



International Network for School Social Work

<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

Electronic Newsletter February 2010

Editor: Marion Huxtable

Bouncing back from challenges:

School social workers support the resiliency of youth, families, and teachers

Kathy Armenta, LCSW, ACSW, Clinical Associate Professor,

The University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work [<karmenta@mail.utexas.edu>](mailto:karmenta@mail.utexas.edu)

School social workers all around the globe are increasingly utilizing information from research about how to support the resiliency of youth. Resiliency is usually defined as the capacity to bounce back from difficulties. It is sometimes helpful to imagine someone that you know or have known who had to deal with some difficult circumstances in life. But, despite the challenges, this person has found ways to move past the events and stressors and become successful in life in a variety of ways. The questions that have been asked include “What factors or experiences did the resilient individual encounter that supported their resiliency? Could those same factors and experiences be provided for others who experience adversity? And would that make a difference?”

What we know is that resilient individuals have developed the following keys to success:

- ✚ They feel *connected* to others
- ✚ They feel *validated* as competent human beings
- ✚ They feel that *their opinion matters*

Schools provide daily experiences for youth in which their resiliency is either supported or shattered. Every day, school social workers provide services to children and adolescents who “have been dealt a heavy hand”, in other words they are dealing with difficult challenges through no fault of their own. Additionally, teachers, administrators and families are encountering personal and professional challenges. The school social worker’s role is to develop interventions and strategies that shore up the resiliency of all members of the school community. Academic success can strengthen a student’s self esteem, while academic failure can contribute to the opposite outcome. Social and behavioral success can increase a student’s ability to bounce back from hard circumstances. Difficulties with forming relationships and managing behavior in and out of the classroom can make it hard for the young person to handle the rest of the stressors in life.

Six factors have been identified as critical in supporting the resiliency of youth, families, schools and organizations. School social workers can make sure that students have support in the following areas.

- ✚ Increasing pro-social bonding
- ✚ Providing meaningful opportunities for participation
- ✚ Setting and communicating high expectations
- ✚ Making sure a youth has at least one caring and supportive individual
- ✚ Developing critical life skills
- ✚ Setting clear and consistent boundaries

School social workers can look for ways to encourage students to have recreational, athletic, social and peer experiences that support pro-social bonding. Additionally, traditions, celebrations and rituals within families and classrooms are important components of that pro-social bonding.

They can work with youth, families and teachers to teach students how to set healthy physical and psychological boundaries. Every student needs to have experiences in the classroom and beyond, in which they can have a meaningful role, have their voice heard and begin to develop leadership capacity. Students who are balancing difficult circumstances with school responsibilities need to have opportunities for developing life skills in the areas of time management, decision making, problem solving and communication strategies. The student's potential needs to be developed around a strengths-based philosophy, encouraging a young person's capacity to "be all they can be" and to "push through and around" obstacles. Creativity is the hallmark of school social work practice, as the professional social worker individualizes what needs to be done, what needs to be provided and what programs need to be developed.

Often, the caring and supportive individual in a youth's life may not be a parent or caregiver. School social workers understand that a teacher, social worker, principal, clergy, grandparent, neighbor or coach may provide that relationship. Making sure that each child or teen on our caseload is well connected with at least one unconditionally caring adult is crucial.

CASE EXAMPLE:

The school social worker serves at both an elementary and a middle school campus in an urban Texas school district with a diverse African-American and Hispanic population. Many students are recent immigrants and undocumented. Luis, age 8, and in the third grade, arrived 6 months ago from Honduras. Last year his mother died of AIDS and Luis and his twelve-year-old seventh grade brother, Eduardo, are living with relatives who brought them to the U.S. Both boys are gradually learning English, but find school-work very difficult. Luis is extremely quiet and withdrawn. He plays under the desk with small objects and walks around the edge of the playground during recess without interacting. The school social worker is developing interventions on many levels. She has built rapport with the adults in the family and provided a wide range of community resources for basic needs and legal consultation on their immigrant status. She has been checking in daily with both Luis and Eduardo and recently included Luis in a support group on grief and loss. The school social worker has encouraged Eduardo's participation in an after-school soccer program. She has been working weekly with the teachers of both boys, providing consultation on strategies. Luis was recently selected to be a "buddy" to a Kindergarten student. Every day he spends twenty minutes helping out his buddy with learning English and with activities in the classroom. Luis has begun to be more engaged in his own class. He is showing signs of wanting to play with peers and complete schoolwork. He never misses his support group and seems to enjoy the art activities provided by the school social worker. He brought a picture of his Mom to share in the last group.

As shown in this case example, the school social worker can assess what is already in place to help the child, determine what might be missing and devise a plan to build the child's capacity to bounce back from adversity and go on to succeed academically and socially.

Henderson, N., Benard, B., Sharp-Light, N. Eds. (2007). *Resiliency In Action: Practical Ideas for Overcoming Risks and Building Strengths in Youth, Families and Communities*. San Diego, CA: Resiliency In Action, Inc.

The Canadian Association of School Social Workers & Attendance Counsellors (CASSWAC) is hosting a national conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba on April 8th and 9th, 2010. The theme is "Students Today", exploring the connection between physical activity and spontaneous, unstructured play in brain development; academic performance and cognitive alertness; self-esteem and childhood obesity; school attendance and absenteeism; social skills development and executive functioning skills. For details [CASSWA.pdf](#) or contact June Murray at <mailto:jmurray@plpsd.mb.ca>