

Developing capable youth: guidance in educational settings

William G Nicoll explains why schools will need to work more closely with counsellors to ensure future generations are emotionally and socially capable

The intended function of our educational system is, ultimately, to develop competent young adults prepared to assume the full complement of adult roles as responsible, productive citizens capable of making positive economic and social contributions in our society. Education has, over the past century, focused primarily upon teaching the academic skills deemed necessary for fulfilling future occupational roles. However, schools have remained rather ambivalent about their role in developing pupils' social competencies. While the past century has witnessed periodic movements calling for guidance programmes to address pupils' social, moral or character development, these programmes have typically been short-lived and more likely to embody ideologically or politically-based agendas rather than research-based programmes.

Research, however, has clearly identified social competence as being at least, if not more, important as cognitive and academic preparedness in determining both school and future life success¹⁻³. Johnson and Johnson⁴ concluded in their research that social competencies appear to be the most important set of skills influencing one's future employability, productiveness and career success. This appears to argue strongly for the development and implementation of sound research-based developmental guidance programmes in educational settings. Such programmes would strive to foster essential social competencies in youth. Social competence and academic competence are not competing curricular topics in education. Rather, it appears that both are necessary to adequately prepare young people to assume successfully the full complement of adult roles as responsible, productive citizens.

A research-based rationale for developmental guidance in educational settings

Developmental psychologists now recognise social competence as a significant indicator of children's overall positive adaptation or wellness^{5,6}. Research has demonstrated that social competencies such as responsiveness to others, empathy, caring, communication skills, humour, positive relationship skills, flexibility and adaptability in solving social problems are the key attributes explaining resiliency in at-risk youth. When these social skills are present,

youth are more likely to develop into healthy, competent young adults despite the presence of an initially adverse life situation⁹. Conversely, most adjustment problems manifested by children and adolescents, such as substance abuse, violence, crime, depression and school failure, have been directly linked to inadequate social skills¹⁰⁻¹⁴. Inadequate social competence has further been empirically demonstrated to be predictive of adult psychiatric problems^{15,16}.

However, recent studies have also indicated that a child's long-term social and emotional adaptation, academic success and cognitive development can be enhanced through exposure to opportunities for developing and strengthening social competence during childhood¹⁷⁻¹⁹.

Research on at-risk youth who seem immune to the negative consequences normally associated with their life circumstances, ie resilient youth, indicates that abilities such as responsiveness to others, caring, empathy, communication skills, humour, positive social relationships, flexibility and adaptability in solving social problems are the key attributes explaining their development into healthy, competent young adults⁹. Goleman³, and Mayer and Salovey²⁰, have termed this social competence 'emotional intelligence' (EQ).

Given the significant body of empirical evidence linking social competence to both academic and future life success, as well as the inverse correlation with adjustment problems of youth, it would seem appropriate for counsellors working in educational settings to turn their efforts increasingly towards a developmental, preventive approach. Such a developmental paradigm for services would be intended to facilitate the development of mental health in youth (ie social competence) and be less focused upon the more traditional, remedial approach of treating pathology through individual and group therapy. As the California task force to promote self-esteem and personal and social responsibility²¹ suggested, we need to work towards the development of a 'social vaccine' for youth. We need to develop programmes and practices in our schools and communities that create positive child-rearing environments and promote the development of key social competencies so as to immunise youth from the myriad of social stressors

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and problems they will encounter over the course of their lives. To accomplish this requires first, a sound developmental framework for conceptualising mental health, and second, practical strategies for developing these competencies in youth through developmentally based programmes delivered through educational settings.

