

Incorporating Wellness into Group Work in Elementary Schools

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Abstract:

Small group and classroom guidance interventions are commonly used by school counselors to address children's academic and personal-social development. Specifically, counselors in elementary school settings have used group work to help children prevent, remediate, and cope with a variety of experiences. For young children, the presence of and their reaction to difficult situations may impact their overall wellbeing, or wellness. This article describes how to incorporate a wellness perspective to classroom guidance and small group work.

Keywords: children; elementary schools; group work; wellness

Article:

Group work is an integral part of a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program. According to the American School Counselor Association's National Model (ASCA, 2005), small group counseling and classroom guidance interventions are examples of essential responsive services, which are part of the school counseling program's delivery system. In addition, Myrick (2002) indicated that small group and classroom guidance interventions can be used to assist children and adolescents in their academic, career, and personal-social development.

Wellness is defined by Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer (2000) as, "a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being, in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully with the human and natural community" (p. 252). Essentially, wellness entails how individuals live their life physically and emotionally, and the factors that positively or negatively impact their lives. For children and adolescents, wellness is positively impacted by a healthy diet, high level of safe physical activity, strong family bonds, and academic success (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Villalba & Borders, 2005). Furthermore, when counseling children and adults from a wellness perspective, clinicians should try to address particular events and consider how they are impacted by an individual's overall wellness. Therefore, incorporating wellness activities and concepts into small and large group interventions with elementary school-aged children may have a more holistic and protective benefit than utilizing groups to focus on the remediation of a particular issue and its isolated effects.

GROUP WORK IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SETTINGS

Small Group Interventions

According to Schmidt (2004), one of the most significant benefits of using small groups in elementary school settings is that children can learn from other children through the sharing of personal experiences. Small group interventions also can lead to an increase in members' insight (Newsome & Gladding, 2003). In addition, the inherent therapeutic factors of cohesiveness and universality that arise in small group interventions (Yalom, 1995) provide further justification for developing and implementing groups in elementary schools. Finally, from a logistical perspective, small group interventions provide counselors in school settings with an efficient and effective method for delivering counseling services to children (Myrick, 2002).

Holmgren (1996) recommended group work in elementary schools specifically for children who have difficulty self-disclosing in classroom guidance settings or who are more comfortable around a small group of peers. Holmgren further indicated that small groups of young children in school settings can be categorized into two

types: counseling groups and guidance groups (psychoeducational groups). Topics discussed in counseling groups might include divorce, grief and loss, or substance abuse issues. Guidance groups (psychoeducational groups) can center on improving decision making skills and social skills, anger management, making friends, and increasing self-concept. Also, Brown (1998) indicated that psychoeducational groups should be used to prevent certain issues, or to educate group participants about coping skills.

For many children in U.S. elementary schools, a variety of school- and home-related issues can challenge their scholastic, physical, and emotional stability. Depression, parental divorce, grief and loss, abuse, peer pressure, bullying, poor study and social skills, and poverty are but a few experiences faced by children. In turn, these experiences have a detrimental effect on children's specific personal-social traits (e.g., self-esteem; self-efficacy; emotional stability; self-care), academic outcomes (e.g., poor grades; truancy) and on their overall wellness (Villalba & Borders, 2005). In an effort to help children cope, counselors have used group work to prevent, remediate, and address these kinds of issues. According to Gerrity and DeLucia-Waack (2007), the most common group interventions used in schools are counseling groups and psychoeducational groups.

