

ACAC NEWSLETTER

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A MESSAGE FROM THE ACAC PRESIDENT

When I start my regular conversations with friends and colleagues (which are typically via zoom these days) they often start out:

“How are you?”

“I’m doing ok... all things considered.”

or

“Hanging in there as much as possible right now...”

What a unique time: experiencing global uncertainty, as well as multiple societal-level traumas and grief, due to: (1) covid-19, (2) increased attention to police brutality, (3) a burgeoning racial justice movement, as well as Black Lives Matter and anti-racism that have continued to pick-up momentum, and (4) the intersectionality between these forces, as we see racism continued through the increased rates of individuals identifying as BIPOC who are negatively impacted by covid-19 through job loss, illness, food insecurity, and death. There is a lot in our world that is heavy and difficult. While we are mental health experts, we are not immune to its impact.

As counselors serving children and adolescents, and often their families, schools, and communities: how are we taking care of ourselves? Are we putting on our oxygen mask first, so we can then serve others? And what if our oxygen masks isn't fitting us quite so well these days? Or what if we have misplaced that oxygen mask? What then?

I recently read an article by Tara Haelle on *surge capacity*: our mental and physical systems that respond to short-term crises and disasters. This author suggests that many of us may have exhausted our surge capacity, as we've been living in a stage of crises for months. She describes this unique time and its impact on our daily living:

“It's different from a hurricane or tornado where you can look outside and see the damage. The destruction is, for most people, invisible and ongoing. So many systems aren't working as they normally do right now, which means radical shifts in work, school, and home life that almost none of us have experience with. Even those who have worked in disaster recovery or served in the military are facing a different kind of uncertainty right now.”

Thus, how do we renew ourselves, when we are feeling depleted? The author, in conjunction with others, provide several suggestions:

1. Accept that life is different right now
2. Expect less from yourself
3. Recognize the different aspects of grief
4. Experiment with “both-and” thinking
5. Asking yourself: what activities fulfill you?
6. Maintain and strengthen friendships
7. Build your resilience bank-account

As counselors serving children and adolescents as well as their families, schools, and communities: we are accustomed to working with others as they experience grief, loss, and trauma. We are also present with them as they recognize their strength, resilience, and insight in the face of difficult times. Just as we intentionally see our clients/students through challenging times, so they can recognize their own personal strength, I hope you are intentional in how you support yourself in this difficult time as well and leave room for your possible grief and loss, as well as growth.

To read Haelle’s full article: <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c>

To provide updates from ACAC specifically: our leadership team had a fruitful fall meeting, discussing celebrations from the past year and initiatives for the year ahead, including: increased professional development and advocacy efforts; our growing membership; an upcoming special issue of our journal; the results of our grant funding and awards processes; we welcomed in a range of new leaders, and so much more. We also created a new ACAC committee on anti-racism and had our first meeting, proposing actions for ACAC as an organization, as well as strategies to partner with others through ACA’s related task-force.

On behalf of the ACAC leadership: we thank you for your membership, your advocacy and passion for counseling children and adolescents. And we wish you wellness, resilience, and strength.

In peace,
Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott
ACAC President 2020-2021

ACA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

THE RIGHT TO BE A CHILD

Justina Wong, B.A., Judy Daniels, Ed.D., Claire Openshaw, Ph.D., LCPC, Sam Steen, Ph.D.

The COVID-19 pandemic has instilled a deep sense of fear in many of us. This terror is reinforced by the daily increase in number of infections and deaths, causing global economic turmoil. The pandemic has impacted one’s ability to go to school/work and be an active member of society. The pandemic impacts psychological stability, individual and community wellbeing, and the future economic viability of many communities (Shah, 2020). Looming large scale concerns like these can easily become overwhelming for anyone, but during these times we really need to turn our

attention to our children and adolescents, who are currently experiencing significant psychological distress (Zhou, 2020). All children and especially racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse children and families are vulnerable both here and abroad.

Counselors of all types are needed, now more than ever. The Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling (ACAC) is in a pivotal position to help young children seek safety and provide support for those who are experiencing distress. The challenges can be even more detrimental depending greatly on the developmental stage (e.g., age of the children/adolescents, educational and economic status, and mental or physical concerns) and intersecting identities (e.g., ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and so forth).

The American Counseling Association's (ACA) Human Rights Committee (HRC) wants to connect with divisions like ACAC to help address growing human rights issues that are impacting the children and adolescents across the globe. The ongoing mission of the HRC is to bring awareness to human rights and social justice issues that impact the counseling profession and to address barriers that impede human rights and wellness. The connection between human rights and counseling especially as it pertains to young clients has not always been readily evident to counselors. To address this disconnection, the HRC is reaching out to ACAC and other ACA divisions to help make these linkages. Human rights issues that affect children and adolescents are endless. However, with so many pressing issues to contend with for youth, including dysfunctional family dynamics, domestic violence in the home, child abuse, neglect, homelessness, health and educational disparities, and sex trafficking just to name a few, where should our focused efforts begin?

The ACA's HRC has a long history, going back to the 1960's, of addressing issues of injustice. It has served as an important committee for the association and its members. In the last few years, this committee was tasked by the Governing Council to establish advocacy statements for ACA which draw attention to social justice issues that impact our profession. Some of the recent motions initiated by the HRC have focused on issues of immigration, trans concerns, the climate crisis, gun violence, and school counseling and COVID-19. The many unprecedented social justice issues we are currently facing within our society are a wakeup call for all of us to become more proactive and address these issues by looking at how to support counselors in their work.

Human rights issues that may impact ACAC members and the children, adolescents, and families they serve are numerous. Within school settings in particular, learning challenges with virtual classes, burn out for teachers and students, lack of resources for basic needs or school necessities due to parental unemployment or socioeconomic status, social isolation, and possible mental health issues as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A study conducted by Duan et al. (2020) found that 22.28% of children and adolescents struggled with coping with symptoms of depression. Zhou (2020) foresees that there will be long term psychological distress for children and adolescents.

Children and adolescents are being asked to learn, interact, and play in an environment that most are unfamiliar with, causing significant disruption to daily lives (Shah, 2020). Children are expected to have access to stable internet or wifi connections, a computer or tablet, attend multiple virtual classes every day, and complete all their assignments on time. Some of these expectations are not realistic due to the unexpected nature of the pandemic (de Miranda, da Silva Athanasio, de Sena Oliveira, & Silva, 2020). As a result of these expectations, there has been a lower rate of enrollment in schools, less children attending virtual classes, and many students struggling with the virtual learning format. Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, and Viruleg (2020) found that in over half of the states within the U.S., approximately 50% of K-12 grade students are not mandated to attend distance learning. Further, the UNICEF's executive director, Henrietta Fore predicts at least 24 million students could drop out of school due to COVID-19.

