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Working With Families: A Rationale for School Counseling Programs

William G. Nicoll, PhD

Family dynamics and parental involvement have been consistently identified as key factors influencing children's academic success and social adjustment. In their review of the research on student achievement, Good and Brophy (1986) concluded that the research to date indicates family factors account for more of the variance in student achievement than do curricular and instructional variables. A recent national longitudinal study on adolescent health concluded that both family and school social contexts are associated with health and risky behaviors in adolescents. In particular, parent-family connectedness and perceived school connectedness were found to be protective against every major health risk behavior measure for adolescents, including suicidality, violence, substance abuse, tobacco use, and emotional distress (Resnick et al., 1997). The researchers concluded that health professionals, social service providers, and educators must begin to take steps to diminish the risk factors and enhance protective factors for our youth. Programs focused on preventive and early intervention services with families could greatly enhance students' academic success and social adjustment as well as increase parental involvement and support for the school itself.

Henderson and Berla (1995) concluded from their review of family-school effects research that there is strong evidence documenting that when schools provide support to families, children realize benefits such as higher grades and test scores, better school attendance, fewer special education placements, more positive attitudes and behavior, higher graduation rates, and increased enrollment in postsecondary education. In addition, Henderson and Berla also pointed out that research has demonstrated that schools and communities also benefit from such family-focused school programs through improved teacher morale, higher ratings of teachers by parents, more support from families, higher student achievement, and better reputations in the community.

In light of such findings linking family dynamics to children's school success, two of the eight National Education Goals stress the importance of family factors in children's education. Goal One states that all children should start school "ready to learn" and notes that parents are the child's first teachers and need to assist their preschool children in developing this readiness. Goal Eight states directly that every school will promote partnerships that increase parental involvement and participation to promote the social, emotional, and academic growth of children (National Educational Goals Panel, 1994). Yet, as Susan McAllister Swap (1993) has since noted,

Given the widespread recognition that parent involvement in schools is important, that it is unequivocally related to improvement in children's achievement and that improvement in children's achievement is urgently needed, it is paradoxical that most schools do not have a comprehensive parent involvement program. (p. 12)

Although most educators and researchers support the educational policy direction of increasing parent involvement, few agree as to what constitutes effective involvement (Baker & Soden, 1998), and fewer still seem to be actively seeking to initiate comprehensive programs.

Counselors working directly in the schools are ideally situated to coordinate and provide such comprehensive family-school programs. Counseling interventions for child and adolescent difficulties are far more effective when directed at altering interaction patterns of the significant adults in the child's life. Parent education and parent-teacher resource centers, along with a family systems approach to counseling, consultation, and intervention services, appear to be ideal strategies for increasing the visibility and effective-

tiveness of school counselors while simultaneously providing optimal services to the school community. Yet, school counselors typically do not receive significant training in family counseling during their professional preparation courses, and fewer still actively initiate a comprehensive family counseling and family involvement component into their comprehensive school counseling program. Indeed, most models for developing comprehensive school counseling programs ignore or minimize the counselor's function in working with parents and families (e.g., Dahir, Sheldon, & Valiga, 1998; Gysbers & Henderson, 1988; Myrick, 1993; Walz, 1988). Clearly, the current state of the art in school counseling programs is out of sync with the research base on the importance of family dynamics and children's social and academic achievement.

This chapter, therefore, reviews the research literature regarding family dynamics and student achievement to establish an empirically sound rationale for establishing a family-focused component within existing school counseling programs. Following the review, key components of a family-focused school counseling program are delineated for possible program redesign and development.

Family Involvement and Achievement

From birth to age 18, children spend only 9% of their time in school (White-Clark & Decker, 1996). Parents obviously, therefore, play a crucial role in the development of intelligence, achievement, and academic competence in their children because much of the remaining 91% of children's lives consist mainly of parental and family interactions. Research has consistently highlighted the importance of the family in determining children's school success and social adjustment.

