's fighting behavior. These discussions were then "scripted" by the participants and acted out using volunteers to play the various roles. The observers

then analyzed the behavioral sequences leading to the fight, and the scene was "re-scripted" by the participants using an alternate, nonviolent outcome. Table 1 presents a small portion of the type of transcript generated by the students and their parents. While not complete, the table exemplifies how the behavior-consequence model was used to generate an alternative to a fighting response. The complete re-scripted scene was then acted out for the group by volunteers. This portion of the seminar always concluded with an open discussion about the dynamics of each role-playing event. Participants were encouraged to express what they had learned about themselves and each other.

#### **Measures**

Since the goal of the SMS program was to reduce fighting at school using a multifamily counseling intervention, the recidivism rates of the SMS participants were compared to the recidivism rates of the suspended students within the same schools and between the overall recidivism rates of the SMS participants and the comparison school. Recidivism was defined as a student being involved in a fighting incident for a second time, following the first offense, during the remainder of the school year. Additional fighting incidents beyond the second offense were not factored into the rates of recidivism measures. School records were provided by the school principals of each participating school to determine the recidivism rate of each identified suspended and SMS student. This method yielded a dichotomous measure for each student initially involved in a fighting incident at any of the four schools.

As an informal measure of the perceived effectiveness of the program, a "suggestion box" was placed in the counseling room, and SMS participants were encouraged to provide written feedback concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Teachers and principals also received a memorandum near the end of the school year requesting their written feedback regarding the program and how they perceived students to be impacted.

### **RESULTS**

#### **Recidivism Rates**

A chi-square test of statistical significance was utilized to compare the recidivism rates of the SMS program participants and the suspended group. The SMS program was shown to be significantly more effective in reducing the recurrence of fighting behavior compared to the mandatory 3-day external suspension program. As noted in Table 2, the recidivism rates for students participating in the SMS program was 10% for School A, 13% for School B, and 12% for School C. This was significantly lower than

**Table 1. Partial Transcript from The Behavior-Consequence Exercise**

Student	Initial Response	Alternative Response
Ben	“I can look at you any way I please.”	“Hey! You ain’t gotta put that stuff on me,” (response to verbal attack).
Sam	“Keep on lookin’ like you’re lookin’ and I’ll rearrange what I see.”	“Keep on lookin’ like you’re lookin’ and I’ll rearrange what I see.”
Ben	“You wanna start somethin’ with me? Let’s go!”	“You really wanna blow this out? Man, we ain’t neither one in a spot to sit it out for a few days,” (referring to being suspended). “Let’s keep it cool.”
Sam	“You gotta big mouth, but your words dried up!”	“Sounds like you ain’t willin’ to put it up?” (referring to fighting)
Ben	“Guess it’s time for me to put on a little clinic, huh?” (throws first punch)	“Whatever, man.” (laughs and walks away)

*Note.* Ben participated in the SMS program. Conversation represents final minutes of an extended verbal altercation.

**Table 2. Differences in Recidivism Rates between the SMS Program Schools and the Comparison School**

School	Enrollment	Intervention			Repeat Fighting	Recidivism Rates
		Fighting	Suspension	SMS		
<b>Saturday Morning Seminar (SMS) Schools</b>						
A	716	89 (11%)	70		26	37%
				19	2	10%
B	842	154 (18%)	111		21	23%
				43	5	13%
C	846	91 (11%)	66		19	28%
				25	3	12%
Total	2404	334 (14%)	247		66	27%
				87	10	11%
<b>Comparison School</b>						
D	585	76 (13%)	76		23	30%

the recidivism rates of 37%, 23%, and 39% for students receiving the 3-day suspension in Schools A, B, and C, respectively. Thus, across all three SMS schools, 11% of the SMS participants were recidivists compared to 27% for the suspension group. These differences in recidivism rates were significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 362) = 5.38, p < .05$ .

In School D, 30% of the suspended students were

involved in a fighting incident on at least one subsequent occasion, a rate that is similar to the overall recidivism rate (27%) for suspended students in the three SMS program schools. The overall 11% recidivism rate for the combined SMS participants was significantly lower than the 30% rate for comparison School D,  $\chi^2(1, N = 163) = 8.84, p < .005$ . In addition, the subsequent fighting rate for program par-

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ticipants at each SMS program school was significantly lower than the rate for the comparison school.

A comparison between the SMS program schools showed School B to have the highest rate of recidivism (18%) when compared to School A (11%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 1558) = 10.08, p < .01$ , and School C (11%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 1327) = 19.3, p < .001$ . However, Schools A, C, and D did not statistically differ on this variable.

In summary, these findings concluded that within and across each of the SMS program schools, the recidivism rates were lower for the SMS participants than for the suspended students. And, these lower recidivism rates for the SMS participants were very similar across the three SMS program schools. Furthermore, the recidivism rates for individual SMS program schools as well as the combined rate were considerably lower than the comparison school.