Advocacy for children and adolescents' human rights are important. Counselors can go about advocating for these human rights by ensuring that children and adolescents have an equal opportunity to succeed during this pandemic regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or socioeconomic status. Counselors should advocate for the right to autonomy, education, and healthcare, especially tele-behavioral health. Counselors should also advocate for health policy changes to ensure that tele-behavioral health services are covered under health insurance policies.

Recommendations

The HRC recommends utilizing tele-behavioral health services to address the many issues affecting accessibility to care. Mental and physical health care is a human right that should not be ignored. To directly address the needs of ACAC membership, the HRC are recommending more intentional collaborative partnerships with HRC and other organizations to co-sponsor virtual workshops on how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting children and their rights, and/or how to address current issues in schools related to mental health issues that children are facing. Additionally, the HRC recommends crafting a joint ACA motion and advocacy statement with the HRC related to the impact of the pandemic on children and youth.

Conclusion

School counselors and counselors who work with children and adolescents can promote change by ensuring that children and adolescents have and can exercise their rights. By working together, ACAC and the HRC can tackle human rights issues through the lens of child and adolescent counseling. For more information on ideas to explore in concert please contact Justina Wong a representative of the Human Rights Committee.

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ADVOCACY IN ACTION

The purpose of our new Advocacy in Action section is to highlight the outstanding achievements of our many ACAC members!

Meet Layla Kurt, Ph.D., PC.

Layla Kurt is an Associate Professor of Counselor Education at the University of Dayton. Her primary concentration is school counseling with an emphasis on the connection between student attachment, engagement and academic outcomes. Layla published a research manuscript, *School Policy and Transgender Identity Expression: A Study of School Administrators' Experiences*, that was cited in two U.S. Federal Court cases by the Anti-defamation League.



1. How did you get engaged in advocacy work?

- Entering an educational or mental health field places all of us in positions where advocacy naturally falls into place. Most of us enter these fields because we believe in helping children and adolescents navigate life difficulties so they can achieve safe, happy, and healthy life outcomes. Children should never have to battle for their rights to be safe, to have boundaries and to simply be themselves. My hope is that this research will assist school boards and superintendents when making school policies related to transgender student rights.

2. Why is advocacy important to you?

- All people deserve to be heard, validated, and helped. Children are our most vulnerable citizens who sometimes need a voice larger than their own to protect their rights. Advocates have a strong and passionate voice to support causes

important to us. As a school counselor educator, I have a duty to remain diligent in working for the rights and well-being of minors, who often have no voice.

3. How do you think we can better advocate for children and adolescents?

- Conduct research and work with interdisciplinary teams.
- Attend and present your research at conferences in other disciplines that are related to your profession.
- Develop research teams with a common interest but from various fields.
- Continue to listen to the new struggles families and communities face.

4. Do you have any ideas for future advocacy work you're interested in? If so, what are they?

- I would like to conduct more interdisciplinary research. I believe that collaborative teams do tremendous work to comprehensively address children's needs and rights.

Now Accepting Nominations for the Spring Newsletter! Please [contact Kyndel Tarziers at ktarziers1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:ktarziers1@student.gsu.edu) to nominate yourself or a colleague for their outstanding advocacy achievements!

IN THIS EDITION....

We are pleased to highlight a number of articles in this edition that are focused on the ways that Counselors, whether in Schools or in the Community, responded to COVID-19 impacts to continue providing care and attention to the children and adolescents we serve.

Selections of interest in school counseling cover the transition to telehealth in alternative education programs and elementary schools. One school district's transition to telehealth in meeting the needs of rural residents is also discussed. An article regarding group counseling interventions for resilience and another on the importance of mentorship is also including. An overriding element of these articles is the specific ways that school counselors adapted to meet the needs of students and families as COVID-19 and the move to telehealth uncovered new challenges.

Selections of interest for child and adolescent counselors in the community cover a wide range of topics – from adapting typical face-to-face interventions to video games and the integration of Zoom. Considerations from the world of neuroscience and the experiences of caregivers.

We appreciate all of our contributors but especially our graduate learners who represent the future of ACAC and the next generation of child and adolescent counselors! Thank-you!!

Enjoy!!

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SCHOOL COUNSELING CORNER....

TRANSITIONING TO TELEHEALTH SERVICES IN A DISCIPLINARY ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

Carrie Beyer, MA & Samantha Klassen, PhD

Disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs) are an educational placement setting for K-12 students who have been removed from their traditional public school campuses for behavioral infractions (Texas Education Code, 2018). Infractions that might send a child to DAEP could include possession of a weapon on campus, violence on school property or at a school-related activity, sexual misconduct, substance-related violations such as drug or alcohol use/possession on or near school property, and/or conduct issues on campus with other students (e.g., bullying; Texas Association of School Boards, 2019). Although the purpose of the alternative placement is to continue a student's academic program with as little disruption as possible, placement at a DAEP differs from a traditional campus in important ways. For example, students who are assigned to DAEP must go through physical searches every morning and cannot bring outside items such as pens, binders, or phones to campus. Class sizes are typically much smaller than on a traditional campus, with student ratios running approximately 10-12 pupils per teacher, although classes may be as small as only four or five students.

Emotional and behavioral modification procedures used on DAEP campuses differ in important ways as well. Staff on DAEP campuses receive specialized training about topics such as the use of physical restraint, time-out, and seclusion as well as strategies for managing and shaping student behavior such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (Texas Behavior Support, 2020). Mental health services in DAEP are similar to those on other campuses and include daily interventions for student mental health and academic support as well as crisis services, when needed. The content of sessions may differ considerably, however, given the unique needs and struggles of the student population. The information that follows is reflective of the experiences of counselors and counselor educators interfacing with the disciplinary alternative education placement campus in a large independent school district in West Texas.

Transitioning Mental Health Services in a COVID Environment

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, all mental health services on the DAEP campus were conducted face-to-face. At the beginning of the pandemic, every student transitioned to virtual learning. Essentially, school-based mental health professionals were tasked with becoming well-versed in telehealth services to ensure every student had social and emotional support in the safety of their homes. After summer break, parents who had students enrolled at the DAEP had the option of at-home virtual learning or returning their student to campus.