A developmental model for mental health

Defining mental health has been rather insufficiently addressed by, quite ironically, the greater mental health field. However, those who have addressed the issue of defining mental health have arrived at very similar conclusions. Abraham Maslow²² used the term 'social synergy' to indicate that the mentally healthy individual fuses what is good for him/herself with the needs and interests of others. The Viennese psychiatrist, Alfred Adler²³, suggested the term *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* as the criterion for mental health. The term has been generally translated in English as 'social interest'. Ansbacher²⁴ summarised Adler's writings on the concept of social interest suggesting that Adler described it as more a life process, an interest in the concerns of humankind, a sense of security and feeling at home on this earth through feeling oneself to be connected to others on an equal and co-operative basis. The mentally healthy individual, Adler²³ suggested, is able to understand and appreciate the subjective experiences and opinions of others and behaves in a responsible, cooperative and contributing manner in his/her relationships with others. Most problems manifested by children and youth, therefore, could be traced back to insufficient development of their social interest. That is, they lack a sufficiently developed sense of self as being connected to, and accepted and valued by, others as respected and capable equals. Such youth had received insufficient training in the essential social skills for living in harmony and equality with others; their social interest had been inadequately fostered and developed in their social environments of family, school and community²³.

In his review of Adler's writings on the concept of social interest (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), Ansbacher²⁴ identified a developmental stage model implied by Adler for healthy social emotional development, ie mental health. Adler's stage model has been modified slightly here so as to be consistent with the resiliency research and is illustrated in Figure 1.

In stage one, mental health, or social interest, is viewed as an innate aptitude for cooperative, responsible social living. However, this aptitude for social interest must then be developed through training in the home, school and community. Thus, in stage two, the individual is taught the objective skills of mental health, and the aptitude is developed through training in essential social competencies. Five essential social competencies appear to be implied in Adler's writings on social interest:

Stage one: An innate social aptitude with potential for development through training.

Stage two: A set of objective social skills learned through training in the home, school and community:

- understanding and respecting self and others
- empathy
- communication
- cooperation
- responsibility

Stage three: A subjective attitude towards life and others and based on which one attaches meaning to life events and makes behavioural choices.

Figure 1: Developmental stages of social-emotional competence

- understanding and respecting oneself and others' skills
- empathy skills
- communication skills
- cooperation skills
- responsibility skills.

Having learned these essential social skills, stage three evolves, and the person begins to value them and chooses and evaluates his or her actions based upon the degree to which they reflect the five social competencies. As noted by Ryan²⁵, this stage model activates Aristotle's idea that one becomes virtuous by performing virtuous acts, kind by doing kind acts, and brave by doing brave acts. For Adler, one becomes mentally healthy by learning the objective social skills that enable one to act in a socially healthy, responsible and contributing manner.

This model of mental health is very compatible with the recent ideas of emotional intelligence (EQ) put forward by Goleman³, and Mayer and Salovey²⁰. Goleman defines emotional intelligence as involving several dimensions including: knowing one's own feelings, making good decisions in life, being motivated, remaining hopeful and optimistic during setbacks, empathy towards others and the social skills of getting along with others and being able to both work with and lead others²⁶. Echoing the earlier ideas of Adler²⁷, Goleman³ suggests that the educational system should take a more active role in developing pupils' emotional intelligence. By doing so, he argues, schools would better prepare pupils both for academic success and for assuming a useful, contributing place in society. This view is reminiscent of Adler's²³, noting that a teacher's job could be simultaneously amplified and simplified by developing pupils' social competencies: 'I must point out that children who do develop in the

direction of social interest and strive for the general welfare are the very ones who achieve in their studies' and 'It is certainly easier to teach social-minded, well-balanced, useful children than to drag along a number of maladjusted, negligent ones'.

That social and academic competencies are actually complementary rather than competing issues in the education of youth is reflected in the writings of Adler²⁷, Benard¹, Goleman³, Mayer and Salovey²⁰, and numerous other authors.

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research evidence has accumulated in support of Adler's original comments. Children who fail to achieve adequate social competencies have a high probability of being at-risk through adolescence and into adulthood and of experiencing a variety of problems including poor mental health, dropping out of school, low achievement and other school difficulties.

