

Understanding the School Counselor/Parent Connection

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All students can learn. A student who is troubled, however, cannot learn as easily. School counselors can help. Divorce, substance abuse, child abuse, poverty, violence and suicidal thoughts are among the social stressors placing numerous students at-risk of educational failure and dropping out of school. Early intervention is essential, and parents and guardians play a vital role. A guidance program that provides direct services and is directed by a professionally trained school counselor is a critical component of a school's prevention efforts in the 21st century.

As a parent, your past experiences with a school counselor may be vastly different than what your child will have. Today school counselors are certified, specially trained mental health professionals who focus on prevention and wellness through a counseling program that meets the needs of all students, not just a few. The counseling program addresses three areas: academic, career and personal/social. School counselors advocate, mediate, coordinate, consult, lead and collaborate with teachers, administrators and parents to help students be successful. Professional school counselors also help children to understand themselves.

But just what do school counselors do? Today's school counselors:

Develop a guidance plan based on a campus needs assessment

Counsel students individually and/or in groups

Provide systematic and developmental classroom guidance to all students

Respond to student needs in crisis situations

Orient students to new school settings

- Work with absentees, potential dropouts and other at-risk students
- Refer students to special programs and/or services when necessary
- Analyze test results to provide information about abilities, achievement, interests and needs
- Help with individual school, college, and career plans; coordinate school-to-work initiatives and with post-secondary institutions
- Coordinate efforts with other school specialists
- Conduct conferences with parents and facilitate parent discussion groups
- Coordinate staff support activities
- Adhere to ethical and legal standards
- Pursue continuous professional growth and development
- Conduct an annual evaluation of the guidance program

All of these activities and duties can make a real difference in students lives, improving their self-understanding and self-confidence, motivation, decision-making, goal-setting, planning and problem solving, interpersonal relationships, communication skills, respect for others and more.

Contacting the School Counselor

Parents contact a school counselor to help their children with a variety of issues, such as academic achievement; new school registration, orientation and transition; test interpretation; special needs;

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student crisis situations; family transitions; and higher education issues.

When contacting a school counselor, parents often have many obstacles to overcome, such as culture, language, their own bad experiences in school, a lack of understanding or feeling intimidated. Some parents may feel if they speak up and disagree with educators, their child will have a harder time at school. Work schedules can also be barriers to meeting with your child's school counselor. However, schools encourage parental involvement, and the school counselor is the primary contact for many parents in connecting with the school.

By focusing on parents' concerns and respecting why these concerns matter to you, school counselors offer options, including better ways to communicate with your child. Both parents and counselors share information, an important part of establishing a helping relationship. School counselors are excellent resources; however, they do not provide therapy or long-term counseling. Referrals to outside agencies may be initiated at school. School counselors are also advocates for children and provide information on parents' rights, such as the right to request information.

Following are some questions you might want to ask your child's school counselor:

- How is my child doing in school?
- What are my child's strengths and weaknesses?
- Are there any areas of concerns or delayed development?
- What are my child's goals for this year?
- What are some suggestions for action at home?
- What programs are available to help my child to do better?
- Does my child get along well with adults?
- Does my child get along well with his/her peers?
- What can I do to improve discipline at home?
- Are there ways I can improve communication with my child?
- What can I expect after a change in the family (death, divorce, illness, financial status, moving)?
- If my child is (running away from home, being disrespectful, having other problems), what should I do?
- What resources are available at school?
- What resources are available outside of school?
- What do I need to do to prepare my child for college admission?
- What are the best resources for information on financial assistance and scholarships?
- What do I do? My child is (sad, not sleeping, not eating, overeating, has temper tantrums, etc.)
- What do I do if I don't like my child's friends?

Studies have shown that children have greater academic achievement when their parents are involved in their education. Motivation, positive attitudes about self and sense of control over their environment improve with parental involvement in the schools. Children from minority and low-income families benefit the most from parental involvement.

You, the parent, are the most important resource for the school counselor and others. Your involvement is critical in helping your child to be successful. Ask the school counselor how you can be more involved in what is happening with your child's education.

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