

School Issues: Working With Children & Adolescents

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Who is a potential ally at school?

- Principal
- Dean
- Teacher
- Nurse
- Social Worker
- Psychologist
- Counselor
- Special Education teacher or case manager

NOTE: Find someone who is willing to listen to you and has the power to help advocate for the child. It is always helpful to have an “insider” working with you.

What is the best way to connect with the school?

- Call
- Email
- Attend meetings
- Write a letter

NOTE: Attending meetings may be the best way to communicate with everyone who is involved with the child.

What services do schools offer?

- Support groups: School social workers, psychologists, or counselors may offer these small group programs that focus on social skills, divorce, conflict resolution, friendship, and so forth.
- Individual support: School personnel may also offer individual support for students who are struggling with a variety of social or emotional concerns. Usually these concerns seem to impact the child's school performance or participation.
- Curriculum that teaches skills outside of reading, writing, and math: For example, many schools try teaching some character education along with the regular curriculum. In one school district they use the month of November to teach about drug awareness and healthy choices.

- Special education services for students on an IEP (Individualized Education Plan). These services may include occupational therapy, speech, physical therapy, adaptive physical education, paraprofessional support, and social/emotional skills training. Special education services also focus on improving academic areas such as reading, writing, and math.
- 504 Accommodation Plan: “School districts are obligated to provide regular or special education programs, including necessary modifications and supplementary aids and services to qualified children based on their individual needs. The definition of a handicapped person is any person who either has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such impairment. Major life activities mean functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, breathing, learning, and working.” Howard Glasser, *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach*
- Community Education: Schools often have different programs which meet after school. There are a variety of ways students can be involved. It may include activities such as music, art, drama, science, scouts, etc.

What issues do students face today?

- Eating disorders
- Cutting, piercing
- Depression
- Smoking, drinking, and drug use (marijuana, ecstasy, meth, and so forth)
- Suicide
- Anxiety disorders
- Grief and loss
- Divorce complications; custody battles
- Early sexual experimentation
- Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse
- Bullying on the bus, at school, and in their neighborhoods
- Low self-esteem
- Gender Identity Disorder
- ADHD
- Autism/Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD)
- Social phobia
- Learning difficulties
- ELL adjustments such as learning a new language and culture
- Poverty
- Homelessness

How are schools handling these challenges?

- Increasing social/emotional support opportunities for students. For example, schools often have a school social worker, psychologist or counselor on staff.
- Teaching on drug and alcohol abuse in health classes as well as in the month of November.
- Special education services.
- Section 504 Accommodation Plans.
- Increasing safety measures at school such as: school crisis plans, strict bullying policy, and communication with the local police and fire departments.
- Providing safe places students can go when emotionally or behaviorally out of control.
- Behavioral Specialists can observe and offer solutions to challenging students.
- Reporting any emotional, physical, and sexual abuse to the county.
- Referring families and students to outside agencies for help.
- Working alongside county and other agencies to help meet the child's needs.
- Developing new programs for families and students who are from another country.

How should schools handle children struggling with attachment problems?

Internalizing Child (Shamed/Withdrawn)

- Offer a support group with other students struggling with similar issues.
- Refer student for appropriate therapy by professional trained in working with attachment issues.
- Encourage involvement in school community activities such as sports, music, art, science, etc.
- If the student is anxious, identify anxiety-producing situations and help develop positive coping skills.
- Develop a team approach with parents of student.
- Determine if child is being bullied.

Externalizing Child (Acting Out)

- Develop a plan for accountability at school and notify staff that work with student.
- Suggest one staff member become that student's case manager in order to accurately track behavior and monitor progress.
- Refer student for appropriate therapy by professional trained in working with attachment issues.
- Offer individual support to work toward positive coping skills.
- Develop team approach with parents of student.
- Assess child for possible bullying behavior.

In what ways can our schools improve?

- Provide accurate and complete information to parents with a struggling child.
- Offer ways to communicate with parents that are simple and dependable.
- Have one “case manager” per child so parents are not getting differing information from many sources within the school.
- Try to make IEP and other school meetings less intimidating by having only the necessary personnel in attendance and then making introductions before the meeting starts.
- Keep current on child and adolescent diagnoses as well as other issues students may face.
- When there is trouble at school, communicate right away with the parents.
- Be positive and find the strengths in each child.

As a parent

1. You need to advocate for your child. If the local school is not helpful enough; contact the district office. If the district office personnel cannot help, call PACER (952) 838-9000 or TTY (952) 838-0190.
2. If you see an accommodation that may help your child; tell someone at school.
3. If your child does not feel safe on the bus, in the cafeteria, in the hallways, in the bathrooms, or elsewhere; call the principal.
4. If your child is having great difficulty with the school work; write a letter asking that your child to be evaluated.
5. If your child is challenging to staff at school; tell them what works at home. Offer ideas to help your child succeed at school.
6. Find an ally at school and let this person help you advocate for your child.
7. Ask for changes to your child’s plan, schedule, and so forth in writing. If you do not agree to the changes; speak up.
8. Remember you are the EXPERT on your child!
9. Remember that most teachers are absolutely dedicated to helping children learn and succeed. It is most effective to be on the same side.
10. If one school setting does not work for your child, explore other school settings in the district.

Recommended reading

High Stakes High School. A Guide for the Perplexed Parent by Allison Zmuda, Mary Tomaino, & Jeanetta Miller

The School-Savvy Parent. 365 Insider Tins to Help You Help Your Child by Rosemarie Clark, Donna Hawkins, Beth Vachon, and Marjorie Lisovksis

Negotiating the Special Education Maze: A Guide for Parents and Teachers by Winnifred Anderson, Stephen Chitwood, & Deidre Hayden

IEP and Inclusion Tips for Parents and Teachers Handout Version by Anne Eason & Kathleen Whitbread

Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach by Howard Glasser & Jennifer Easley