This meant mental health professionals took on the role of creating an online presence that was, and is, accessible to families enrolled at the DAEP. Appointment options were given. Students could meet face-to-face with their counselors utilizing personal protective equipment while maintaining an appropriate distance. The student could also opt for appointments conducted over the phone or through a HIPAA-compliant virtual platform. Beyond these resources, families were also provided short videos about mental health, including education, tips, and resources that were created and shared with families using the district's website and social media accounts, as well as broadcasted on television. Mental health professionals also called parents and spoke to them and their children about the family's needs. Through these conversations, counselors discovered that they had to focus first on addressing physical needs before it would be possible to move on to social, emotional, or academic needs. Families were fearful for their safety and well-being during COVID-19, making it difficult to focus on academics. Additionally, many families' finances were negatively impacted by the pandemic; parents who were once able to provide for their families found themselves furloughed and unable to meet the needs of their household. Symptoms increased as students were dealing with the pandemic on top of their typical day-to-day stressors.

Adapting Interventions Utilized on DAEP Campuses

Counselors have transitioned the content of many sessions to address the shifting concerns faced by students and parents during the pandemic. While some case management remains an important part of all school-based counseling services, DAEP counselors have had to focus on connecting students and families to resources to address concerns such as food and housing insecurity and varying access to utilities like the internet. These issues

are doubly pressing when students and parents opt for virtual learning, as unstable internet access directly impacts students' ability to engage in any educational experiences.

Beyond case management concerns, DAEP counselors continue to address mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and trauma, symptoms of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Coping strategies such as mindfulness meditation, grounding techniques, and cognitive focusing techniques to identify things within their control have been beneficial for our student population. Many students need support in managing their anxiety and frustration about the pandemic; some struggle with focusing on schoolwork in a time where learning feels "non-essential" in the wake of more pressing family stressors, like economic insecurity. Family-based interventions with parents focus on managing home structure, creating spaces where students can learn effectively, asking for help when needed, and normalizing the struggles parents face with regard to balancing their children's education have been important as well. Finally, we remain adaptive, flexible, and creative with our schedules and with session content to meet the needs of our students and their families.

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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELING DURING COVID-19: ADAPTING TO MEET STAKEHOLDER NEEDS

Cristal Delgado, MEd and Tara M. Gray, PhD

Mental health issues have increased tremendously with the Covid-19 pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). With schools switching to online platforms for remote learning, school counselors had to adapt to the new normal to meet stakeholder needs. School counselors, students, parents, teachers and administrators faced an immediate switch to providing online services and school counselors were faced with meeting the diverse needs of all stakeholders in new and responsive ways. This article serves to highlight two elementary school counselors' experiences and adaptations during Covid-19 from March to the present.

Before needs assessments could be made in March, school counselors created webpages to provide resources to parents, teachers, and students. Individual and group counseling was continued but switched to a Zoom format which presented confidentiality issues as suddenly parents and other household members were present for school counseling services. Additionally, new students were referred for school counseling, including students who were not participating in online classes. Phone calls were made to families to assess technology needs and the schools' technology departments provided iPads and internet hot spots to families in need. Child and adolescent students could no longer spend time in their favorite extracurricular activities and hanging out with friends, so school counseling advocacy adapted to meet increasing demands.

As summer progressed most school counselors, teachers and families felt as if there was no summer vacation and the stresses of Covid-19 were exacerbated without the much-needed typical summer break. School suddenly started again in the fall and the continued unknowns of school in a pandemic started to creep in. The unknowns started to create depression, anxiety, stress, and a negative outlook for those working in the education system. Our school counselor role started to shift to more of a support system and advocacy. School counselors can oftentimes feel as if they are in their own island, left alone, and without the support of other school counselors so an emphasis on school counselor self-care during Covid-19 is essential. Ethically, a school counselor has to

take care of one's self before taking care of others and this is an essential part of school counseling during Covid-19 (ASCA, 2020).

During this time, Covid-19 has forced school counselors to adapt to technology tremendously. Technology has always been a part of this new generation, but currently whoever is a part of the education system has to be well trained. Many students, teachers, and counselors have spent numerous hours online and on Zoom. As virtual school counseling sessions have become less personable, due to the students' home environment. Oftentimes school counselors may fall into a role as a family counselor, or a resource to community services (especially to school numbers, food, economic assistance, computers). At this time, there are more phone calls to parents to make connections and ensure they are logging into class. The last thing on parents' minds have been actual counseling, although at times parents will call for parenting advice. The question is, how do school counselors support students and parents? The answer is by modeling, listening, advocating, educating, and supporting.

It has become challenging to connect with every single student. With a school of over 700 hundred students, the mindset had to shift in how to support students virtually. As you observe teachers who have requirements, standards, and a different type of support within the school system. School counselors again feel as if they are on their own island. School counselors have to adapt to the needs of their students, teachers, and families. For example, many of our students come from poverty and parents are working longer hours with many students caring for younger siblings. It has created a different sense of advocacy for a school counselor.

As school resumed in the fall, needs assessments for students, teachers and parents were created along with additional websites and online resources, including Schoology and Bitmoji web pages (in English and Spanish). Needs assessments results included a need for self-care for teachers and staff and led to the creation of teacher survival kits and an emphasis on self-care strategies for teachers with a chance to win a free duty pass. A Parents needs assessment resulted in the creation of online lessons and support groups to provided parenting and stress management tips to deal with online learning and the stress of Covid-19. Crisis counseling expanded to include home visits for families facing the death of a loved one and suicidal ideation. Referrals to community supports, financial assistance and teletherapy increased dramatically.

A specific example of school counseling in elementary school during Covid-19 includes video recorded classroom lessons including school counselors reading books related to social emotional health. Examples of these books include, "*The Way I Feel* (Cain, 2005)," "*Lily The Unicorn* (Clayton, 2014)," "*I'm New Here* (O'Brien, 2015)," "*Waiting is Not Easy!* (Willems, 2014)," "*Same, Same, But Different* (Kostecki-Shaw, 2011)," "*The Way I Act* (Metzer & Cain, 2011)," "*Stick and Stone* (Ferry & Lichtenheld, 2015)," and "*My Way A Mi Manera* (Reiser, 2007)."

In summary, school counselors have had to adapt, adjust, and connect with all students, teachers, families during Covid-19. As we face challenges regarding Covid-19, we cannot minimize other current events that are also impacting our students. As we already know the stressors related to Covid-19 and social injustice stressors have exacerbated student mental health issues. Focusing on self-care and finding creative ways to use technology are essential for adapting to meet stakeholder needs for elementary school counseling during Covid-19.

