

NASP Position Statement on Mental Health Services in the Schools

"Children are the messages we send to a time we will not see."
- Neil Postman

Introduction

The National Association of School Psychologists recognizes that school success is facilitated by factors in students' lives such as psychological health, supportive social relationships, positive health behaviors, and schools free of violence and drugs. Mental or psychological health in childhood and adolescence is defined by the achievement of expected developmental cognitive, social, and emotional milestones. Mental health is evidenced by the student's forming secure attachments, developing satisfying social relationships, and demonstrating effective coping skills. Mentally healthy children and adolescents enjoy a positive quality of life; function well at home, in school, and in their communities; and are free of disabling symptoms of psychopathology. A collaborative and coordinated effort is needed among schools, families, and communities to ensure that all children and adolescents achieve positive academic and behavioral outcomes. One of the most important of these positive outcomes is psychological competence, a set of skills and attitudes that leads to positive mental health and a strong sense of well-being.

To that end, NASP advocates the inclusion of effective, comprehensive mental health services in the schools, emphasizing prevention and early intervention. Mental health services must be included in school reform efforts in order to help students overcome barriers to learning, many of which are the result of poverty, family difficulties, and/or emotional and social needs. School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students, but when the need directly affects learning, schools must meet the challenge.

School psychologists are at the forefront of mental health service delivery in the schools. Throughout the United States, school psychologists provide mental health services including the design of prevention programs, assessment, counseling, mental health, case management, and behavioral consultation services and crisis intervention in partnership with teachers, parents, school administrators, and other members of the school community to assist in developing effective strategies to serve students in need and to prevent mental health problems. School psychologists also serve students directly through individual and group counseling/therapy services, and as members of comprehensive school based mental health programs. School psychologists are also often the liaisons between schools and community-based programming or social service agencies.

The Need for Mental Health Services in Schools

The effect of mental health on school success and achievement is well-documented in recent reports by the U.S. Surgeon General. Factors such as healthy self-esteem and positive relationships are critical to student success. Research emphasizes the importance of positive student behaviors and attitudes as elements in promoting effective schools.

Unfortunately, in today's society, too many students are unable to benefit from educational experiences due to environmental or personal difficulties. Statistics regarding poverty, family disintegration, violence and substance abuse are staggering

indications of barriers to learning and school success as well as contributors to harmful and often tragic outcomes for children and youth. As the Surgeon General noted, "mental health is inexorably linked with general health, child care, and success in the classroom and inversely related to involvement in the juvenile justice system," and a high proportion of young people with a diagnosable mental disorder do not receive any mental health services at all.

Addressing Student Mental Health Needs within the Context of the Schools

Schools are the logical point of entry to increase the efficacy of mental health services to children and adolescents. For nearly half of the children with serious emotional disturbances who receive mental health services at all, the school system has been the sole provider. Moreover, schools are already the primary providers of mental health services for children. School-based and school-linked services can be designed to address students' mental health needs using a range of service options ranging from prevention to intensive intervention. The key to making mental health services effective is to ensure that they are comprehensive, coordinated, and accessible to students and families. Offering services in the schools improves access to treatment.

Although providing for the mental health needs of students should be a shared school and community responsibility, there are several advantages to providing such services in the schools:

1. Mental health is directly linked to educational outcomes.
2. Schools are the optimal place to develop psychological competence and to teach children about making informed and appropriate choices concerning their health and many other aspects of their lives because schools are the only organization in our society to which virtually all children and adolescents are consistently exposed for extended periods of time. Schools are vital and central community institutions.
3. As multidisciplinary entities, schools are the best place to integrate and coordinate the efforts of teachers, families, mental health service providers, and administrators to foster the mental health of students.
4. Accessible, affordable mental health services are most easily and consistently provided in the educational setting. Problems of transportation, accessibility, and stigma are minimized when such services are provided in schools.

The Role of School Psychologists as Mental Health Service Providers in the Schools

School psychologists are uniquely trained to integrate the knowledge and skill base of psychology with their specific training in learning, child development, and educational systems. Given this broad training and experience, school psychologists are well-qualified to provide comprehensive, cost-effective mental health services. School psychological services include but are not limited to consultation, counseling, assessment, the development and evaluation of prevention and intervention programs, the formulation of behavioral intervention plans, and crisis intervention. School psychologists also assist schools, administrators, teachers, families, and other community agencies in direct and indirect service delivery, systems level planning, and program evaluation.

Given the Significant Need for School Psychological Services

1. NASP advocates the expansion of coordinated and comprehensive school-based mental health services emphasizing prevention, education, and early intervention to all schools so that they are available to all students who need them.
2. NASP recognizes that intervention services provided by school psychologists are a cost-effective and efficacious means by which to deliver mental health services to children, adolescents, families and communities.
3. NASP advocates for increased federal, state, local, and private funding for mental health services in the schools.
4. NASP supports parity in insurance coverage to ensure that mental health services and funding for those services are as available as other types of health services.
5. NASP supports school reform that eliminates barriers to students' learning and includes school psychological services as an integral component of effective schools.
6. NASP promotes culturally competent school psychological services that are sensitive to the individual needs of students, their families, and their communities.
7. NASP considers the following to be hallmarks of exemplary mental health programs in the schools and supports inclusion of mental health programs which:
 - a. demonstrate a philosophy of family and consumer driven services;
 - b. are based on sound theory, research, and practice;
 - c. are respectful of cultural differences;
 - d. demonstrate a collaborative-participatory model;
 - e. make a continuum of mental health services available; and
 - f. evaluate program acceptability, integration, and efficacy.

References

- Mackay, A.P., Fingerhut, L.A., & Duran, C.R. Adolescent Health Chartbook: Health, United States, 2000. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2000.
- Nastasi, B.K., Pluymert, K., Varjas, K., & Moore, R.B. (2002). Exemplary mental health programs: School psychologists as mental health service providers. Bethesda, MD. NASP.
- Nastasi, B.K. (Ed.) (1998). Mini-Series: Mental Health Programming in Schools and Communities. *School Psychology Review*, 27 (2).
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, 1999.
- U.S. Public Health Service. Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000.
- Original statement adopted by NASP Delegate Assembly in 1998.

Revision of this statement adopted by NASP Delegate Assembly, April 12, 2003.

Approved by the CASP Board of Directors March 7, 2007.

© 2003 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda MD 20814 - 301-657-0270.