Children whose parents are involved in educational activities at home or in school activities achieve more in school, regardless of socioeconomic status (Benson, Buckley, & Medtrich, 1980). Achievement test scores have been found to vary directly with the number of hours parents spend involved in activities related to the school program (Irvine, 1979). Parents of high achievers visit their children's school more often, get acquainted with the teachers, and become involved in school activities. Parents of high achievers also are found to set high standards for their children's educational activities and maintain a home environment that supports learning. These parents are more involved in home learning activities, and their children spend more time on homework (Clark, 1993).

Children in elementary school are more likely than children in middle or high school to have parents who are highly involved in their school (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Nord, 1998). However, Dauber and Epstein (1993) also found that the level of parent involvement is directly correlated to the specific practices that schools and teachers use to encourage involvement at school and to guide parents in how to help their children at home. Important types of parental involvement that have been found to affect student success include:

- providing a stimulating environment that emphasizes literacy;
- holding high expectations for school and home performance, with moderate levels of parental support and supervision;
- monitoring homework completion and reinforcing of school assignments;
- emphasizing effort more than ability;
- engaging in practices that promote independence and problem-solving strategies;
- frequently responding to and interacting with children; and
- acting as models of learning and achievement (Baker & Soden, 1998; Becher, 1984; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Williams, 1994).

Deslandes, Royer, and Turcotte (1997) in a study of 525 ninth-grade students found that parental involvement in terms of affective support, communication with teachers, and family discussions regarding school, grades, and achievement was positively correlated with school grades. Further, they found that improved school grades were also associated with the adolescent's perception of parents as being firm, warm, involved, and democratic (i.e., authoritative). Similarly, Hickman, Greenwood, and Miller (1995) found that among high school students parent involvement was correlated with grade point average when involvement included active support, communication with the school regarding the child's progress, advocacy, and home-based learning activities. However, parental involvement that included volunteering at the school and serving on school committees did not seem to affect student grade point average.

In a study by Clark (1993) involving more than 1,100 elementary-age students, findings indicated that parents of high achievers were more involved in home learning activities, and their children spent more time on homework. Interestingly, parents of low achievers assisted their children with homework more but spent less time on home learning. High achievers came from a wide variety of family backgrounds, but in all cases parents typically set high standards

for their children's educational activities and maintained a home environment supportive of learning.

Benson, Buckley, and Medrich (1980) gathered data from parents of 764 sixth graders to examine the relationship between specific parent-child interactions and school performance. They concluded that elementary school children whose parents spend time with them in educational activities achieve more in school, regardless of socioeconomic status, although the effects of different types of activities are different for low-income children versus middle- or high-income children. Unlike children in higher income families, low-income students did not show any positive effect on achievement for going to cultural activities. Across all socioeconomic groups, however, parental encouragement of hobbies, participation in organized activities, family dinner times, and family activities on weekends were found to be the most powerful family parent-child interaction predictors of academic achievement.

A study of extremely talented young professionals from difficult competitive fields conducted to determine common factors that might predict such future success indicated that the most common characteristic impacting the professionals' general education, specialized training, and achievement was enthusiastic parent involvement (Bloom, 1985). Parent enthusiasm was the main confirmation that the goals the professionals were pursuing were entirely worthwhile and fully within their reach.

Similar to Bloom's findings, Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore (1992) conducted a study of academically successful Southeast Asian children who immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s and found that high academic success can be traced to strong family values regarding the importance of education and a home environment that supports learning. Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore noted in their results that several significant values and family practices were correlated with high achievement. These included parents reading aloud to their children, homework dominating weeknight activities, relative equality existing between the sexes, a love of learning being present, parents holding a strong belief in the children's potential to master their own destinies, and parents placing an emphasis on education as the key to social acceptance and economic success. Encouragement of academic rigor and excellence led to high achievement. These researchers concluded that when families instill a respect for education and create a home environment that encourages learning, children do better in school.

Although the importance of parental involvement has been clearly established in the research, there is wide variance among parents

and schools in regard to parent involvement. More highly educated parents and parents with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be actively involved in their children's schools (Vaden-Kiernan & Davis, 1993; Zill & Nord, 1994). However, school policies and teacher practices are significant factors influencing the level of parental involvement in children's education (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1990). It is likely that less educated parents and parents who themselves had negative school experiences are intimidated by, or reluctant to become actively involved in, their children's school. Thus, counselors, teachers, and administrators must work to develop policies and practices that actively encourage all parents to become involved and that diminish the inhibiting factors that prevent some parents from actively participating.