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RURAL ISOLATION WIDENS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON K-12 STUDENTS

Miranda Merton & John J. S. Harrichand

Our world continues to feel the negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) first identified in Wuhan, China back in 2019 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). As of October 6, 2020, the United States has 7,341,406 confirmed cases and over 208,433 deaths (World Health Organization, 2020). For rural schools, COVID-19 has created added pressures for students, parents, and staff who already have limited resources (Modan, 2020). This piece captures how a school counseling intern at a rural public school in Upstate New York is seeking to meet the challenges of COVID-19 while caring for her students.

Red Creek Central School District (RCCSD)

Red Creek is located in Wayne County, New York and has a population of 658 people (Data USA, n.d.). Twenty-two percent of its population lives below the poverty line, which is almost 10% higher than the national average of 13%, and the median household income is \$34,236 (Data USA, n.d.). Red Creek's population is 97% White (Non-Hispanic) and the other three percent is comprised of White (Hispanic) and Black or African American (Non-Hispanic) (Data USA, n.d.). Red Creek Central School District (RCCSD) is comprised of 850 students in grades K-12, of which 18.6% are diagnosed with a disability (Data.nysed.gov).

Due to geographic location, there is disproportionate allocation of resources in Red Creek; Ms. Merton has found this to be especially detrimental to students who are learning remotely during the COVID-19 outbreak. In rural areas like Red Creek, students lack high-speed internet, which is necessary for online virtual learning platforms such as Zoom or Google Classroom. According to Taddeo (2020) the New York Broadband Program Office states that 99% of New York is covered with high-speed internet, which leaves 1% of New York residents in rural areas without high-speed internet. Residents of Red Creek, NY are counted among the 1%, and as a result children within this community appear to be disproportionately disadvantaged when it comes to virtual learning since their homes can't support virtual meeting platforms like Zoom. For places like Red Creek, COVID-19 has widened the educational divide due to lack of access to needed resources. Ms. Merton states "now more than ever students need access to technological resources necessary for emotional and academic success."

The spread of COVID-19 forced RCCSD to close schools on March 16, 2020 (WHEC News 10, 2020). School closures left rural Wayne County residents isolated, both socially and technologically, emphasizing the increased need for emotional support for residents, especially children. With the start of the 2020-2021 school year, RCCSD is continuing to find ways to meet the technological needs of its rural students. A recent study found that most teachers (75%) consider lack of technological tools a serious obstacle when implementing remote learning (Hamilton et al., 2020). Additionally, during the COVID-19 shutdown many parents of lower socioeconomic status reported a greater likelihood of their child experiencing difficulties completing schoolwork at home resulting from a lack of technology (Vogels et al., 2020).

RCCSD teachers and School Counselors are advocating for an increase in resources (i.e., hotspots, Chromebooks), offering to personally deliver items to their students to ensure they have access to and are receiving an education this school year. For Ms. Merton, COVID-19 increased her awareness of the need for School Counselors to advocate for the individual needs of students, academic and social-emotional, finding ways to maximize student success. In June 2020, Jay Roscup and colleagues from Finger Lakes Community Schools conducted the Youth Voice Survey 2020 (YVS 2020) to assess the impact of COVID-19 on students. They found

that attachment, self-regulation, competence, and health (ARCH) factors “have been demonstrated to predict more positive youth development and reduced likelihood of problem behavior” (Finger Lakes Community Schools, 2020, p. 3). Results from YVS 2020 showed elementary, middle, and high school level students reported an increase in social emotional distress and decreases in learning and socialization. More so, all grade level students reported feeling anxious and worried about themselves or family members getting sick (Finger Lakes Community Schools, 2020).

Bridging the Digital Divide: Recommendations for School Counselors and Interns

The physical and emotional distance from the classroom creates new hardships for students to overcome. Creating and maintaining connection is difficult when students are virtual. Auger et al. (2019) suggest that School Counselors make themselves approachable and visible; it is necessary to explain the role you are serving students especially as they navigate a virtual reality. Providing information and services online during COVID-19 can support students who may feel alone during remote learning. Determining the needs of individual students without meeting them in person can be a challenge, however, Hoover (2020) reminds us that supporting students in a virtual reality may require us to make ourselves accessible over the phone and/or computer. Finally, it is important for School Counselors and Interns to be intentional in infusing mindfulness components during interactions (over the phone, computer, or in-person) with students thereby enhancing their emotion regulation skills (Sibinga et al, 2016), and hopefully offsetting the negative effects observed in the Finger Lakes Community Schools (2020) study.

Conclusion

Ultimately, COVID-19 and the lack of internet access has widened the digital gap and isolation already existing among students in rural settings. These complications have contributed to the need for greater support for students returning to in-person classes, or virtual classes from home. As a School Counseling Intern, it is important to develop the sensitivity and awareness to identify and meet the needs of students, seeking to support them within an ever-changing socio-political environment. Ms. Merton is confident that her experiences from navigating COVID-19 as an Intern is equipping her with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of her future students as she begins her role as a School Counselor.

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PROMOTING ATTACHMENT-ORIENTED ONLINE COUNSELING THROUGH GROUP STORYTELLING: BOOSTING STUDENT RESILIENCE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Jenna Epstein, Dana Kasper, and Brandy Nicholson

With an increasing number of counseling offices and classrooms going online, a host of new challenges have emerged regarding how to maintain a relational orientation with students-clients. Since March 2020, the resulting absence of an in-person presence for counselors in schools and communities has led to a spotlight on the glaring gaps in equity and access faced by many (Mineo, 2020). In addition to the shortcomings faced by students with existing adverse childhood experiences, COVID-19's resulting school closures have led to poor nutrition, increased exposure to violence, exploitation, social isolation, confusion, and stress, as well as a spike in children visiting emergency rooms with severe child-abuse related injuries (UNESCO, 2020, Woodal, 2020). Due to a lack of regular contact with their trusting supports like teachers and counselors, it is likely that many students may be struggling with this significant relational loss. Therefore, counselors require methods of promoting a secure relationship online, in order to meet the needs of their student-clients.

Promoting a secure attachment status online

Promoting a secure attachment status in therapy is often trying in-person, and has become even more difficult, as counselors attempt to find ways to personalize the online environment. It is essential to our students, however, that counselors continue to work to facilitate secure attachments, as research has shown that healing relationships can increase resilience in individuals facing potentially traumatic experiences (Greenwald, 2018; van der Kolk, 2014). Most counselors are aware of the significance that a stable, secure, and nurturing environment has on school-aged clients. Without specialized training, however, they may have limited knowledge regarding the neuroscience behind attachment or specific interventions that promote attachment-focused healing (Cozolino, 2006; van der Kolk, 2014; Zak, 2013).

