

STRENGTHS OF SBFC

School-Based Family Counseling has six strengths:

- Systems Focus
- Strength-based
- Partnership with Parents
- Multi-culturally sensitive
- Child Advocacy role
- Promotion of school transformation

SYSTEMS FOCUS

SBFC emphasizes that students are part of multiple systems: family, school, peer group, and the larger community. Family and school, however, play a critical role especially at the primary and middle school levels. These represent critical periods where change can be more easily implemented to help children. They are also the levels where appropriate interventions can have optimal positive results. What is unique about the SBFC systems orientation is its emphasis on family systems theory which is change focused and connected to practical family counseling techniques for implementing change. Likewise, family systems theory recognizes the interdependence of various systems in our society--be they the school, the family, or the community context—as well as the vulnerability of the child depending on these systems for his/her development. Because of the flexibility of family systems theory, it can also be used to conceptualize relationship dynamics in the “school family.” Evidence of the growing, albeit not always enthusiastic recognition of “systems” thinking in our society is the preface to the document, “Creating Caring Relationships to Foster Academic Excellence: Recommendations for Reducing Violence in California Schools (Dear, Soriano et al, 1995). This document was the summation of three years’ worth of research on school violence and the degree to which the educational community is prepared to respond to acts of violence in schools. The Preface states in part, “The problems in the schools are but a reflection of the problems in society; the solution to those problems lies in understanding the systemic nature and interdependence of schools, families and communities.” (Dear, Soriano et al., 1995).

STRENGTH-BASED

Unlike the traditional paradigm for professional education whereby training and practice of professionals is done “irrespective” of other professionals, SBFC relies on the familiarity, respect and understanding of various professionals who have an interest in the child and his/her family. SBFC requires significant distancing away from the “silo” training model that results in separate interventions that may directly or indirectly undermine efforts of other professionals. Like the proverbial “blind leading the blind” counselors who “counsel” the child, but fail to work with the parents or with the teacher(s) (who may be unaware of the child’s home ordeals) may actually do more harm than good, as the intervention with the child may fail to address the root of the problem. Also, unlike therapy models based on the DSM, SBFC is not pathology-based, but rather strength-based. SBFC is a strength-based approach in that the focus of counseling is on promoting wellness and student success. When parents, guardians, and other family members are approached by the SBFC counselor it is in order to help a child succeed in school. This is in sharp contrast to the school

contacting the family and recommending they “go for counseling” in order to deal with “family problems” that are having a negative effect on the student. This normalizes and de-pathologizes the counseling situation for the child and family.

PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS

Increasingly, government professional licensing bodies have published research showing the importance of effective partnerships with parents. For example, in the document entitled, “Preparing Educators for Partnerships with Families”, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing states: “A growing number of citizens and educators believe that any workable solution to the problems facing education must include a re-conceptualization of the ways schools work with families and communities. Family involvement in the education of children is known to be critical for effective schooling. Collaboration between schools and homes has repeatedly been found to improve students’ achievement, attitudes toward learning, and self esteem. School-home partnerships benefit not only students, but families, schools and teachers.” (Ammon, 1998, p. 3). SBFC counselors “walk the talk” by essentially adopting the paradigm that says, the client is the child and family; and the intervention must be inclusive of involvement with the family, the school and the community. Parents and guardians are approached as true partners and persons of authority and wisdom who are in a unique position to provide guidance to the student and the school. This view has much in common with the CBT view of the importance of the “therapeutic alliance.” However, this goes a step further in framing this counselor-parent/guardian alliance as fully collaborative in helping a third party: the child. That is, the parents are approached as “co-helpers.”