A developmental framework for guidance programmes in educational settings

Counselling services in educational settings clearly must focus their interventions increasingly upon developing essential social competencies in children and adolescents rather than on treating psycho-educational pathologies, disabilities, dysfunctions and disorders. Further, by working in partnership with classroom teachers, the development of pupil social competencies can be integrated with academic competence, thereby fulfilling the school's true purpose of preparing youth to assume responsibility and prepare adult roles in society. A classroom guidance programme specifically designed to teach the essential social competencies associated with resilience and healthy development would empower youth and provide the 'social vaccine' suggested by the 1990 California task force²¹. By working in partnership with counsellors to integrate the social competency skills into the established curriculum in each subject area, teachers would be able to improve significantly pupils' depth of understanding and critical thinking skills in subject-content areas, while reinforcing these essential social competencies. Courses in language, arts, reading, social studies and history appear particularly appropriate for combining social and academic skill development. In the UK, this approach has been integrated within PSHE (personal, social and health education) modules, an aspect of the tradition of pastoral care within primary and secondary educational settings, but this has been only marginally effective in meeting the social needs of young people. Currently, in England, a comprehensive reorganisation of children's services is underway at national and local authority levels. Children's centres are being extended around the country to meet the educational, social and health needs of young children and their families in a one-stop shop model, and a new qualification in 'Integrated centre leadership' was successfully

piloted in 2004/05 and is being rolled out from 2005/07. Primary and secondary schools are being funded to become 'extended schools', integrating social and health support services for young people and their families.]

Music, art, foreign languages, science and even mathematics can also lend themselves to the reinforcement of essential social competencies. Such programmes would not only improve the academic competence and success of pupils, but prevent, or at least decrease, the myriad of social adjustment difficulties of youth such as bullying, substance abuse, school drop-outs, gang membership and delinquency.

The five objective skills of mental health, or social interest, form the basis for a theoretically and empirically sound model for developmental guidance interventions with youth. The schools provide the ideal setting for delivering such a preventive, developmental programme to improve the social and academic competencies of all children and adolescents. The skills build upon one another and therefore can be taught in a sequential manner, with the skills of each new stage building upon those of the preceding stage. Initially, the counsellor can work in partnership with the classroom teacher to develop pupils' skills in understanding and respecting self and others, and then proceed to the following skills as the class begins to demonstrate basic competencies in each skill. Follow-up classroom instructional activities are suggested with each activity enabling the teacher to reinforce each social competency through direct academic instruction in a content area. Suggested 'homework' activities designed to involve parents in the teaching of these essential social competency areas are also included.

The programme is to be repeated through each grade level in a spiralling manner such that each class group repeats the five skills but with differing, and developmentally appropriate, learning activities. This process results not only in pupils developing the skills and attitudes necessary for mental health (ie social interest), but simultaneously the classroom group evolves into an increasingly more cohesive, cooperative and supportive unit, thereby increasing the efficiency of classroom academic instruction. In addition, by including parent involvement in homework activities, the home and school collaborate in the development of both social and academic competence in children. As noted by Benard¹⁹ optimal development in youth appears to be the result of the development of two primary processes: development of the essential social competencies in youth, and the presence of supportive social environments of home, school and community. The developmental guidance programme outlined here strives to facilitate both these processes.

Examples of specific classroom guidance skill development activities along with follow-up supplementary classroom and home activities are