Anchoring secure attachments through storytelling

The human brain is a social organ (Cozolino, 2006). Therefore, brain development is established through bonding (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby). As a result, primary attachments are what children use to create the behavioral system and internal working model related to how they view others, the world and themselves, as well as how to respond. Thus, having a secure (warm, attentive, consistent and predictable) attachment is salient from infancy through adolescence. When this is not the case, utilizing a neurocognitive, attachment, developmental framework assists clinicians in decreasing the child's negative symptomatology like emotional dysregulation (Perry, 2019; Shore, 2017).

Neurological interventions, using a bottom up approach (working from the brain stem up towards the frontal lobe of the cortex) increase the ability to regulate affect. Examples include touch, breathing, and movement (van der Kolk, 2014). In fact, storytelling, which uses movement and group collaboration, is one promising method of not only promoting positive relationships but providing students with access to both adult and peer support. Non-verbal forms of communication like attunement, and prosodic infant dyadic rhythmic connection also promote affect regulation (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Cozolino, 2006; Meyer,

2011; Stern, 2000;; van der Kolk, 2014). Storytelling is a strategy providing prosodic features, like rhythm and intonation, which are verbal cues of empathy and understanding (Weiste & Peräkylä, 2014).

Storytelling can be applied to group or individual counseling settings online through the application of a basic story structure like the Fairy Tale Story Spine: *Once upon a time...Every day...Until one day...Because of that...Because of that...Because of that...Until finally...Ever since that day...* (Rotmann, 2017; Zak, 2013). Using simple language activates brain regions that allow us to relate to, and assist with, problem-solving a story. Through completion with another person or a group, the creation of a character, a plot with a beginning, middle, and end, a challenge, a choice, and a resolution provide an opportunity to make sense of the narratives students (and counselors) are creating in their heads all day long (Rotmann, 2017).

Securing attachments through movement during storytelling

During storytelling, counselors can guide client students through rhythmic body movements (Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2015); integrating body-based senses like balance, vision, and hearing, to restore synchrony (van der Kolk, 2014). Students who like to move or are tactile-kinesthetic learners often benefit from stories that incorporate dance and music (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). Students can be encouraged to act out or perform their stories to better understand how they view themselves, others, and the world, while generating new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). To promote a sense of togetherness and cognitive, social, emotional, and physical well-being and facilitate change (Feniger-Schaal et al., 2018), students can imitate, mimic, or mirror movements with the counselor and peers throughout their storytelling; Subsequently, anchoring a secure attachment.

Summary

Although some educational systems ignore an emotional-engagement system where play, movement, and social interactions are made a priority (van der Kolk, 2014), using storytelling and movement in online counseling affords students with unique opportunities to work through the causes and effects of their behaviors, their biggest concerns, as well as secure a relationship in an online format. These processes not only mimic the simplistic problem-solving processes that occur internally but provide a safe, empathetic environment in which students can positively relate to themselves and others (Neuhauser, 1993, van der Kolk, 2014). As a result of COVID-19, students require more opportunities to seek out healthy and stable support networks who can foster secure attachments and promote self-exploration. Storytelling, combined with movement, provides an excellent method for incorporating these activities in both individual and group experiences online; using a simple, yet powerful method of engagement.

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THE POWER OF PRESENCE AND MENTORSHIP: EXAMINING THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN A PANDEMIC

Felix Morton IV, MEd, MA, LCMHCA, NCC

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impeded school counselors' abilities to connect with students. This new style of learning, counseling, and living has encouraged me to consider how the roles and responsibilities of school counselors have changed given the current state of both education and the world. The American School Counselor Association defines the school counselor profession through multiple roles and responsibilities, including advocates, school leaders, collaborators, and change agents (ASCA, 2012). I believe that the impact of COVID-19 on education has forced the profession to focus on a few roles and responsibilities more than others. Striving not only to be exemplars demonstrating knowledge, integrity, and character, we as school counselors must find ways to focus on the power of presence in the era of virtual learning as well as the importance of mentorship for our continued development during unprecedented times. Focusing on presence and mentorship in our work during COVID-19 can help school counselors build stronger connections with students as well as their professional identities.

The Role of Presence

Although the roles of school counselors can be difficult to define, many of their responsibilities are forthright. These responsibilities, like scheduling, discipline, and clerical tasks, however, sometimes do not align with our actual training (Foxx et al., 2017). Foxx et al. (2017) defined these responsibilities as "non-counseling functions" (p. 9) and stated that these tasks discourage individuals from careers in school counseling because they typically receive priority over counseling-focused duties. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more awareness has been brought to the non-counseling responsibilities school counselors are burdened with, like responding to emails, scheduling, and disciplinary tasks, creating greater obstacles to providing direct services to students, leading to negative student outcomes.

Due to the harm that COVID-19 has caused to the education experience for both students and school staff, I believe the most important school counselor responsibility during this time is increasing our presence in students' lives. "Presence is perhaps one of the most powerful, yet intangible and unquantifiable variables, which affects the course of therapy, and is an irreducible aspect within the therapeutic relationship" (Nanda, 2009, p. 159). Level of presence equates to level of access. School counselors can increase their presence in students' lives in a virtual format in many ways. Some being establishing virtual office hours, one-on-one check-ins, house calls, and weekly hangout spaces for students during breaks from classes. The more present school counselors are within their schools and communities, the greater the access students, families, and communities will have to additional support.

The Responsibility of Mentorship

Having a better understanding of school counselor roles and responsibilities creates pathways towards becoming advocates for students and the profession. COVID-19 has also highlighted the importance of mentorship as a personal and professional responsibility. School counselors must engage in mentorship experiences that promote self-awareness, cultural insight, and leadership. Mentorship has been defined in many ways; however, the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2012) defines a mentor as “someone with experience and expertise in the counseling field who is willing to share knowledge and offer advice to foster professional development” (p. 68). Dollarhide et al. (2008) believed that school counselors should seek mentorship as it can help them sustain positive momentum to be leaders in the field and “display courage in the face of internal and external doubts” (p. 268). Mentorship will help school counselors by providing wisdom, guidance, models, and ideas for them to strive towards in their ongoing development as counselors and people, as well as their individual work with students and advocacy for the profession.