Furthermore, Greenberg (2003) acknowledged that psychoeducational groups are an effective method for addressing the personal-social and academic needs of children in K-12 school settings. Topics for which group work has been recommended to help children include coping with depression (Auger, 2005), parents who abuse substances (Arman, 2000), natural disasters (Shelby & Tredinnick, 1995), and parental divorce (Yauman, 1991). In addition, group work interventions have been designed to enrich the school experiences of children from diverse backgrounds, including African-American children (Baggerly & Parker, 2005), Latino children in English language learner programs (Villalba, 2003), Native American students in at-risk schools (Boyer, 2003), and Southeast Asian refugee children (Huang, 2001). Addressing individual challenges to children's healthy development can be effective; however, often times these specific challenges can have a wide-range impact on a child's overall wellness (Villalba & Borders, 2005). Finally, examples of empirically valid group work with children and adolescents include decreased bullying behaviors (Bennett & Gibbons, 2000), increased self-esteem for children of alcoholics (Riddle & Bergin, 1997), decreases in trauma-related anxiety in young survivors of natural disasters (Shen, 2002), and decreased levels of anxiety and increased academic performance for children from divorced parents (Stathakos & Roehrl, 2003).

Classroom Guidance Interventions

Goodnough, Pérusse, and Erford (2003), and Wittmer and Thompson (1995) advocated for the development and implementation of classroom guidance interventions for delivering direct counseling services to children and adolescents. Classroom guidance interventions and small groups share similar benefits in that they are both efficient methods for presenting information to students, allow peers to learn from each other, and can lead to participant insight (Holmgren, 1996). Also, both methods of group work are routinely used in K-12 school settings to deliver direct services to students. Most importantly, Holmgren highlighted the usefulness of classroom guidance interventions because they enable “an elementary school counselor to reach virtually every student in the school” (p. 180).

A classroom guidance unit with a planned and deliberate scope (breadth of ideas and concepts) and sequence (interconnected and related ideas and concepts) can lead to academic and personal-social benefits for elementary school children (Goodnough et al., 2003). Wittmer and Thompson (1995) specifically supported the use of classroom guidance units (composed of four to eight lessons) for addressing interpersonal communication and cooperation skills, multicultural awareness, study skills, decision making skills, personal awareness and knowledge, and responsible behavior.

According to Goodnough et al., grade-level appropriate classroom guidance units can lead to improved cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills in children. For example, Davis and Gidyez (2000) found that psychoeducational, child abuse prevention strategies presented through classroom guidance programs increased abuse prevention skills in young children. Also, Young (2005) successfully used a classroom guidance unit on character education to promote elementary school children's understanding of self-esteem and goal-setting.

Brock (1998) further suggested the use of classroom guidance units for helping children cope with isolated traumatic events. Finally, Nicholson and Pearson (2003) shared the benefits of using children's literature in classroom guidance interventions to decrease youngsters' fears of violence and terrorist attacks.

As is evident, small group and classroom guidance work in elementary schools can provide many benefits for children and counselors alike. Yet, the incorporation of wellness in large and small group work in elementary schools has received little attention. The following sections define wellness, provide examples for infusing wellness into group work, and present support for wellness perspectives in group work.

DEFINING WELLNESS THROUGH THE IS-WEL MODEL OF HOLISTIC WELLNESS

The Indivisible Self model of wellness (IS-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2005b) is an empirically validated model of holistic wellness. The general tenets of the model are grounded in the definition of wellness provided earlier. Overall, the IS-Wel model suggests that the primary concept of *wellness*, the sum of all aspects of one's wellbeing, includes and is affected by secondary concepts such as coping skills (*The Coping Self*), social relationships (*The Social Self*), physical health (*The Physical Self*), spirituality (*The Spiritual Self*), and creativity (*The Creative Self*) (Myers & Sweeney). When working with elementary school-aged children, it is recommended that school counselors focus on the concrete wellness concepts, such as coping skills, relationships, and physical health (Villalba & Borders, 2005).

In addition to the factors discussed above, the IS-Wel model also considers the importance and influence of different *contexts* for understanding the intricacies of holistic wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2005b). Elementary schools are the main *institutional* context in which a young child participates. For children, schools provide many daily opportunities to enhance their wellness. As a result, school counselors and other educators can positively affect a child's wellness during school. Through the use of group work, elementary school counselors can utilize group work to provide proactive and positive services.