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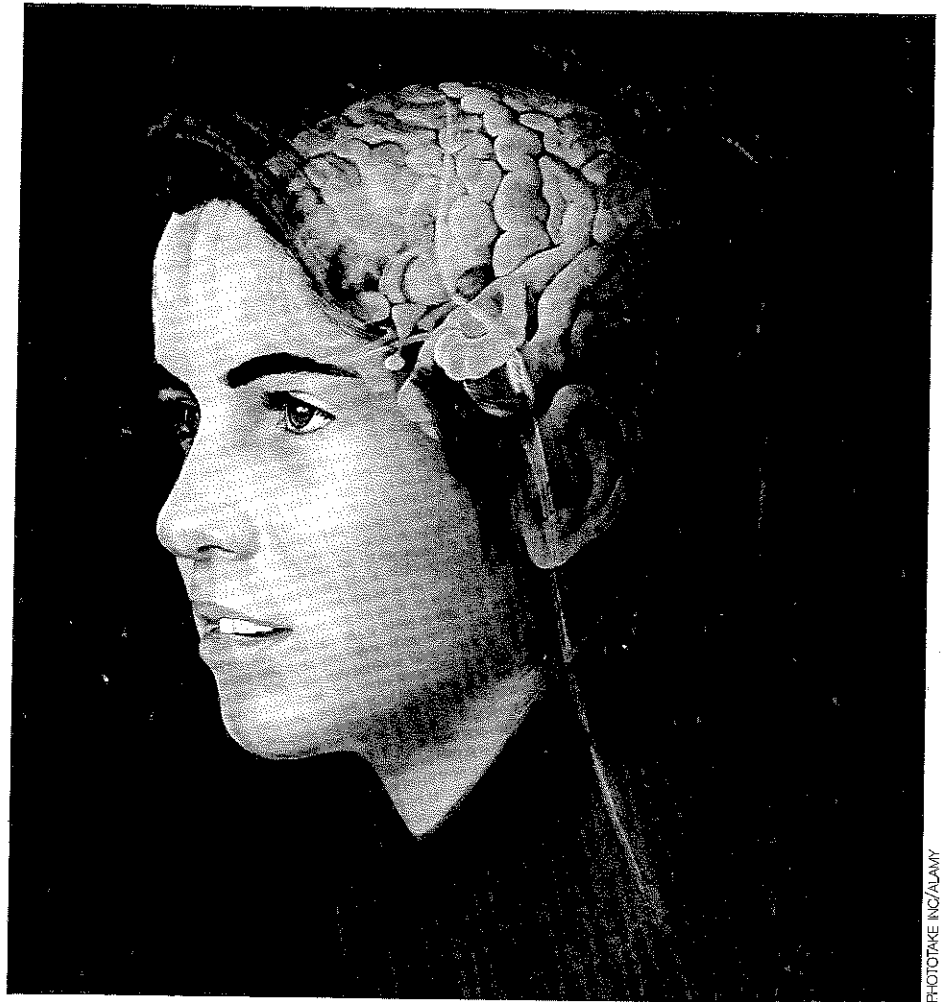


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included in Appendices A and B (p19-20). Specific learning activities in the five social competency skill areas can be drawn for a wide range of current character education and social skills training programmes. Counsellors and teachers can also work collaboratively to develop further activities for their particular school community needs. Skill five, responsibility, is intended to be developed and expanded in a variety of directions depending upon the situation and developmental issues faced by any particular group of youth including: career development, substance misuse, conflict resolution, ethical decision-making, sexuality education, problem-solving and so forth.

Best results have been realised by using more experiential learning activities rather than group discussion formats. However, it is best to conclude each learning experience with a follow-up group discussion. With younger children, the follow-up discussion should be kept relatively short (maximum 10 minutes). As the age and grade level of the children rises, the ratio of experiential activity to discussion moves increasingly towards a one-to-one ratio. The counsellor leads the group through a five-step follow-up discussion:

- what occurred during this activity?
- how did you feel at the beginning, middle and end of the activity?
- what did you learn from this activity?
- what similar situations occur in your life where you could apply this skill? *or* when was there a time that this information or skill would have helped you?
- what might you do to use this skill in future situations?