Parenting Style and Achievement

Although the quantity of parent involvement in children's school experience and learning activities has been much discussed as a key contributor to children's academic and social success, the quality of the parent-child relationship may be even more important. The family's main contribution to success in school is made through the parent-child relationship (Nicoll, 1991, 1992, 1994). The nature of this relationship can have either a positive or adverse impact on student achievement. As early as 1951, early reading success was correlated with family interaction patterns, such as communication patterns, expression of positive affect, parental discipline styles, and home socialization practices (Milner, 1951). Fifty years of subsequent research has provided clear and convincing evidence of the powerful role family dynamics play in children's school success, indeed even more powerful than school instructional variables (Ferguson, 1991; Good & Brophy, 1986).

Characteristic parent-child interaction patterns—that is, parenting style—appear to be the most powerful family variable influencing children's academic success and social adjustment. Baumrind's (1967, 1975) original three parenting style typology has been more recently expanded to a typology of four basic parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive-indulgent, and permissive-disengaged (Darling, 1999; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Nicoll, 1991, 1992). Authoritarian (or autocratic) parents are defined as being highly demanding and directive but providing little positive emotional support. Such parents seek to shape and control the child's behaviors and attitudes and focus on behavior control, or compli-

ance as parenting strategies (e.g., reward and punishment). Authoritative parents establish clear standards and expectations of their children and also use supportive rather than punitive disciplinary methods. Such parents take a strong, active interest in the totality of their children's lives, setting reasonable, firm limits without being intrusive and overly controlling. A positive, respectful, and encouraging relationship is maintained, and children are expected to assume responsibility in their lives. The permissive-indulgent parenting style involves a high level of responsiveness by the parent but a low level of limit and boundary setting. Such parents place a high value on making the child's life happy and tend to avoid firm limits and expectations for responsible, respectful behavior. The permissive-disengaged parenting style is described as being low on both parental responsiveness and parental demands. Children are left to self-regulate their behavior and activities, and the parent shows little or no interest in the child as an individual, fulfilling primarily the instrumental care-taking roles of providing food, clothing, and shelter but not the essential affective support.

Probably the most extensive study of parenting styles and academic achievement was conducted by Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, and Fraleigh (1987). They found that significant and very consistent relationships existed between parenting styles and student grades. A questionnaire was distributed to 7,836 students attending six high schools in the San Francisco Bay area. About 88% of the total enrollment responded. Questions covered student background, self-reported grades, perceptions of parent attitudes and behavior, and family communication patterns. Three parenting styles (authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative) were identified and correlated with student grades, parent education levels, ethnicity, and family structure.

Across all ethnic groups, education levels, and family structures, the researchers consistently found that authoritarian parenting was associated with the lowest grades, permissive parenting with the next lowest, and authoritative with the highest grades (mean grade point average of 3.2). Inconsistent parenting—switching from one style to the other—was found to be strongly associated with low grades. These researchers concluded that parenting style is a more powerful predictor of student achievement than parent education, ethnicity, or family structure.

A later study by the same researchers was conducted to examine the extent to which positive effects of authoritative parenting held across various ethnic groups, social classes, and family structures (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1989). The sample con-

sisted of 8,000 high school students from nine high schools in Wisconsin and California. Results were consistent with the previously cited research in that authoritative parenting was positively correlated with academic success. Furthermore, the study examined other social-psychological outcomes of parenting style and found authoritative parenting also to be positively correlated with greater adolescent self-reliance, less psychological distress, and less delinquent behavior.