MULTI-CULTURALLY SENSITIVE

Considerable research has shown that western individualistic models of helping are culturally inappropriate with many collectivist cultures, including Asian, Latino, African and Middle Eastern, among others (Sue & Sue, 2008; Hong, Garcia & Soriano, in press). For example, a majority of Mexican immigrants do not share the Western assumptive set that when one has a family problem, one goes to a therapist. Instead, the assumptive set of most traditional Mexicans is to seek guidance from a family elder, from a priest or even a “curandero” (an indigenous healer). Thus counselors offering “therapy” or “counseling” meet with great resistance, even when the problems are significantly stressful. However, an SBFC counselor understands that while a Mexican client may resist “counseling” he/she would eagerly seek “educational help” for his/her child or adolescent. Thus the reframing of “counseling” into a psycho-educational model of service reaches both parents and their children. Going to a school or agency to consult with the counselor on how to help one's child succeed in school is something that many parents are willing to accept (especially if the counselor emphasizes that she/he needs the parents' help). This normalizes the counseling and reframes it in a way that de-stigmatizes coming for counseling. As the school-based family counselor works with the parents and family to help the child, trust is built which permits the counselor to eventually work on other family's issues affecting the child. School-based family counseling is a multi-culturally sensitive approach because it engages parents and families as partners with the school-based family counselor in working to promote the success of the child at school (Soriano, 2004).

CHILD ADVOCACY ROLE

The ethical standards for professional conduct in the helping professions require the clinician to take a stance as an advocate for the client. This is particularly so in the case of the most vulnerable member in a family, a school or in the community: this is the child. Moreover, as society becomes increasingly complex and taxing on families, schools and communities, abuse and neglect of children continues to be an underreported but growing problem. Often this is not necessarily with malicious intent, but due to overwhelmed parents and educators. In SBFC the client is the child, the family, and the school. The SBFC counselor acts as an advocate for all three. However, emphasis is given to being an advocate to the child because children are more vulnerable than families or schools. This requires a balancing act by the SBFC counselor who must act in the child's best interests while also acting in the best interests of the family and the school. In essence, the SBFC professional is multilingual and multi-visional; he/she learns the language of schools, the language of counseling and the language of families, while understanding the world view of each of them.

PROMOTION OF SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

As stated earlier when quoting the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC), "the problems in the schools are but a reflection of the problems in society" (Dear, 1995). The challenges facing students in public schools are intimately related to the problems facing educators. Any way one looks at the needs of children and adolescents, the structure of the school is not congruous with the life cycle reality of a developing child, a growing adolescent or a diverse, evolving family. This was captured in national milestone publications like "Lost in the Shuffle," "Caught in the Middle" or "Second to None." These are all professional documents and books stating that we essentially forgot to think of the child when configuring the structure of schools. Consequently, a major focus of SBFC philosophy is to put the child and his/her family back in the equation. In an ASCD Journal article, Rick Allen (2010) states: "Whether they call it "middle school" or "junior high school," educator advocates who seek to shine the light on best practices for young adolescent students believe grades 5-9 are pivotal in students' academic careers and should be a key element of school reform. In the last 10 years, with the intense focus on developing solid reading and math skills in early elementary students, lowering the high school dropout rate, and preparing students for college and careers, the needs of middle school students have been overlooked, say middle school experts" (Allen, 2010). Moreover, the SBFC professional knows that the same holds true for the structure of elementary and high schools. SBFC professional counselors are leaders whose vision, illustrated in Figure 1.1, includes the promotion of collaboration and true school reform that places the child and family first.

In SBFC the school, as well as the family, has an obligation to change in order to promote student success and resilience. Schools that have authoritarian or chaotic leadership in the classroom or in the school overall can have a destructive effect on children, as well as a demoralizing effect on teachers and others in the school. The SBFC counselor will not only assess the child's behavior and the family's structure and dynamics, but will also assess the organizational structure and dynamics of the child's classroom and school. It is admittedly more difficult to promote school transformation, particularly if the SBFC counselor is an intern or recently graduated.

Nevertheless, the SBFC counselor is in a unique position to initiate small but important changes with principals and teachers by virtue of the counselor's SBFC systems skills.

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