Addressing Problem Behavior of Middle School Students
Counselors have a leading role to play in reducing behavior problems and producing a more positive learning environment in schools.

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by Jim Bierma

Students today come to school with more behavioral issues than they did in the past—issues that range from distracting classroom behaviors such as visiting with friends, interrupting, throwing things, and teasing, to oppositional behaviors such as refusing to stay in their seats, vulgar language, and harassment. Students often reject adult authority, which can affect not only their academic performance but the education of their classmates as well.

The Roots of the Problem
There are many reasons for the increase in unacceptable student behavior in middle schools today, and it is important to understand the roots of the behavior if we are to implement successful interventions. For example:

- In recent years there has been an increase in the number of students who are attempting to cope with an unstable home environment. There are increasing numbers of incarcerated fathers and more single mothers living in poverty. There is more parental neglect. Increasing numbers of domestic and sexual abuse cases have been reported.
- Youngsters who were born with fetal alcohol syndrome and crack babies are now in middle school.
- Students who do not learn respect at home and who challenge parental authority do not show respect for adults in the school environment.
- In years past, students played outside with friends and were closely monitored by parents. Students do not get as much exercise today, and the inactivity often leads to hyperactivity and other problems.
- Playing fast-moving video games and constantly switching TV channels can lead to decreased attention span.
- Violence is glorified in many video games and in much popular music. The “bad guy” often is the hero.

The most important role models for middle schoolers are no longer parents and teachers. They are focused on pop-culture icons and their peers as they try to discover and establish their identity. However, it is important to remember that they still seek the approval of the adults in their lives.

A Collaborative Approach to Improving Behavior
The American School Counseling Association National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs is a schoolwide, collaborative approach that is designed to reduce behavior problems and produce a more positive learning environment. It involves administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and other members of the school community.

The ASCA model is comprised of several separate elements. The following discussion provides a brief description of each element and explains how the model was implemented by counselors in one St. Paul, Minnesota, junior high school.

1. Foundation. The foundation component is based on school goals for student achievement—what every student should know and be able to do. It determines how every student will benefit from the counseling program. The foundation includes statements of belief and philosophy as well as a mission statement.

The St. Paul counselors used the belief and philosophy statements as guideposts to create the following mission statement:

*We are focused on improving academic achievement and student behavior with*
2. Management System. The management system, combined with the delivery system, ensures that the program is organized, concrete, clearly delineated, and reflective of the school’s needs.

In St. Paul, a counselor met with the school principal in June. Together, they decided to introduce a data-driven program that included using needs assessments, setting goals, implementing interventions, and administering evaluations. They also determined that it would be beneficial to create a staff leadership team comprising an administrator, a teacher, and a support staff member.

The team’s first task was to prepare for a meeting of all staff members by reviewing office behavior referrals and survey data from the previous school year. At the meeting, staff used this information to determine the issues on which they would focus in homeroom lessons during the upcoming year. They included behavioral issues such as fighting, sexual harassment, bullying, and gang activity as well as such things as cooperation, responsibility, safety, productivity, and respect.

The group established four goals for the year:

1. Reduce office referrals by 25 percent;
2. Reduce referrals related to bullying by 30 percent;
3. Increase the number of students who say they like going to school by 10 percent; and
4. Decrease staff reports of student fighting by 25 percent.

The meeting helped the staff unite with a common goal of creating a more positive learning environment. It generated renewed optimism and excitement about the upcoming school year.

3. Delivery System. The delivery system includes the activities, interactions, and methods used to provide the program to the students.

Every student at the St. Paul school received lessons on the identified issues. One topic was covered each week during homeroom. Although teachers provided most of the instruction, school counselors taught lessons in selected homerooms and provided follow-up lessons throughout the school day.

A student leadership team developed materials to support each of the topics. The team developed a video that was shown to the entire school on Friday, posters, and morning announcements about the topic of the week. Videos included skits on how to prevent bullying and interviews about the negative effects of gangs.

The counselors developed a system of extra support for the 8 percent of the students who accounted for 63 percent of the school’s suspensions. That system included participation in individual counseling sessions each week. The counselors would ask how things had gone during the preceding week, allow each student to discuss personal/social issues, and review the academic, behavioral, and attendance records for the week. If the student met his or her goals, the counselor would call the parents to share the good news. This strategy proved to be very effective with many students.

The Results: A Documented Success

Counselors tracked disciplinary data and measured student and staff attitudes throughout the school year. The following survey results documented the fact that the program was working.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Survey</th>
<th>Previous Year</th>
<th>This Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you think student fighting is a problem?</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Administrators, teachers, and support staff worked cooperatively throughout the year to build positive relationships with students and their families. The result: Many students reached their behavioral and academic goals, and the number of students who exhibited problem behaviors was reduced.

**Student Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Previous Year</th>
<th>This Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do students treat each other respectfully?</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are school rules effective?</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are students safe in school?</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there racial/ethnic discord?</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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