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Culturally Competent Mental Health Services in the Schools: Tips for Teachers

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The Importance of School-Based Mental Health Services

Mental health is essential to success in school and life. It directly impacts learning and behavior. Mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness but also the ability to cope with difficult circumstances. Children who receive mental health and social-emotional support do better academically and socially. The school environment is an optimal context to provide mental health services because it is familiar and accessible to students and their families.

What are Culturally Competent Mental Health Services?

As with all efforts in education, it is critical that mental health services be responsive to students' individual needs, including their cultural and linguistic background. **Specifically culturally competent mental health services are policies and practices that enable school personnel to effectively address the social, behavioral, and mental health needs of students from diverse cultures.**

Students who attend U.S. schools increasingly are coming from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2004), 5.5 million English language learners are attending U.S. public schools and speak more than 400 different languages.

Language is not the only potential barrier to providing appropriate mental services. Cultures have different attitudes toward issues of mental health and mental illness that can affect levels of awareness among students and families, the likelihood that they will seek or even accept assistance, and the social mores that should help guide the delivery of services. The familiarity and accessibility of schools can aid in reaching out to families. It is very important that school personnel are comfortable in cross-cultural situations and able to address students' mental health needs regardless of their race, religion, language, or other cultural influence.

When teachers, school psychologists, and other school personnel address the mental health needs of culturally diverse students they become **cross cultural helpers** who assist children and adolescents to deal with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that might interfere with their ability to focus on school work. Students who feel socially isolated or emotionally upset in school are less likely to be able to learn and achieve to their full potential.

What are the Characteristics of Culturally Competent Mental Health Services?

Culturally competent school personnel:

- Are aware and respectful of the values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and parenting styles of the diverse families.
- Are aware of the impact of their own culture and worldviews on their interaction with others in cross-cultural situations.
- Recognize that cultural differences exist within an ethnic group.
- Learn about the culture of the student and families with whom they work, i.e., family composition, family members' roles, and family support systems.

- Understands the attitudes about mental health issues, treatment, and help-seeking behaviors within different cultures represented in the student body.
- Establish rapport and build trust through displays of respect and appropriate social greetings.
- Use a problem-solving orientation that systematically considers cultural difference.
- When necessary, use appropriately-trained interpreters and/or cultural brokers.
- Are committed to developing interventions that are compatible with needs, values, and customs of diverse students and families.

Why is it Important to Develop Culturally Competent Mental Health Services?

As the student population in U.S. schools becomes increasingly multicultural and diverse, educators will need to develop and improve their skills in becoming *multicultural helpers* to address the mental health needs of children. It is estimated that by the year 2040, no one ethnic or racial group will make up the majority of the national school-age population (National Association of School Boards of Education, 2002).

How can teachers help?

Although teachers are not mental health services providers, they do play a vital role in supporting students' mental wellness and helping to identify and support students who may have a mental health problem. Specifically, teachers can:

- Learn as much as possible about the cultural and linguistic background of students they teach.
- Pronounce students' names correctly and learn key phrases in their native language.
- Allow students to share their thoughts, ideas and feelings through use of cooperative groups, role plays, dialogue journals and other forms of active and interactive learning.
- Enhance students' self-image, motivation and cultural pride by using culturally-relevant materials and encouraging discussion and actions that honor their cultural and linguistic heritage.
- Invite parents and families to actively participate in their child's education.
- Facilitate home-school communication and collaboration.
- Beware that families from diverse linguistic or cultural backgrounds may not initiate requests for help or use in-school resources available to address mental health issues. Teachers are urged to provide orientations to inform parents and families about school resources.
- Seek help from school psychologists or other school mental health professional if students exhibit academic, behavioral and/or mental health problems.

What is the Role of the School Psychologist?

School psychologists can work proactively with families, teachers and other school personnel to provide preventive mental health services for diverse students at the school-wide and classroom levels. They can:

- Connect students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with supportive and empathic children, particularly when the students with diverse backgrounds are new to the school and community.
- Provide organized opportunities for students to develop a support system, e.g., peer mentoring.
- Help all children value multicultural environments and appreciate a multicultural world.
- Hold parent and family education workshops on child development and child and adolescent age-appropriate mental health issues.
- Consult with teachers and families to provide information about in-school and community mental health resources for children and adolescents.
- When necessary, provide group or individual counseling to students at-risk for mental health problems.

NASP Resources Available Online

NASP has a number of resources available to assist families and educators in helping to create school environments that promote culturally competent educational practice. These can be accessed at <http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence/index.html>.

References

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National Association of State Boards of Education (2002). *A more perfect union: Building an education system that embraces all children*. http://www.nasbe.org/Research_Projects/Changing_Face.html

Ortiz, S.O. & Flanagan, D.P. (2002). Best practices in working with culturally diverse children and families. In *Best practices in school psychology IV* (pp. 337-351). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

U.S. Department of Education (2004). *Fact sheet: NCLB provisions ensure flexibility and accountability for limited English proficient students*. Retrieved from www.ed.gov/print/nclb/accountability/schools/factsheet-english.html

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001). *Mental Health: Culture, Race and Ethnicity: A Supplement to Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Retrieved from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/cre/>

Web Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Facts for Families in multiple languages, <http://www.aacap.org/page.ww?section=Facts+for+Families&name=Facts+for+Families>

Center for School Mental Health and Analysis and Action (2006), *Cultural Competence and School Mental Health*, <http://csmha.umaryland.edu/resources.html/CulturalCompetenceIB-CSMHA.pdf>

National Center for Cultural Competence of the [Georgetown University Child Development Center](http://www.georgetown.edu/research/qucdc/nccc/) <http://www.georgetown.edu/research/qucdc/nccc/>

Success in School/Skills for Life Online Resource Kit, handouts in Spanish, National Association of School Psychologists, <http://www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit/index.html>

U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/index.html?src=oc>