

## THE NEED FOR SBFC

The need for SBFC arises from the challenges of traditional school counseling and family counseling (agency based) models in dealing with children who are failing at school because of family problems. A survey of the student clients of SBFCs in San Francisco (Gerrard, 1990) showed that over 85% of the children referred by teachers, parents, or self-referred had significant problems at home. The family problems included: marital discord, parents divorcing, custody problems, substance abuse, older siblings involved in gangs, sexual and physical abuse, parental neglect, single parents overwhelmed by economic and emotional problems, spouse abuse, and chaotic families with little parental control. Carlson and Sincavage (1987) conducted a survey of 110 members of the National Association of School Psychologists and reported that family variables were seen as highly relevant to children's school problems. Crespi and Hughes (2004) describe some of the crises affecting adolescents in schools: alcohol and drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, divorce, abuse, and family discord. The authors present an argument for school-based mental health services for adolescents as a way to offset restrictions imposed by managed care. Stinchfield (2004) describes research that indicates that traditional office-based therapy is not always effective with at-risk families and advocates family-based therapy that includes involvement of school personnel.

There is considerable research demonstrating that dysfunctional families (characterized by conflict, anxiety, low cohesion, and emotional problems of parents) are associated with a variety of problems affecting children. These problems include: behavior problems (Henderson, Sayger & Horne, 2003; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Sessa, Avenevoli & Essex, 2002); deliberate self harm (Evans, Hawton & Rodham, 2005); delinquency (Coll, Thobro, & Haas, 2004; Cashwell & Vacc, 1996); depression (Schneiders, Nicolson, Berkhof, Feron, van Os & de Vries, 2006; Sigfusdottir, Farkas & Silver, 2004; Sourander, Multimaki, Nikolakaros, Haavisto, Ristkari, Helenius, Parkkola, Piha, Tamminan, Moilanen, Kumpulainen & Almqvist, 2005); risky peer behavior (Goldstein, Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2005; Jeltova, Fish & Revenson, 2005); social isolation (Elliott, Cunningham, Linder, Colangelo & Gross, 2005); substance abuse (Henry, Robinson & Wilson, 2004); and suicide attempt (Yip, Liu, Lam, Stewart, Chen & Fan, 2004; Wild, Flisher & Lombard, 2004; Hacker, Suglia, Fried, Rappaport & Cabral, 2006).

These negative effects of the family on children extend to the school. According to Crespi, Gustafson and Borges (2006) school psychologists are increasingly being confronted with students affected by family problems: "With one in six children raised in alcoholic families, with divorce impacting approximately 60% of families, and with such issues as...parental neglect, as well as sexual and physical abuse affecting large numbers of children and youths, many practitioners are interested in interventions which can directly affect children in school settings." (p.67). Researchers have documented the negative effects on children's academic performance caused by lack of family support (Lagana, 2004; Chiam, 2003; Ponsford & Lapadat, 2001); marital disruption and divorce (Sun & Li, 2002); mother absence (Heard, 2007); and parental loss (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004). Other researchers have noted the positive correlation between children's aggression at school and variables such as: family aggression (Fitzpatrick, Dulin & Piko, 2007; Miller, Miller, Trampush, McKay, Newcorn & Halperin, 2006) and negative home experiences (Fryxell & Smith, 2000).

There are also a number of studies focusing on how healthy family functioning helps children succeed at school. Zimmer-Gemback and Locke (2007) found support for a Family Primacy Model exemplified by adolescents with more positive family relationships using more effective coping strategies

at home and at school. Lambert and Cashwell (2004) state that preadolescents who perceived effective communication with their parents had low school-based aggression. Steward, Jo, Murray, Fitzgerald, Neil, Fear & Hill (1998) found that students who used family members for solving problems had higher GPA's than students who did not rely on their families. Amatea, Smith-Adcock, and Villares (2006) describe a family resilience framework that school counselors can use to help families promote students' learning.

Resmini (2004) points out that in some cases for a particular child the school itself may function like a dysfunctional family exposing the child to abuse and neglect by peers and teachers. Resmini states: "Some schools can bear a strong resemblance to the proverbial dysfunctional home, particularly for the student who has learning differences or different interests. Teachers often are taxed by the large number of students in their class, and therefore they are apt to ignore the needs of the student with differences." (p.222). Resmini recommends a family systems approach be used to assist these children both at home and at school.

When children's problems are seen through the lens of the education researcher (Adelman & Taylor, 2011), the focus becomes one of looking for the "barriers to student achievement". These indeed are often the same barriers described above with respect to the family. However, beyond the family system, research accumulated over the past twenty years by the National Clearing House which is based at UCLA's School Mental Health Project (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/temp/home.htm>) suggests that the problems are not always due to dysfunctional families, but may lie in the way school systems are structured as well as the way support services, including counseling, targets problems after they impact the child's learning, then apply "counseling" interventions that amount to band aids to a serious wound. This is not to say that counseling is not seen as important, but rather that traditional school interventions are piecemeal approaches that lack an understanding of the three contextual systems that are critical to optimal child development, the family, the school and the community. Thus when Johnny experiences a hostile, adversarial divorce between his/her parents, the negative effects of this hostility, turmoil and instability weigh heavily on his/her ability to function well in school. SBFC professionals, on the other hand, are skilled at working with all three systems, often generating school and community support since they "see" the wisdom of involving key stake-holders in the helping process.

School counselors, who typically have no training (or only one survey course) in family counseling, are not equipped to intervene effectively with the families of these students. Family counseling is one of the more difficult forms of counseling and learning to do it well requires extensive training and supervision. When school personnel determine that there is a family problem affecting a student, they often refer the family to a community mental health agency for family counseling. Most school principals are familiar with the phenomenon of families that are referred for family counseling, but they fail to go. Many of these "resistant" families are involved in a power struggle with school personnel. The families resent being sent for therapy because of the implicit message that the family (i.e. the parent) is sick or irresponsible. While seeing a therapist may be a sign of social status or trendiness with some people, with many, especially with minority families, therapy holds a stigma. "Seeing a therapist" is viewed within these families' communities as a sign one is "crazy." Family therapists who are themselves very familiar with the concept of triangulation (in which two family members form a coalition against a third family member, who is often the family scapegoat or "identified patient") are often perceived by parents as involved in a triangulation in which the school and the family therapist are in a coalition and "ganging up" on the parents. SBFC minimizes this triangulation because the school-based family counselor is not seen as a "third party" but rather is viewed as part of the school system. The SBFC professional is an advocate for

the child, the family, and the school. The counseling focus is on working with parents and families to help their children succeed in school.

From:

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