



The WCPA News

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Making Referrals to Psychological Professionals **By Dr. Robert Poirier**

As educators, we may have an intuition that a child or family may benefit from psychological services such as therapy or an evaluation. Yet, we may hesitate to make a recommendation or suggestion to a parent. Discretion and sensitivity, as well as timing, are all essential in making a recommendation. Our hesitation, however, may not always be a reflection of our sensitivity. Other matters may interfere with our good instincts about referring. Naming some of the issues that get in the way can increase our likelihood of actually speaking to a parent about such a suggestion.

As teachers and administrators we are keenly aware of the resistance and objections parents initially may have about therapy or psychological assessment. Is it possible that some of our hesitation to make a referral is an unexamined buying into the parent's resistance to considering professional help? As educators we may feel out of our element in terms of mental health services. Maybe it is better not to say anything, lest parents resent us for presuming to know what the problem might be. If we have had any difficulties with a family, we might fear that they will see a referral as judgmental or vindictive. We may assume that other educators see or have seen this problem, so they probably will say something or have done so in the past. These are some of the reservations we may experience as educators, and we are probably affected by the resistances parents feel. Let's look at the objections parents might have.

The stigma of counseling or therapy is one issue that can prevent any of us from seeking or recommending therapy. If a child suffers an injury in athletics, we are alert to seeking medical help immediately. If a child has social or emotional problems, are we as vigilant to seek help? We all know what negative impact emotional problems can have on the human spirit and body over time, and yet we struggle at times to offer the help that can make a difference for a child. The prospect that a daughter or son may benefit from help can be an injury or insult to a parent's self-esteem. As educators, we have a chance to support parents and help them see that therapy may be a part of healthy parenting.

Some parents are guarded about letting anyone else know family business, and worry that therapy could be intrusive. However, the alliance of therapist, school personnel and parent is ideal and offers the greatest help to a child. Educators can help a parent view the therapist as an ally in the process of parent consultation. School professionals can also educate parents that the boundaries of confidentiality protect the family's privacy.

One assumption that may prevent us from making a referral is the belief that therapy is really for a child having severe problems. This assumption is counter-productive to the healthy environment we promote in our schools. It leaves the children who have milder difficulties without professional intervention. It also leaves such children at risk for becoming more dysfunctional and exposes the rest of the classroom to the behaviors of the struggling child. A timely referral and early intervention will spare a student further distress and improve the environment in our classrooms.

Some adults assume that if we leave the child alone, he or she may get better. For children who internalize emotions or conflicts, that may be the appearance. The reality is that the problems have been emotionally suppressed and become part of a pattern of ineffective functioning. A similar assumption is that social and emotional hurts are part of growing up. That is true of human development. But educators usually have an intuition about the difference between a student who is just experiencing a brief rough spot and the one who is showing signs of psychological distress.

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Considering a Part-Time School Counselor?

WCPA therapists serve as part-time school counselors for several area schools, counseling students and providing consultation to teachers and administrators. Hours can vary according to your school's needs and budget. To discuss the possibilities, contact Amy Maus at the WCPA office, (314) 275-8599.

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One concern educators have is the cost of psychological services and the ability of a family to afford the cost. While this may in some cases be a real concern, we do a disservice to a family by not voicing a suggestion to seek help. Occasionally a family may find a way to cover the costs through insurance, budgeting, or adjusting the priorities for family spending. There are psychological services available on a sliding scale, and we can help parents access them. We sometimes lose sight of the very real cost of failing to act, thus allowing a young person to live with a learning or emotional problem.

A child can benefit from mental health assistance in numerous ways. Therapy can bolster a child's self-esteem, communication skills, interpersonal interactions, and emotional functioning. On-going therapy can provide a relationship and a safe place to talk in the midst of problems. Psychological, educational, or social difficulties can impair or block normal development. Young people are resilient psychologically and can often get back on track with the help of a therapist. Professional help can diminish the isolation or confusion a child may feel as a result of his or her difficulties.

Academic achievement and self-esteem work hand-in-hand. If a child is doing poorly academically due to a learning problem, her or his self-esteem suffers. If a child is socially awkward and becomes discouraged, his or her adequate academic performance may suffer. Psychological assessment and/or therapy can identify the problem areas and propose solutions. When we do not promote the real benefit and relief that psychological services can offer, we implicitly convey a sense that a child is stuck with his or her difficulties.

