

School Psychologists: Partners in Healthcare

National Association of School Psychologists

School psychologists are professionals specializing in both mental health and education, who provide services that help students succeed academically, emotionally and socially. They are trained to identify and address a wide range of barriers to school and community success, including learning disabilities, cognitive deficits, behavioral difficulties and emotional stressors. Children and youth today often experience mental health and health-related problems that can limit their ability to learn, participate in activities, socialize, concentrate or even attend school. Through collaboration with other mental health providers as well as medical professionals, school psychologists can help youngsters develop resiliency, competence, self-control and self-esteem, and can facilitate integration of services between home and school. It is essential that states and communities support this collaboration through appropriate credentialing, policies and legislation, and avoid any unintended or misguided restrictions on student access to appropriate health and mental health supports in their schools.

What training prepares school psychologists to work with other healthcare professionals?

School psychologists are specially trained to link mental health and health-related factors to learning and behavior. School psychologists work in schools, clinics, and other health and education settings. They often are the *only* school-based mental health professionals trained in child psychology, learning and development as well as school systems and classroom environments. Their training includes the study of the biological basis of behavior, the impact of mental illness on school performance, and the medical conditions that impact learning, behavior and mental health. Furthermore, school psychologists are trained to work with multi-disciplinary teams and families. They use research and evidence-based strategies to promote:

- Mental health
- Wellness
- High academic achievement
- Positive social skills and behavior
- Positive discipline strategies
- Tolerance and respect for others
- Safe, supportive learning environments
- Behavioral self-control
- Family involvement in the educational process

What health-related problems might a school psychologist address?

Most chronic health problems affect student achievement, behavior and/or mental health status. Additionally, acute and chronic health problems within the family (such as a parent's critical illness) can significantly impact the performance of other family members. With parent consent, school psychologists collaborate with other school and community healthcare professionals (e.g., school nurse, family physician, neurologist, chemical dependency specialists, etc.) to address a wide range of issues, including but not limited to:

- Chronic child illness (e.g., diabetes, asthma, severe allergies, cancer)
- Chronic illness of a family member
- Teen pregnancy
- Obesity
- Eating disorders
- Substance dependency or abuse
- Violence and aggression
- Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD)
- Suicidal ideation/risk
- Medically-based disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, spina bifida)
- Vision and hearing impairments
- Psychiatric disorders including depression and anxiety
- Seizure disorders
- Tourette's Syndrome and other tic disorders
- Traumatic brain injury (TBI)

What services do school psychologists provide for health-related problems?

School psychologists serve general education students through consultation, direct intervention and referral. Furthermore, because schools are mandated to address health issues as part of special education disability determination under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school psychologists play essential roles in assisting Individual Education Plan teams to identify and provide needed services for students with health-related disabilities. In addition to coordination of services through collaboration with parents and school and community healthcare providers, school psychologists support children with health-related problems through:

- Consultation to assure consistency between home, school and community providers
- Observations and performance feedback to physicians monitoring the effects of medications and therapies on student's school performance
- Assessments to help determine student strengths and weaknesses, as part of determining eligibility for special education and/or need for accommodations or modifications of instructional program
- Diagnostic assessments that assist parents, physicians and psychiatrists appropriately address conditions such as ADHD and depression
- Risk assessments regarding potential for suicide and violence
- Specific skills training (e.g., social skills, organization skills, study skills)
- Individual or group counseling around relevant issues (e.g., chronic illness, sibling or parent illness, substance abuse prevention, etc.)
- Direct intervention and consultation regarding behavior planning for students with ADD, Tourette's Syndrome, TBI, etc.
- Inservice and parent education programs regarding mental health and learning issues related to medical conditions (e.g., helping kids with ADD; understanding eating disorders; supporting children with a terminally ill parent, etc.)
- Program evaluation (e.g., examining the effectiveness of a social skills program for ADD students; identifying outcomes for TBI students who receive a special instruction program)

Assuring Access to Appropriate Services

School psychologists support students with health-related problems in many ways. They are recognized as healthcare providers by the Medicaid regulations of many states and are critical members of special education teams charged with identifying and serving students with health-related disabilities. Essential to delivering such services is their ability to exercise professional judgment in offering thoughtful consultation and individualized referral resources for school personnel and families. Certainly school psychologists and other school personnel should limit their practice to their areas of training, competence, and credentialing.

While school psychologists typically are not trained or credentialed to prescribe specific medical treatments, they are knowledgeable about the impact of medical conditions on learning and behavior; they may also identify symptoms of potentially harmful diseases or disorders that would require medical evaluation and possibly treatment. Ethically, they are obligated to inform school personnel and parents of the possibility of conditions that require further evaluation and to take or recommend further action when supported by reliable and valid data.

Policies, standards, and legal mandates should help assure the public that the professionals working with their children practice within the scope of their training and credentialing, and that their children have access to professionals who can appropriately address the factors that impact school success and lifelong outcomes. Professionals such as school psychologists address multi-faceted problems affecting learning, behavior, mental health, and health status. Their expert involvement in these areas should be acknowledged and supported, not limited, by federal, state or local policies.

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