



EP 6a

development. Of particular importance is how the school setting affects the child's sense of social acceptance and the development of self-esteem and ego rate assessment of the strengths and needs of the student.

Above all, school social workers need good intervention skills and knowledge of how to use the various approaches to social work practice outlined in **Chapter 6**. As described in Box 11.3, building relationships is critical. To do that well, the school social worker needs to feel comfortable with children and understand how to communicate and relate to them.

Box 11.3 From the Field

Experiencing School Social Work Charlie Boyse, MSW

I had the opportunity to do a field placement at an elementary school that enrolled children in kindergarten through third grade. I had never worked with children this young before, and I wasn't looking forward to it. Because I was one of few men on staff, one of my responsibilities was one-on-one relationship building with troubled male students in need of a positive male role model.

My first case, Robert, was referred to the counseling department by his second-grade teacher because of disturbing entries he made in his journal. Robert wrote about death and dying; he wrote that he wished he were dead and made many negative remarks about himself, writing that he was stupid, unimportant, and so on. He had behavioral problems and was referred to the Responsibility Room almost daily. I had no idea how to start a relationship with Robert, and the school's counselor and social worker met with me on a regular basis to mentor and guide me through the process.

Initially, I interviewed Robert's teacher to gather information about his behavior. I then observed Robert in the classroom and on the playground. I also met with his mother to discuss his family life. Robert's father had mysteriously disappeared a year earlier. He had been involved in illegal activities and had many dangerous acquaintances, and Robert's mother suspected foul play. Robert had been close to his father and was just now coming to terms with the fact that his father might not return and might in fact be dead.

I was now ready to meet with Robert. At our initial meeting, I explained that we would be meeting twice a week for a half an hour at a time to talk, play, or do whatever he wanted to do. I had Robert draw a picture of his family, and

we discussed the picture. I was surprised by his openness, honesty, and directness as he discussed his father's disappearance and the probability that he was dead.

We continued to meet regularly for the rest of the school year. I was amazed by how quickly children bond to adults who give them attention and praise. I treated Robert as if he were the best kid in the world. I praised him often and honestly. Robert decided what we would do during our time together, and we usually played soccer or basketball. I asked about his life and about how things were going at school and at home. Robert's behavior improved dramatically.

We had many opportunities to discuss abandonment and death that year. Robert's teacher left on maternity leave during the second semester. She and Robert had grown close, and he was upset at her leaving. A student at the school was murdered by his father. Robert told me that he believed the father must have been angry with the boy to have murdered him. I suggested other possibilities that placed the blame on the father, not on the murdered son. Robert then spoke about how sad the boy's family must be and how the father probably didn't really mean to do it. Robert asked me if I would be sad if he were murdered. I said that I would be and that lots of people would be. We then discussed all the people who would be sad if he were murdered. I ended the conversation by saying that he would be the saddest because of all the things that he would miss seeing and doing. Robert came up with a large list of things he would miss.

By the end of the school year, Robert was no longer talking about death and dying. He was no longer being sent to the Responsibility Room. His mother reported that his behavior and attitude had greatly improved. All of this

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Box 11.3 (continued)

was due to the fact that an adult had showed interest in him and had given him time and attention. An adult had treated him as though he was the best kid in the world, and he'd started to believe that way.

Here are some things I learned about building relationships with children:

- Show interest in his or her home life and school life.
- Clearly state your high expectations.
- Be consistent in behavior, attitude, and expectations.
- Give praise openly and honestly.
- Verbalize your feelings, and verbalize and validate the child's feelings for himself or herself.
- Allow yourself to learn from the child. Consider the question posed in Box 11.4.
- Look at the child as though he or she is the best child in the world.
- Allow her or him to direct the activity of the day.

Box 11.4 What Do You Think?

What are some other ways to build relationships with young children in schools?

If it seems as though school social workers do everything in some schools they do. Regardless of specific tasks, there is a unifying perspective and philosophy. **School social work is based on the belief that every child is entitled to the best possible learning environment.** School social workers contribute to the learning environment by matching the needs of students and their families with the resources available in the community and by creating new resources when the existing ones are inadequate. School social workers are employed by local school systems, school districts, county school boards, private schools, and charter schools.

Most states regulate and require certification of school social workers. Although requirements for licensing and certification vary, they generally include some combination of the following: a BSW or MSW degree, a certificate for school social work from an accredited school of social work, practicum or professional experience in a school setting, and a passing grade on a state exam. Many states require the MSW degree. Box 11.5 summarizes the qualifications needed to receive the NASW school social worker specialist (SSWS) credential.

Box 11.5 More About...School Social Work Credentials

The National Association of Social Workers offers a special credential called school social work specialist. To receive the credential, you must complete the following requirements:

1. Graduate with an MSW degree from an accredited program.
2. Work as a school social worker for two years after completing your MSW. During the two years, you must be supervised by an MSW. Your supervisor will be asked to evaluate your performance and recommend you for certification at the end of the two years.
3. Obtain one reference from an MSW or doctoral-level social worker other than your supervisor.

Renew your certification every three years. The renewal requirement is 30 hours of continuing professional education every three years.