Some tips for making a referral may be useful. School professionals will want to review concerns with their principal and determine who will speak to the child's parent(s). Select a time and place that will allow the parent to hear what you want to say. Mention the strengths and successes you see, and suggest that you and the parent are allies in seeking the child's welfare. Couch your concerns in terms of how you notice that the child's abilities and/or development may be hindered by patterns you have noticed. Focus on behaviors and statements the child has made. Speak also about what you are not observing in terms of what would be normal development for a child of this age. Avoid minimizing or exaggerating the concerns. Acknowledge that it may not be easy to hear and you understand that. Avoid labeling the child's behavior so as not to appear to the parent as if you are diagnosing. If it seems appropriate, make reference to similar concerns the parent may have previously voiced to you. Allow the parent time to process your suggestions. Principals of private schools may want to assess whether professional help will be required for the sake of the overall school environment. A brief phone consult about an anonymous "hypothetical scenario" with a therapist may help determine whether a referral is appropriate.

Expecting health from our students and families is part and parcel of our schools' missions. Making a referral is an affirmation of the health we want for our students. Teachers and principals are the vital link between families and psychological professionals who can foster that health.

Dr. Bob Poirier offers psychological testing and therapy to students and families, and can be reached at the WCPA office.

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

From the Director

Dear Friends,

In the month of August, we at WCPA were fortunate to be asked to present at a series of parent meetings sponsored by a coalition of thirty area Catholic High Schools. This is the second year that these presentations were required of all parents of ninth grade students entering one of the Catholic High Schools in the St. Louis Archdiocese. Each of the one-hour talks had between 250 and 850 parents attending, and addressed the issues of drugs and alcohol as they relate to our teens and the difficulties of parenting today. At the end of the talk, the two presenting speakers invited parents to come to the front and ask questions individually. I personally found myself hearing the same lament at every presentation. "I feel as though I'm standing alone when I say no to my child." "Are my expectations too great because no one seems to have the same rules that I do?" "Sometimes I feel like giving in because it takes too much out of me to say no." "Am I harming my daughter socially if I don't allow her to do what everyone else is doing?"

I have great empathy for these parents. They truly want to do the right thing with their children. However, with the tide seeming to be against them, they question themselves, stand in doubt and, too often, give in. Our children today, more than ever, need our limits and boundaries. While I recognize that schools can't be all things to all people, it seems that schools may be able to help parents gain the strength that they need today in parenting their children. Perhaps one of the answers is modeling limit-setting when you, as teachers and administrators, stand true to your own boundaries. Maybe, it is in bringing parents together regularly to discuss their frustrations and gain support to do the right thing. There is strength in numbers and in the long run this would serve them, their children, and you well.

- Mary

Honoring the Mother/Daughter Spirit: **A Retreat Designed to Rejuvenate the Spirits of Mothers and Daughters** Jennifer Gauvain, MSW, LCSW

Recently, WCPA has been inundated by a stream of referrals from mothers who desperately need guidance and support for dealing with their teenage daughters. The common thread among all of the mothers is this: "Help me communicate better with my daughter before our relationship completely deteriorates." Ironically, the daughters are just as desperate to be closer to their mothers but seem stuck as to how to facilitate a better relationship.

Unfortunately, as times change, so does the daunting task of raising our children. This is especially true of daughters. It seems more difficult than ever to raise healthy, strong, confident daughters. With the role of the media, the constant bombardment of sexually charged images, the viciousness of peer pressure, it seems like we are fighting an uphill battle.

But the battle does not have to be fought alone. Now more than ever mothers and daughters need a supportive environment to discuss their challenges, their fears, their vision and their faith. WCPA has developed the "Honoring the Mother/Daughter Spirit Retreat," which offers a safe atmosphere where mothers and daughters of different backgrounds can support and learn from one another, celebrating just how truly special the mother/daughter relationship can be.

This two day retreat assists mothers and daughters to examine their inner selves and commit to making the changes necessary to truly learn how to love and respect each other. It benefits schools through increased healthy cohesion and communication within students' families. As all educators are aware, improving family life often improves a student's work habits, behavior and social relationships at school. Retreat participants can be responsible for payment.

This retreat is designed to include a variety of subjects and activities to truly enhance the mother/daughter spirit. Topics will be discussed in break-out groups, through role plays, panel discussion and much more. Topics can include:

- From Tea Parties to Frat Parties
- Navigating the Adolescent Female Culture
- Dating in Today's World
- Effective Communication Styles
- Rejuvenating the Mother/Daughter Relationship
- Inevitable Conflict:
Defining the Mother/Daughter Relationship
- You Are Not Your Daughter's Best Friend:
Learn How to Set Limits
- Nourishing the Spirit:
Acceptance and Practice Beyond Today

For more information, contact Jennifer Gauvain at the West County Psychological Associates office, (314) 275-8599.