Ginsburg and Bronstein (1993) in a study of fifth-grade students found overcontrolling parental styles, characterized by high parental surveillance of homework, punitive reactions to grades, and use of extrinsic rewards for achievement, to be correlated with lower academic performance and decreased motivation to learn. Conversely, the parent-child relationship experienced by successful students is more likely to be characterized by frequent dialogues between parents and children, strong parent encouragement of academic pursuits, clear and consistent limits for children, warm and nurturing interactions, and consistent monitoring of how time is used (Clark, 1983). Children of parents who set clear limits and expectations such that their children know what is expected of them, and who model behaviors that emphasize education, perform better in school (Williams, 1994). Moreover, such authoritative parenting styles are also associated with decreased substance abuse, fewer mental health problems, and fewer behavioral problems with adolescents, along with improved academic achievement (Cohen & Rice, 1997; Shek, 1997). Authoritative parenting includes a high degree of involvement, a high degree of monitoring, and a high degree of psychological autonomy granting (Lam, 1997).

Clark (1983) conducted in-depth case studies of 10 Black families living in Chicago public housing projects. Clark's findings indicated that in the high achievers' homes, regardless of whether the family had one or two parents, the parenting style was considered authoritative and characterized by frequent dialogues between parents and children, strong parent encouragement of academic pursuits, clear and consistent limits for children, warm and nurturing interactions, and consistent monitoring of how time is used. Clark concluded that the overall quality of a family's lifestyle, not marital status, educational level, income, or social surroundings, is what determines children's level of preparedness for competent school performance. Further, his results supported the previously cited research on parental involvement, noting that parents of high achievers also visited the school periodically, got acquainted with the teachers, and became involved in various school activities.

Several other studies have consistently found a positive relationship between authoritative parenting style and academic achievement. In a study of parenting style and achievement with eighth graders at two inner-city Midwestern communities, Lam (1997) obtained similar results. In her sample of 181 students, she found a significant positive relationship between authoritative parenting and academic achievement. Slicker (1998) found that authoritative parenting styles were correlated with better school adjustment among high school students. Johnson's (1997) study of kindergarten and first-grade students and Marjoribanks' (1996) study of elementary-age students both producing results supportive of the previous studies, indicating that parenting style was associated with academic achievement and social achievement.

Vandell and Posner (1998) studied parenting style effects on achievement and behavioral adjustment of elementary school students from low-income urban families. Firm, authoritative parenting was found to be associated with better academic performance, social behavior, and child responsibility both at home and in school. Parental harshness was correlated with lower academic achievement and increased behavior difficulties in the home and school. Furthermore, the strength of the correlations increased by grade level, suggesting that without intervention the problems developing in the early elementary years will escalate as the child progresses through the educational system. Cohen and Rice (1997) found similar results regarding authoritative parenting styles among adolescents. In a study of eighth- and ninth-grade students, they found adolescents' perceptions of parenting styles to be positively correlated with academic achievement. Additionally, they found adolescent tobacco and alcohol use to be correlated with higher permissive and authoritarian parenting styles and inversely correlated with authoritative parenting styles.

Fathers and Education

Researchers investigating children's adjustment issues have tended to focus primarily on mothers and children. School programs for parents have also traditionally been heavily dominated by mothers who are more likely than fathers to attend a school event (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Some researchers have estimated that at least 50% of all children today will spend at least some portion of their school years in a single-parent household (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). The overwhelming majority of these children will live with their mothers as the custodial single parent. The tendency, therefore, is for

schools to focus on mothers' school involvement rather than fathers'. However, although the research on the fathers' influences on children's adjustment is still somewhat limited and inconsistent in design, the importance of the father's role must be recognized and father involvement fostered.

Studies have typically found that fathers are more likely to be involved with their sons than with their daughters (Lamb, 1986; Marsiglio, 1991). Close father-son relationships appear to be correlated with the cognitive abilities of boys and the development of analytic skills (Radin, 1981). Thompson (1986) has also found that although fathers tend to spend less time with their children, the importance of fathers in children's development actually increases as children grow older. Although mothers play a stronger role in emotional support and companionship, fathers seem to be associated more with learning and achievement factors in children's lives. One plausible conclusion from the existing body of research is that maternal involvement is beneficial for the social and emotional adjustment of children to school but that paternal involvement may be most important for academic achievement (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1997).