Conclusion

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has created obstacles for school counselors, it has also provided us with an opportunity to showcase our resiliency, tenacity, and dedication. The power of presence and mentorship relationships could help school counselors not only strengthen relationships and better support their students in a virtual format, but also help them in better understanding their own identities and areas for growth as people in a broken society. My identity as a school counselor will be ever-changing, and constantly growing, as I gain more insight of discrepancies in the field of education through increasing my experiences in the schools. It is my overall hope that our insight during this pandemic will allow us all to become more present, supportive, and hopeful school counselors during the era of virtual learning and beyond.

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COMMUNITY COUNSELING CORNER...

ADAPTING COUNSELING FOR ONLINE

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Today's climate has alluded to counselors finding ways to continue providing counseling services in non-traditional ways. As a school counselor for 18 years and a licensed professional counselor for five years, bibliotherapy and forms of play therapy have been used in sessions with children and adolescents. Previous research has shown the significance of using these techniques to support clients (Shechtman, 2009; Swank, Cheung, & Williams, 2018). With the need to implement telehealth counseling, counselors may wonder how to create dynamic sessions without the ability to utilize tried and true methods during face to face sessions. The importance of building rapport and maintaining the counseling relationship is critical regardless of the format. Regardless of the setting, foundational skills can be used to ensure the client is being accepted, heard, and supported; however, it is not as certain that techniques implemented can be as effective in the online setting.

For the past seven months, typical in person counseling has shifted to an online format so that mental health services are not discontinued completely. After a few attempts only offering talk therapy, it was clear that more was needed for some clients; especially those struggling with depression, anxiety, and limited attention spans. Bibliotherapy has been a technique included many times in sessions so bringing back favorite books was a consideration to try while online.

Bibliotherapy has been coined as “healing through books” and goes back to ancient Greece. It became more widespread after World War II by providing support and guidance through the exploits of the characters in the story (Shechtman, 2009). “The counselor and the client consider problems or stress areas in the client's life; then the counselor ‘prescribes’ a book or story for the client to read.” (Gladding, 2011) Stories provide perspectives that children and adolescents can relate with while gaining new insights and ideas for their own lives. Instead of assigning a book to be read outside of counseling, reading the book with the child can allow for discussion during the session.

Over time, a collection of read aloud books has been created consisting of various topics. A particular favorite just acquired is *Right now, I am fine* (Owen, 2020). This book illustrates how to manage worries in spite of challenging times and reminds readers how to cope. It is not difficult to search and find many books that are relatable and for all situations. Recalling the effectiveness of books, Bibliotherapy can be used during counseling even in the online format. The book can be read, illustrations shown, then a discussion can follow. Goals can be set to demonstrate a quality or character trait as observed in the story. Once again, Bibliotherapy proved to be a tool for the toolbox.

Play therapy is another tool used frequently in traditional settings but with a bit of modifying, can be used in online telemental health therapy. As explained by Landreth (2012), play therapy is an effective, developmentally appropriate, and efficient mental health treatment for children. Play therapy allows children to lead the session while the counselor is non-directive (Blanco & Ray, 2011). Being online can present a challenge for following this recommendation but can be adapted.

As online counseling expectations are made known, explanations can be given to include screen sharing to support the premise of a child led play therapy session by having the child share a game of their choosing. This example was demonstrated during a recent session. The session began with a typical check in. After the check in, the question was posed to the student on what would they like to do. The Zoom screen was shared with the student, and a favorite online game was played by the student while the therapist watched and interpreted the action as is done with typical face to face play therapy. (Landreth, 2012).

Other examples of play can be more counselor directed with games such as; Connect Four, Uno, Pokemon cards, scavenger hunts, and drawing scribbles to name a few. Many games can be used with some imagination and creativity. As these games are played, conversations can take place along with explaining skills used from these games. Goals can be set to transfer the skills from the games to coping skills. In spite of these unusual times, counselors today can make online sessions work to resemble traditional approaches and can be quite successful meeting the needs of the children and adolescents.

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INTEGRATING NEUROEDUCATION INTO DISTANCED PRACTICE

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Neuroeducation interventions are designed to reduce client distress and improve outcomes through increasing their understanding of how the brain and its processes contribute to mental health functioning (Miller, 2016). Neuroeducation, in itself, is an evidence-based practice and is an emerging area of clinical relevance that solidifies counselor identity and practice as backed by science (Miller, 2016). During this unsettling time, counselors require the ability to address client distress in competent ways, while maintaining a focus on relating from a distance. Most neuroeducation methods rely on the ideas of neuroplasticity and neurogenesis, which address the brain's ability to rewire itself and reorganize memories; reducing trauma-based symptoms such as the fight, flight, freeze response (Siegel, 2020). They are also excellent methods of assisting clients with maintaining focus on the present, and what they can control.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the addition of recent financial, race, and political stressors, counselors require methods of meeting the complex needs of student-clients, and the systems within which they exist. Neuroscience-based interventions discuss the bio-genetic basis of client symptoms, while also providing counselors with opportunities to incorporate physical movement, play, and art into their distanced practice.

This information is widely available and there are avenues through which to learn about these topics. Online searches on neuroeducation yield a variety of educational videos and writings including:

- Dan Siegel Hand Brain Model (Siegel, 2020)
- Window of Tolerance (NICABM, 2019)
- Triangle of Human Experience (Miller, 2016)
- Sensorimotor calming (McLelland & Gilyard, 2019)
- Butterfly Technique (Burry & Baker, 2016).

These resources can be used for clinicians to gain additional knowledge in these areas, and with clients, as a method of psychoeducation.

Aside from the positive impact it has at an individual level in therapy, neuroeducation can also be a means of addressing the inequity faced by our clients. Through promoting the neuroevolutionary origins of human emotions, neuroeducation assists with shame reduction, and the ways in which our mind, brain, and relationships all play a role in our level of mental health functioning (Panskepp & Bivens, 2012; Miller, 2016). It assists with keeping therapy strengths-based; focusing on the ways in which the client has become more resilient as a result of their experience, and how they are more than just a product of their past or current circumstances. Through advocacy (ACA, 2014), we can assist others with understanding these aspects of mental health as well. Empower student-clients to address their needs as complex individuals are essential during this difficult time.

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GAME ON! VIDEO GAMES AS A COUNSELING TOOL

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When quarantine began I panicked, trying to figure out a way to connect meaningfully with the children I supported both as a school counselor and a clinical counselor. Furthermore, as my clinical caseload increased, I struggled to establish rapport with kids that had never known me face to face. One day as I was relaxing by playing some video games, I had an epiphany: video games. Kids love them. I do too. Why not harness this outlet to connect to my clients and students? Thus began my journey of education, exploration, and fun that resulted in increased rapport and therapeutic progress for my clients and students.

