



## International Network for School Social Work

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

Contact [mhuxtable@olympus.net](mailto:mhuxtable@olympus.net)

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

### How to Do It

School social workers all over the world report that counseling school children with problems is one of their many roles. Teachers refer pupils who are causing problems in class, anticipating that the school social worker will solve the problems. The pupil in many cases does not see himself as the root of the problem, but rather as the victim of the system. It takes skill to work with an unwilling participant who is probably not enthusiastic about seeing the social worker.

Despite this resistance, the school social worker has some advantages in this situation. Knowing that changes in a child's behavior may not happen quickly, she can take the time needed to establish rapport, develop a trusting relationship, engage the various resources of the school and family and keep working on the problem as long as it takes. Groups of children with similar problems can also be brought together to extend the benefits to more pupils. In an age that looks for quick fixes using short-term therapy and medication, the school social worker can be flexible with how to use time and a variety of counseling methods. Another benefit is that a psychiatric label as a prerequisite to counseling does not apply when a school social worker provides the service.

In spite of the advantages of working in a school, the school social worker has many challenges in counseling troubled pupils. There is plenty of groundwork to do to gain the trust of the school administration and teachers, claim a reliable workspace, work out referral procedures and obtain parents' permission to see children. The rest of the groundwork is the never-ending effort to learn how to counsel children individually and in groups. Although children can and do talk about their problems, talking is usually not the only or even the main approach. A variety of tools are needed.

Teachers in every country use art, drama, story-telling, reading, writing, poetry, music, dance, movement, computers, sports and games to support educational goals. School social workers can use the same modalities and combine them with therapeutic methods that are suited to school settings (such as solution focused therapy and cognitive therapy) to reach counseling goals. Developing ways to use these activities provides scope for the school social worker's creativity and own interests, making counseling one of the most rewarding aspects of the work.

**Games.** Children would rather play than talk, and for the youngest children play is an essential part of learning. So play, including games, is an important resource for the school social worker to use with all age groups. There are many therapeutic games such as board games, but if none are

available, it is worth creating board games that help to assess the pupil's functioning and support the goals of counseling such as learning social skills, dealing with emotions and resolving conflict.

**Stories and Books.** When children hear the magic words “*Once upon a time*”, even unruly or alienated children get ready to listen, so being a good story-teller is a useful skill for the school social worker. Stories are the oldest form of entertainment and have been used in every culture to help children with developmental tasks, universal conflicts and transmitting cultural norms. Many folk tales and fairy tales have magical endings (such as when Prince Charming marries Cinderella), but the school social worker can either select more realistic stories or write them herself. For example, Cinderella could choose to find a fulfilling life and lift herself out of poverty and abuse by getting a college education. With practice the school social worker can develop stories for many of the issues children bring to school, and use them in individual and group counseling or with the entire class. The child's own stories are another useful tool in assessment and counseling.

**Role Play and Sociodrama.** Role-play is especially useful for learning social skills, including appropriate verbal and non-verbal behavior, how to handle conflict and how to be assertive. Sociodrama is an extension of story-telling with all age groups for handling common experiences.

**Art.** Visual arts give the school social worker endless opportunities for creativity in counseling children. If you are lucky the school has art supplies that can be used. Art is often used with children who have been abused to help them express their feelings and move towards recovery.



*You are Loved* murals are created with pupils in schools by artist Alex Cook <http://www.youarelovedmurals.com>

**Puppets.** Children bond easily with puppets, such as animal puppets and people puppets, and with stuffed animals, and use them to express feelings and conflicts that are otherwise hard to deal with. Children will tell the puppets more than they are willing to tell you.

**Music, Dance and Movement.** Music, dance and movement are ancient forms of expression in every culture. They are most often connected with therapy for children with special needs such as non-verbal children, but are powerful motivators for all young people, involving their auditory, visual and kinesthetic abilities and promoting expression of feelings in culturally acceptable ways.

**Technology.** Technology used in classrooms can also be used in counseling. Digital cameras and video cameras can enhance the use of role-play making it possible to replay enacted scenes for further discussion. U Tube, PowerPoint etc. can provide additional means for pupils to share what they have learned and, in doing so, increase their psychological investment in therapeutic goals. Remedial games and stories are enhanced using electronic therapeutic games and apps for problem-solving, learning self-control, relaxation, social skills etc.