EXAMPLES FOR INCORPORATING WELLNESS INTO GROUP WORK

Many school counselors are familiar with specific obstacles to holistic wellness through group work, as well as comfortable with using group work with children to address personal-social concerns (e.g., anger management, friendship skills, grief, substance abuse) and academic concerns (e.g., truancy, low grades, missing homework assignments). Therefore, school counselors are accustomed to facilitating individual wellness skills (e.g., personal hygiene, study skills, gaining insight). School counselors should consider the interaction of secondary wellness factors (as described in the IS-WEL model) while incorporating them into different kinds of group work in order to further increase the therapeutic benefits of group work.

Holcomb-McCoy (2005) indicated that helping elementary school children understand and address their wellness needs could lead to improvements in self-esteem, life-long goals for healthy behaviors, and increased resiliency for coping with adverse situations. As it relates to this article and the incorporation of wellness concepts into group work with children, understanding wellness may include expressing the importance of identifying helpful adults and qualities they would like in friends (*Social Self*), the importance of good nutritional choices and benefits of routine physical activity (*Physical Self*), or developing and using social skills and study skills (*Coping Self*). Infusing wellness concepts and behaviors into small group interventions (e.g., divorce groups, anger management groups, and grief and loss groups) and classroom guidance interventions (e.g., respecting diversity, substance abuse, child abuse prevention) can lead to groups that resonate with children on a grander scale.

Incorporating Wellness into Small Group Interventions

School counselors can use wellness as a foundation for their counseling and psychoeducational groups. A critical aspect for incorporating wellness concepts into groups, such as divorce groups, is defining wellness. For example, using the wellness literature and research (i.e., Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Myers & Sweeney, 2005a, 2005b; Myers et al., 2000; Villalba & Borders, 2005) as a guide, school counselors preparing to start a 6-week counseling divorce group for elementary school children can develop an exercise for the first session whereby children are asked for their personal definitions of "divorce," "separation," and "feelings." To further this

discussion, school counselors also could ask children to talk about their parents' divorce, their feelings about the divorce, and their reactions when they found out their parents were getting a divorce. As part of background information, school counselors can further explore the concept of wellness with children and, by paying particular attention to wellness factors previously discussed, can help children realize that their parents' divorce has impacted their social support system (*Social Self*), the way they deal with their feelings (*Coping Self*), and perhaps their activity level or eating patterns (*Physical Self*). Using this collection of experiences, recollections, and definitions, the school counselor can talk about the holistic concept of wellness and how it has impacted (and affects) many aspects of their lives. Finally, after considering this knowledge, children can be asked to “connect” how they think their present situation is affecting their performance in school, sports, eating habits, or interactions with peers and adults. The overall goal of this type of exercise is to *deliberately* incorporate wellness into the group.

There are various wellness-based activities or discussions which could be incorporated into counseling and psychoeducational groups. One example of a wellness-based discussion is to ask children what they do when they are upset, scared, or sad, and how exercise and eating habits are affected by their emotions. Also, children involved in a group intervention can monitor their eating patterns when they are feeling sad, mad, upset, scared, or confused, while they learn that coping with negative feelings by eating poorly or in excess is not a very effective way of helping their emotional pain subside. Rather, children can be asked to develop a “top 10” list of foods to eat or activities to engage in when they feel upset about, for example, their poor performance on a recent exam. A final wellness-based activity could involve the re-administration of the informal wellness assessment from the prescreening process. Children could complete the assessment during the first half of the final session, giving the group facilitator an opportunity to discuss changes for particular items. A final discussion can center on the relationship between their current responses, the central focus of the group, and their overall wellness. Counselors using these kinds of wellness-based activities should help group participants realize the dual benefits of engaging in these exercises: potential benefits for dealing with or learning about a particular situation, while improving their overall wellness.