#### **Perceived Effectiveness**

Family counselors who led the groups during the scripting and role-playing exercises perceived students to be more successful in learning new information regarding the decision-making process, as evidenced by the generation of various behavioral options excluding fighting. Improved communication skills between students and parents as the sessions progressed were also noted by counselors, as confirmed by an increased willingness on the part of both parties to share information with one another. Ninety-two percent of the comments placed in the “suggestion box” reported that the SMS program had been beneficial in developing positive methods of communication applicable for future use. And, more than 98% of the comments stated that the SMS program was a positive, non-adversarial experience and would be recommended to others.

School administrators and teachers who responded to the request for feedback were overwhelmingly positive in their remarks. Comments noted the observation of favorable generalized responses among participant students in the subsequent selection of behaviors when confronted with potential fighting situations. Additionally, several teachers and administrators reported an observable change in the social behavior among a number of the participant students who subsequently assisted peers in avoiding potential fighting situations.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study build positively upon the existing literature touting the merits of school-based family counseling (e.g., Davis, 2001; Fine, 1992; Fine & Carlson, 1992; Hinkle, 1993; Hinkle & Wells, 1995; Mince, 2001). And, the study exempli-

fies how the school counselor’s role, as defined by ASCA (1999), can be enhanced by implementing family counseling with at-risk students. Based upon the results, most students who participated in the SMS program were not involved in another fighting incident for the remainder of the year. As school administrators continue to focus on school counselors as resources for violence prevention recommendations (Riley & McDaniel, 2000), school-based family counseling should be considered an excellent tool for the school counselor’s “tool box.”

When compared to the students who received the 3-day external suspension, it is clear that the school-based family counseling program made a positive impact on the future behavior of students. But, students were not the only beneficiaries. Family counselors conducting the groups noted an increase in the willingness of family members to communicate with one another as the sessions progressed. The levels of effectiveness in communicating among families prior to the groups are unknown. However, while observing the role-playing and discussion exercises, counselors perceived that most of those who participated in the SMS program exemplified an increased ability to communicate and problem solve. Another benefit of the program was the willingness of the SMS student participants to “coach” their friends when they were facing a situation that might have involved a fighting response. This outcome was unexpected, but certainly a prized benefit when considering the violent situations that might have been avoided as a result of the SMS program.

This simple, but often difficult to coordinate, mode of intervention seems to have considerable merit in reducing the likelihood that a student will become violent for a second time. These school counselors were fortunate to have the complete cooperation of the school leaders. Without their ongoing support and encouragement, the program might have been less successful or even prohibited from ever taking place. Therefore, school counselors must work diligently with school administrators during the planning process to ensure their support in providing the time, space, and resources for the program to be successful. As most school counselors know, the absence of administrative support can prohibit the success of otherwise effective programs.

#### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the lack of demographic data prevents further exploration into the impact of the SMS program on different groups; future studies should collect this data if possible. Also, the use of volunteer families in the SMS program and the utilization of a comparison school versus randomly assigned control and experimental groups limited any broad assumptions

that might have been made. Future studies would be strengthened with a greater level of participant randomization, possibly utilizing true control groups.

Future research may include an examination of the parental attitudes that factor into the decision-making process of allowing a child to attend the SMS program or be suspended for 3 days. For example, parents participating in the SMS program may be more involved in their child's life. However, just the opposite could be true. For example, many parents who opted for the 3-day external suspension may have believed this form of discipline would be most effective in terms of preventing future fighting incidents. In this instance, parents were making a decision they truly felt was best for their child. At present, parental motives are unknown.

Because this study focused primarily on reducing fighting at school, it is unknown how the SMS program may have impacted students and their families in other areas. Future research may also examine differences that may have occurred in academic performance, school involvement, levels of self-esteem and perceived self-worth, and social interactions beyond the school environment. Also, differences in family interactions after the completion of the SMS program could also be examined in future research.

### Implications

School counselors can be encouraged by these as well as other findings concerning the effectiveness of school-based family counseling as a collaborative effort between the school counselor and outside mental health providers in reducing fighting at school. The school counselors at these schools had little time, and several lacked formal training in providing family counseling, to offer this needed service. However, utilizing the talents and resources of others is what helped these school counselors build a successful intervention to address fighting at school. Recognizing that they could not possibly provide every needed service was their first step toward creating the SMS program. Most community agencies, hospitals, universities, and private practitioners stand ready to assist school counselors when called upon. In our opinion, even when funding is difficult to come by, most community mental health providers are willing to work with school counselors toward possible solutions.

A collaborative program such as the SMS requires only a minimum amount of involvement on the part of the school counselor once the program is underway. However, "selling" the need for such a program to parents, teachers and school administrators can be a difficult task (Caffery et al., 2000). School counselors should be knowledgeable concerning the research advocating for school-based family models

before they begin to approach others for support. And, should school counselors decide to be the direct providers of a school-based program, they should first have the theoretical and practical training in systems theory and practice before they begin. For many this will not be an obstacle, while for others, additional training in providing family counseling may be required.

School counselors are challenged to consider the role of school-based family counseling in their schools. Realizing that so many of the school-related problems that students face can only be dealt with on a systemic level, school counselors should pursue with urgency the inclusion of a family-based component in their programs. Historically, many school counselors have worked masterfully as consultants, coordinators, and collaborators. These skills can be utilized to secure community resources and devise programs that acknowledge the undeniable fact that to make a difference in the lives of most students, families must become involved. ■

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