A total of 214.4 million Americans, including 70% of all kids under age 18, consider themselves video game players, or gamers (Entertainment Software Association, 2020). Gaming devices include consoles like the Microsoft Xbox, handheld systems like the Nintendo Switch, phones, and computers. This pervasiveness makes video games an excellent tool to use in counseling sessions. Furthermore, during the lockdown, virtual connections were the only safe ones.

In session, video games can help establish rapport (Franco, 2016), introduce and practice social skills (Zayeni et al., 2020), and to provide insight into the inner workings of the child (Dini, 2012). Counselors can collaboratively play the games, watch the child play, or discuss previous gameplay. Video games can be used in the assessment process, giving the counselor a clue about identity formation and social development (Earl, 2018). In the next few paragraphs, I will share a popular game, available research highlights, and suggestions for use with clients.

Pokémon Go, an augmented reality game that has the user walking around their physical surroundings searching for Pokémon, can lead to an increase in social interaction and feelings of life satisfaction (Ewell et al., 2020). Other augmented reality games such as Ingress and Harry Potter: Wizards' Unite may show similar results. Pokémon Go has also been correlated with increased verbal working memory and decreased negative affect (Alloway & Carpenter, 2020). I use this game as an intervention with children who are developing social skills. The conversations they will engage in while playing circle naturally around a specific topic (Pokémon), making it easier for them to engage. Children that I work with enjoy that their experiential homework is to go to the park, walk around, and report back to me the coolest/cutest/strongest Pokémon they can find. I also ask them to find out what other people playing near them have caught, to encourage conversations. My anecdotal findings mesh with the research, which suggests that playing video games in a social setting decreases feelings of loneliness (Verheijen et al., 2020).

A genre of games termed massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, where players can work with or against each other, challenging both the environment and other players, can also help children establish and practice social skills. World of Warcraft is one such game where playing leads to an increase in social support and a decrease in psychological symptoms (Longman et al., 2009). Torchlight II, another MMO, can encourage students who are at risk to increase their social participation while decreasing their sense of external regulation

(Hanghøj et al., 2018). In session, I have illuminative discussions about what type of character they created and why. For example, did they select a healer type, which is popular with other players, or did they choose a character that can inflict more damage? What attracted them to that character? How is that character similar to who they are and who they would like to be?

Games that promote exercise, or exergames, can help children who struggle with ADHD. Exergames can increase executive functioning, motor functioning, and a decrease in general psychopathology (Benzing & Schmidt, 2019). Students who played exergames showed decreased teacher-reported symptoms (Weerdmeester et al., 2016). Two such games are the Wii Fit and the Shape UP game for the Xbox Kinect. There are also multiple virtual reality (VR) games that are physical. In session you can have the client play, or you can join them. If you select a game with winners and losers, you can add invaluable experiences and conversations. You can also assign this gameplay as homework.

Games where you can build and create a world, like Minecraft or the new and wildly popular Nintendo's Animal Crossing: New Horizons, can be useful in session. Minecraft, a game where you build with blocks and break things to find resources, helps children increase their social, problem-solving, and teamwork skills (Hewett et al., 2020). Using Minecraft in session taught children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder to increase social initiation and social skills in general (MacCormack & Freeman, 2019). Animal Crossing, a similar game where players have to design islands and interact with talking animals, may have the same effects. In session, you can play with your clients, processing the activities as you go. Verbally processing the play in session can also shed light on social skills and problem-solving. I will ask my clients to explain why they did something, how they decided to make a change, and what resources they used to complete their plan. It is easy to extrapolate these video game conversations to real-life situations.

Video games offer an exciting adjunct to counseling sessions. In the spirit of play therapy, we can use these games to look into the minds of the children we work with and to help them take steps towards healing. They are excellent at helping to establish rapport. Furthermore, most kids enjoy playing them. The games listed above are a small sampling of the current games available, and this is an area of research that is quickly growing. If you are reading this and unsure how to learn more about using video games in session, I suggest that you start by playing, in addition to reading. Learning, just like counseling, can be fun!

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Special Considerations for Caregivers

YOUTH AND ADOLESCENTS PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL CHANGES DURING VIRTUAL SCHOOL

Jordan Mann, BA

The new virtual schooling world of COVID-19 has taken most by the ankles and has given us a good shake. While most of us thought we had a handle on the technology of 2020, we were not fully prepared to take on elementary and middle school tasks. I have been a nanny for twelve years this year and while I have many years of experience helping kids with their homework, it has been a completely different ball game with sitting in their virtual classrooms all day. As many parents and caregivers have witnessed, it has been difficult to keep our kiddos on task while asking them to sit for long periods of time in the comfort of their own homes. Not only is it difficult on attention spans for these kids, but I have since noticed a physical and emotional change since virtual schooling began one month ago. I feel as though we have all experienced some sort of physical and emotional change since we were forced into quarantine, but those feelings have rolled over onto our kids. What I really want to focus on with this article is the changes I have seen in the kids I work with since the start of virtual school. To emphasize, I will be discussing the negative emotional and physical impacts that have developed due to the new virtual classroom. I will also suggest ways to improve the emotional and physical states of kids during this time of virtual schooling.

School closures may also mean that children sit continuously for longer periods of time, for example at computers, and this could lead to issues like back pain, eye strain and disturbed sleep (Gupta & Jawanda, 2020). The kids I am working with had their mother buy them seat cushions so they would not be as uncomfortable sitting in their chairs for such long periods. We have added pillows behind them as their backs are becoming sore as well. Schools are not the only ones that were forced to close at the beginning of this pandemic. Extracurricular activities such as basketball and dance have also been cancelled. Many of these after school activities were the only physical activities these kids were participating in (besides recess, but with schools closed, they are not even getting that time outside either). So with those closures, the kiddos I work with are not able to be social or burn off that residual energy they have after school anymore. They have become quite bored and even a bit angry at the fact that they cannot do their favorite things anymore. The anticipatory anxiety about whether or not they will ever be able to do those fun activities again is elevated. Along with those fun activities was the social interactions the kids were involved in. They looked forward to seeing their friends at dance or at basketball practice, they get to be kids during these activities. Peer interactions help contribute to adolescents' social health by enhancing their sense of belonging and reducing a sense of burdensomeness on others, both of which are considered crucial interpersonal needs (Oosterhoff et al., 2020). With these activities cancelled until further notice, and the fact that they cannot go see their friends physically for playdates has been hard on them. They do not get the opportunities to strengthen their social skills as they would at school or during sports.