Incorporating Wellness into Classroom Guidance Interventions

According to the ASCA National Model (ASCA, [2005](#)), a school counseling guidance curriculum includes the delivery of classroom guidance through guidance units composed of interconnected lessons, grounded in an overall scope and deliberate sequence. For example, when addressing issues around the *Social Self* (personal relationships) is relevant to the topic, then a counselor planning a substance abuse prevention unit can prepare activities and discussions related to how friends and loved ones can support substance abuse prevention. Another example could include the relationship between a healthy amount of exercise and a well-balanced diet, and feeling good about oneself. Regardless of the classroom guidance unit's topic, wellness should be defined during the first session, much in the same manner as was recommended for small groups.

The emphasis on scope and sequence for classroom guidance by ASCA ([2005](#)) and experts in the school counseling field (e.g., Goodnough et al., [2003](#); Myrick, [2002](#); Schmidt, [2004](#)) can actually serve as an impetus for developing wellness-specific classroom guidance units. For example, a six-session unit could be developed in which the first two sessions focus on the benefits of nutrition and exercise (The Physical Self), the next two sessions center on the effects of friends and loved-ones (The Social Self) on how children feel about themselves, and developing coping skills and skills for enhancing self-worth (The Coping Self) are detailed in the last two sessions. The sequence for this type of intervention follows Maslow's ([1968](#)) Hierarchy of Needs, dealing with physiological needs first, whereupon safety and social needs are met next, and self-esteem needs serve as the endpoint. Also, school counselors leading these types of guidance units are encouraged to partner with classroom teachers as they develop classroom lesson activities, while the school counselor encourages partnering teachers to incorporate applicable wellness concepts in their students' daily school activities. Lastly, after the classroom guidance unit has ended, the same classroom-specific needs assessment can be re-administered to measure classroom-wide wellness changes.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN WELLNESS AND GROUP WORK

Aside from a few studies on wellness-based group work (e.g., Dixon Rayle, Sand, Brucato, & Ortega, [2006](#); Omizmo, Omizmo, & D'Andrea, [1992](#)), empirical validation for wellness-based group work is yet emerging. Even so, considering the underlying and interrelated nature of wellness concepts to the physical and emotional experiences of children, it is paramount that researchers and mental health practitioners design and measure wellness-based interventions. Researchers are encouraged to sort out how counseling and psychoeducational groups infuse wellness concepts. Similarly, the benefits to coping with stress or increasing nutritional awareness related to participating in a wellness-specific classroom guidance unit should be ascertained, wherein the unit focuses on the mutual inclusiveness of wellness factors (i.e., the *Social Self* and the *Coping Self*) on multiple aspects of an individual's daily experiences and interactions. Also, school counselors could determine the most effective methods for achieving the ASCA National Standards associated with the National Model ([2005](#)) through the use of group work that incorporates wellness concepts and perspectives. Examples of ASCA National Standards which incorporate different and interrelated wellness factors include ASCA National Standard 7, which indicates that students must possess the knowledge and interpersonal communication skills to help them understand others' points of view (*Social Self*) while having respect for oneself and others (*Coping Self* and *Social Self*), and ASCA National Standard 3, whereby students realize the connection between academic success (*Creative Self*) and the world of work, home life, and the community (*Physical Self*, *Spiritual Self*, and *Social Self*). Finally, designing and validating psychoeducational small group and large group interventions, where the focus is to teach wellness concepts and to have children learn methods for maintaining a healthy level of holistic wellness, also is recommended as an area in need of further inquiry.

CONCLUSION

The variety of personal, social, and academic stressors impacting elementary school children can take their toll on their overall wellness. The focus of this study has been to consider the incorporation of wellness concepts, from a holistic perspective, when conducting large group and small group interventions at the elementary school level. After years of research and conceptual literature related to small group and classroom guidance interventions, it is apparent that school counselors working in elementary schools should and do use group work as a means to help young children cope with tough circumstances and develop effective academic and personal-social skills. The author believes that by infusing the situation-specific focus of group work with wellness concepts, terminology, and knowledge, young children can expect to receive more benefit from the group experience than if the holistic wellness was ignored. In the end, promoting children's overall wellness by incorporating wellness into a variety of group activities may lead to physically, emotional, cognitively, and spiritually healthier children in academic and non-academic settings.

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