Counselors working with children experiencing academic difficulties are well advised to attempt to involve fathers as well as mothers in their interventions. This may involve flexible scheduling of conferences and specific requests or calls to fathers to attend such conferences or counseling sessions. Further, school counselors need to take a proactive approach to encouraging paternal involvement in their children's education. Father-focused programs at the school and information on the importance of paternal involvement should be provided. Programs can be implemented to meet the unique needs of all types of fathers, including fathers in two-parent homes, single custodial parent fathers, and noncustodial fathers. Such programs should also take into consideration the cultural backgrounds of fathers and the role this may play in their approach to parenting.

Implications for Teacher Consultation

The importance of parenting style—that is, parent-child interaction patterns—in relation to academic and social-behavioral adjustment has implications for classroom climate and teaching style. Paulsen, Marchant, and Rothlisberg (1997) found that students' perceptions of parenting style in regard to high responsiveness, valuing achievement, involvement in school functions, and moderate parental demands were correlated with higher achievement. However, they

also found that similar patterns in the teacher's relationship style with students had similar outcome effects. High teacher responsiveness, classroom structure, and positive school atmosphere were correlated with higher achievement. Further analyses revealed that students who perceived authoritative adult-child interaction styles at home and at school had the highest grades, perceptions of grade importance, and perceptions of their own competence. Students who perceived incongruent styles between home and school had lower achievement, with lowest achievement outcomes occurring with the combination of neglectful, disengaged parenting styles and authoritarian teaching styles.

Many studies have identified teacher-student relationship variables as important correlates of students' academic performance, learning motivation, and school attitudes (Chiu & Tulley, 1997; Pert & Campbell, 1999; Wentzel, 1997; Wilson, 1997). Students who view their teachers as empathic, warm, friendly, and as having a genuine concern for them as individuals appear to perform better academically, display more positive attitudes toward school, and engage in fewer problematic classroom behaviors (Aspy, Roebuck, & Aspy, 1984; Branwhite, 1988; Niebuhr & Niebuhr, 1999; Waxman, 1983; Weishen & Peng, 1993). School counselors need to be able to go beyond family counseling and apply a similar systemic intervention strategy in teacher consultation regarding student difficulties. Preventive in-service training programs in effective teacher-student relationship styles might also be provided for school staff as part of a comprehensive school counseling program. Such programs might include training in authoritative classroom management strategies and the development of a positive classroom climate as well as in effective parent conferencing skills and strategies for fostering home-school collaboration.

It is interesting to note that teachers are often specifically trained to use classroom behavior management models that are authoritarian in nature—and focused on behavioral compliance through the use of reward and punishment strategies. Such models are often taught to educators through both preservice and in-service training programs, despite the large body of research that contraindicates the use of such models because they adversely impact students' academic achievement, learning motivation, and social adjustment. It is highly probable that teachers and administrators, trained in such counterproductive approaches, will be likely to suggest similar strategies to parents when confronted with a child's school adjustment difficulty. Dornbusch et al. (1987), for example, found that parents, when dealing with a child's behavior problem, will tend to use more intensive

strategies consistent with the parenting style already employed (i.e., more authoritarian, more permissive, more disengaged, or more authoritative), which serves to exacerbate problems for those employing authoritarian, permissive, or disengaged parenting styles.

Developing Family-Focused Counseling Programs in Schools

Given the overwhelming research evidence documenting the key role played by family dynamics in children's social and academic adjustment, school counselors and other professionals working with children's academic and social adjustment difficulties must be prepared to provide both preventive and direct counseling services to parents and families (Nicol, 1984, 1992, 1994). Further, given the evidence documenting the effects of classroom climate, teacher-student interaction styles, and home-school collaboration on students' academic achievement, consulting and training services must also be provided for teachers and other school personnel in these areas.

Family-focused school counseling programs should strive to facilitate the development of congruent adult-child interaction styles in home and school that are based on the authoritative model, thereby creating a common vocabulary and shared understanding of children among the primary caregivers—parents and teachers. School counseling programs need to place greater emphasis on developing strategies for facilitating positive, effective parent involvement and home-school collaboration programs through parent education programs and the establishment of parent-teacher resource centers in the schools. In addition, school counseling programs need to place greater emphasis on providing direct brief family counseling and solution-focused parent conference interventions. Such programs will not only increase the effectiveness of the counseling interventions but also increase community support for the school and counseling program.