Another important issue I wanted to discuss was the stress the parents are experiencing because most of them have to become the teacher now. It is one thing to keep your kids on task outside of school, but now, they cannot rely on the teacher to keep their kids on task during school. Handling time and space to work with children around may be very problematic as they are called to take an educational role while also trying to live their own lives and get on with their everyday job commitments. This situation has significantly increased the risk of experiencing stress and negative emotions in parents, with a potential cascading effect on children's well-being (Sprang & Silman, 2013, as cited in Sana et al., 2020). As I have seen firsthand, the stress of parents working from

home and trying to keep their kids focused on school throughout the day, with constant distractions is extremely hard. The outward frustrations from parents causes the same frustrations in the kids. Based on questionnaires completed by the parents, findings reveal that children felt uncertain, fearful and isolated during current times. It was also shown that children experienced disturbed sleep, nightmares, poor appetite, agitation, inattention and separation related anxiety (Jiao et al., 2020, as cited in Singh et al., 2020). We can work together to help alleviate some of those negative outcomes, they are not permanent!

It is known that physical activity in general helps with stress, anxiety and even sleep. Outdoor play opportunities increase the likelihood of children meeting the movement guidelines, since children that play outdoors tend to be more active, sit less, and sleep better. Outdoor time can also provide children and youth a necessary refuge during times of stress and build a more robust immune system (Lasselin et al., 2016, as cited in Mitra et al., 2020). I think it would benefit everyone involved if kids and their families found time during the day, either on a break, during lunch or after school to spend an hour or so outside to release some of that built up energy. I have noticed with the kids I work with that the hour we spend outside walking or riding their bikes, it creates a whole new attitude. Giving them that time to release their energy from sitting in class all day is a great way to decrease the likelihood of breakdowns and poor attitudes. To alleviate the anxiety of children regarding the current uncertain situation (Wang et al., 2020), children's exposure to news should be limited and be through fact based neutral news channels only. The tabloid news should be avoided by all means. The parents are recommended to model appropriate preventive measures and coping mechanisms which the family as a team and children individually are motivated to follow (Singh et al., 2020). I know it is hard to keep kids away from the internet and keeping our thoughts to ourselves, but it is important we watch what we say in front of them. I hope you are able to take some of this information and either use it yourself or pass it along to a friend. I know we will work our way out of this pandemic, but for now, we just have to find creative ways to stay active and positive.

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Graduate Students Making a Difference

THE ZOOMSTER PARTY PROGRAM: ONE MASTER'S STUDENT'S WAY OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Elisa Pellegrino Kohutis

In the early months of 2020, as the COVID-19 Pandemic began to spread and take hold, many individuals were left feeling alone while enveloped by the sorrow of losing the innocence of how we once moved through our day, and worse, losing loved ones to this infectious disease. While many adults found the reduction in human connection required by the stay-at-home orders of the COVID-19 Pandemic extremely difficult to tolerate, many children found themselves amid even greater isolation making their predicament much worse. Research shows that the lack of social connection connects to lower self-esteem, depression, and psychological symptoms of maladjustment, with increased loneliness linked to lower self-worth (Hall-Lande et al., 2007).

Modified social distancing orders for many children quickly turned into immediate school closures and elimination of all social gatherings, leaving middle school children void of interpersonal connection and desired social interaction beyond their nuclear families. Once enriching their lives through engagement, friendship, and fun, many group activities seemingly vanished overnight with no warning and no preparation for the transition. As a mother, these sentiments were difficult to hear and even harder to process. As a counseling student trying to make meaning of this suffering, I felt compelled to use my voice and make a difference.

I decided to create a no-cost virtual program geared at reducing isolation, facilitating bonding, and increasing connection among middle school children and members of their intergenerational circle. The result has been an amazing collaboration designed with all the participants in mind and humorously titled The Zoomster Party program, as it truly is a weekly party inside of an ever-changing tapestry of zoom squares. Every child is welcome to join in the fun, and each is free to invite other special members of their intergenerational circle. Our participant population currently ranges from four to 87 years of age. There is no sign up required and no penalty for canceling. The goal is to make this experience super easy for participants by allowing them to join whenever convenient.

As the Zoomster Party facilitator, I organize weekly Zoomster Party content. Consistent program components include opening with participants sharing “peaks and pits” from their week and closing with participants sharing “acts of kindness” and “silly jokes.” Many of the children especially love sharing their peaks and pits and say this is the highlight of the Zoomster Party. The “Mystery Guest” portion of the Zoomster Party keeps everyone engaged and excited for the next meeting. These prearranged guests offer an “element of surprise” that captivates everyone. Each mystery guest brings their own unique personality and talents to their participation. Mystery guests include my fellow classmates: one who taught the art of juggling and another who shared photos from his Egyptian travels. An associate professor of pharmacology and toxicology discussed the liver and ways to maintain a strong immune system. A special education teacher helped participants make their own ice cream. A middle-school teacher created an animated story-time, including multiple costume changes for an added surprise. A well-known yoga teacher with an Amazon yoga series engaged participants through yoga and meditation. One middle-school bus driver regularly participates, sharing silly jokes and animated stories. One middle-school principal appeared from his home and surprised everyone by joining with his band members. The children were flabbergasted to see their beloved principal outside of his usual suit and tie, and playing the drums!

During our first few Zoomster parties, several participants shared the “peak” of their week was attending the Zoomster Party, followed up with “I have no pits to share.” Parents reached out to let me know how much they appreciated such a creative, fun, and importantly safe experience for their children during this difficult time. There have been several magical moments throughout this program. One little boy, age 10, said to me, “It’s like you’re helping our brains feel better, and I love it.” Another little girl, age 11, said, “I didn’t cry this week because I knew I had the Zoomster Party to look forward to, I need something to look forward to, and I could see my friends!” Finally, when I shared with the group that I considered ending the Zoomster Party program as summer approached, certain the children would prefer enjoying outside activities, one little girl’s comment changed that idea. She quickly replied, “What? You mean this has to end? I need this in my life!”

This Zoomster Party program retains a commitment to creating live, interactive, meaningful opportunities for safe and joyful connections during this unpredictable time. The positive feedback and lasting impacts expressed by everyone involved are beyond measure. Proudly and with great enthusiasm, this program continues to support the needs of middle school children and their intergenerational circles to this day.

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CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

Special Edition: Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling

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- Manuscripts should be 15-20 pages in length and submitted directly to this link: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ucac20>
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Any inquires and questions regarding this special issue can be sent directly to Dr. Kimberly N. Frazier at kfraz1@lsuhsc.edu.

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