Summary

Counsellors working in educational settings can optimise their effectiveness by turning to resiliency-based, developmental guidance programmes consistent with the concepts of social interest, emotional intelligence, character and social skills discussed throughout the literature on the development of socially well-adjusted, capable youth. Such a positive, preventive model is well supported by the empirical research on child and adolescent adjustment and school/career success. The goal of this, the 'Developing capable youth' classroom guidance programme delineated here, is to fulfil the long unheeded call made over fifteen years ago by the California task force to promote

self-esteem and personal and social responsibility²¹ to develop a social vaccine for youth. The 'Developing capable youth' programme is intended primarily to be implemented in our schools so as to foster social-emotional competence. This aims at immunising youth from the myriad of social problems and life stressors that they will encounter throughout their lives. Simultaneously the programme is intended to develop more effective learners and more supportive home, school and community environments. In so doing, counsellors in educational settings would significantly contribute to the educational system's ultimate goal of preparing youth to successfully assume their full complement of adult roles as responsible, productive citizens prepared to make both an economic/occupational and social contribution in our global society. ■

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Appendix A: Friendship books

Social competency unit: Understanding and respecting self and others. US grade level: 1-3; UK ages 5-8

Objective To assist pupils in recognising characteristics of a friendly relationship and to teach them to identify and plan an activity that shows good friendship skills and appreciation of another.

Materials Chalk board, news print, overhead projector, chalk, marker, overhead pen, and worksheet on 'Things a good friend does'.

Lesson

Introduction

Ask the class: *Why are friends important? How many have or had a best friend?* Then have the class list famous friendships from history and literature we know about and list on the board: eg, Pooh and Piglet, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.

Activity

Step 1. *What made each of these famous friends such good friends? Let's brainstorm a list of what makes a person a good friend (make a list on chalk board, news print or overhead).*

Step 2. *Now let's think of some things friends do for each other that makes us want them for our friend (again, list on board, news print or overhead).*

Step 3. *Wow! It sounds like friends are really important! Let's think about what each of us can do this week to be a good friend to someone and let them know that we really care about them and appreciate their friendship (elicit a few suggestions).*

Step 4. *Those are some good ideas to get us thinking. Let's each take a few minutes to develop a plan, something special we could do this week, to be a good friend and let someone know how much we appreciate their friendship. Write your plan on the worksheet I'm passing out to each of you now. You may also draw a picture of you and your friend when you are implementing your plan and being a good and special friend. We will then put all our ideas into a special book to keep in class on 'How to be a good friend'.*

Closure

Begin by sharing pupils' picture stories: *Ok, let's share some of the ideas we've come up with on how to be a good friend.* After a few sharings of their ideas, collect the pupils' worksheets and create a bookbinder organising their worksheets into a booklet. Let the pupils know it will be left in the reading area of the room for pupils to look at during the week.

How many of you think you will use some of these ideas this week to be a good friend to someone?

Try to think about other things you can do all the time, or something your friend has done that makes them a special friend. Let pupils know you will leave out extra worksheets for that, as they come up with new ideas: *We can add them to the friendship book.*

Suggested classroom follow-up activities

- Choose stories in your instructional reading programme or for reading to the class that deal with friendships, eg *Charlotte's Web*, *Tom Sawyer*.
- Create an 'I spy' bulletin board. The bulletin board can have a pirate ship with a crow's nest lookout and spyglass or just a large eye looking out. Then place them at the top of, 'I spied examples of good friendship skills'. From the spyglass or eye, place pieces of string going out in different directions. After school throughout the week place pieces of paper at the end of each string with the names of pupils whom you, the teacher, have observed displaying good friendship skills along with a brief description of the behaviour observed. Try to add new examples each evening so that each pupil is recognised for a specific behaviour by the week's end.

Suggested home follow-up activities

- Have pupils interview their parents or another family member regarding: 'Who is your best friend and what do they do that makes them special to you?' Pupils can share their parents' answers in class the next day.
- Suggest a list of books to parents that involve friendship that they could read with their children this week.
- Ask parents to write a short description of things their son/daughter has done to be a special friend to someone over the years. Pupils or the teacher can read these in class at the end of the week.

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