Family Counseling and Consultation

Family counseling and consulting services can be delivered directly through the schools (Nicol, 1992, 1994). For example, referrals for either academic or psychosocial adjustment concerns might include an assessment of possible family functioning factors in the etiology and maintenance of the problem behavior. Shek (1997),

for example, found that adolescents' (i.e., children 12 to 16 years of age) perceptions of family functioning level were strongly correlated with mental health problems, problematic behaviors, and poorer academic achievement. Counselors, therefore, need to work directly with the family as well as the student in their assessment and intervention strategies.

Given the large caseloads of counselors working in schools and the complexity of their tasks and responsibilities, brief family counseling and consultation intervention models seem particularly well suited to the educational setting (Nicol, 1992). Such an approach allows both parents and teachers to become involved collaboratively in resolving student learning and behavioral difficulties in partnership with the counselor and student. Parents and teachers can be assisted in recognizing the interactional patterns within the family system, as well as the classroom system, that may be maintaining the presenting problem. Counselors are then in a position to develop interventions that will effectively alter the dysfunctional adult-child or parent-child-school interaction patterns.

Parent-Teacher Resource Centers

The creation of parent-teacher resource centers is another possible component of a comprehensive family-based program that provides preventive and early intervention services. Such centers have been established in schools to provide information and training on raising and educating children. By educating both parents and teachers regarding family dynamics and achievement and effective home and classroom child-rearing practices, a congruent and effective style of parenting and teaching can be established to facilitate improved social and academic adjustment. Norwood, Atkinson, and Tellez (1997), for example, found positive effects on academic achievement from implementing a school-based parent education program targeted at an at-risk school population. The parent education program focused on developing both positive behavior management strategies and practical methods for increasing parent involvement in their children's education. Similarly, Becher (1984) found that parent education programs, particularly with low-income parents, are effective in improving children's language skills, test performance, and school behavior.

Formal parent education programs consistent with the authoritative parenting model, such as Systematic Training in Effective Parenting (STEP) (Dinkmeyer, McKay, & Dinkmeyer, 1997) or Active Parenting (Popkin, 1983), can be offered through the parent-

teacher resource center to train parents in effective child-rearing practices. Such centers can also serve as places where parents may obtain information on community resources and effective strategies for parental involvement in education at home. Programs and activities that strengthen and empower families have also been offered through these centers, such as establishing baby-sitting cooperatives, sharing used books and educational materials, and organizing family activities, such as field trips and science activity nights. Some centers have also implemented open-forum family counseling sessions (Christensen & Schramski, 1983) as an effective means of providing ongoing supportive family counseling and parent education services while also fostering a sense of community, understanding, and mutual support among parents and teachers.

Similarly, formal in-service professional development programs for teachers can be established through the parent-teacher resource center. Such training should focus on authoritative classroom behavior management and student motivation strategies. Teachers could learn practical strategies for creating positive classroom and school climates. Programs such as Cooperative Discipline (Albert, 1996) or Positive Discipline in the Classroom (Nelson, Lott, & Glenn, 1993) are designed to train teachers in authoritative teaching styles.

By training both parents and teachers to work congruently with an authoritative approach to interacting with children and adolescents at home and school, more positive and effective child-rearing environments can be created, leading to increased academic achievement, fewer special education placements, and improved social-emotional adjustment. A parent-teacher resource center can also implement programs that facilitate home-school collaboration and parental involvement, both of which are associated with improved academic success and social adjustment.

Conclusion

Counseling interventions for child and adolescent difficulties are far more effective when directed at altering interaction patterns between the child and the significant adults in his or her life—parents and teachers. Further, the research knowledge base on family dynamics and achievement overwhelmingly advocates for implementing programs designed to facilitate the development of adult-child interaction styles consistent with the authoritative model—the adult-child interaction style most highly correlated with academic achievement and positive psychosocial development. Parent edu-

cation and parent-teacher resource centers combined with a brief family counseling consultation approach to interventions for school problems appear to offer ideal strategies for increasing the visibility and effectiveness of counseling in educational settings while simultaneously providing optimal services to the school and community.

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