

# Using Solution-Focused Brief Counseling in the Elementary School: A Case Study

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## Introduction

This paper will reflect my views on using a solution-focused approach at the elementary school level. Sklare (2014) reported that solution-focused approach emphasizes problem solving and highlights the strengths and positives of students. A solution-focused approach is also recognized for creating solutions for clients or students in a limited amount of time (Sklare, 2014). In an elementary school setting where the ratio of students to a school counselor, in a typical Georgia school, maybe 500:1, this approach may be best utilized in order to provide individual counseling with a large student population. I have found this approach to be efficient and effective for elementary school students because students will focus on the solutions to their problems, which lead to changes in their lives. As well, students will hear comments that are positive and receive recognition for their strengths and past and present successes. Kim and Franklin (2015) reported solution focused brief therapy (SFBT) focuses on the client recognizing past success and identifying new responses to problem solving. Thus, the solution-focused

approach would be very helpful in building self-esteem in impressionable elementary age students. As Sklare (2014) stated, the solution-focused approach helps students to recognize what they can do (focusing on the positive) and eliminates the concept of what they need to stop doing (deter the negative). Some key components of the solution-focused approach that I think are very beneficial to elementary school students are goal setting, the miracle question, scaling, cheerleading, and the message. This paper will examine how each of these components were used in a case study of a fifth grade student.

## Case Study

### *Student's Background*

Tabitha (pseudonym) is a 10-year-old fifth grade student. She has one sister who is in the first grade at the same school. Tabitha and her sister are currently living with their aunt. Tabitha's mother is currently incarcerated for a long period of time. Tabitha does not know her father or his whereabouts. On many days, Tabitha comes to school looking disheveled. Her clothes are dirty or stained. Her hair is not combed, and it is matted and tangled.

There have been several days as well when she has come to school hungry.

Tabitha is considered to be a C student. On a scale of 100, her reading assessments average is approximately 74, and her math assessment average is approximately 67. She has some difficulty with vocabulary and reading comprehension. She struggles with multi-step problems and computation in math. She lacks focus in class, and she is easily distracted. On last year's CRCT examination, she did not pass Reading, Math, and Social Studies. When Tabitha is focused in class, she works hard in completing her assignments with accuracy. When she doesn't understand a skill or concept, she is willing to ask for help without hesitation. Tabitha is anxious to help other students in class when she has mastered a skill. Her favorite subjects are Spanish and Art. She excels in those classes.

Tabitha's social skills need improvement. She struggles with having friends. She is teased often because of her appearance. She is not easily accepted into groups; therefore, she becomes involved in confrontations with other students. There have been times where Tabitha has been destructive with items in her desk or in the class because she is angry or frustrated about something. On rare occasions, Tabitha has been disrespectful to her teachers by not following directions, making inappropriate statements, and arguing back with teachers. Tabitha is currently in the SST (student support team) process for academic and behavioral problems.

#### *Student's Identified Problems*

Tabitha's home life is affecting her academics, behavior, and social skills. She

is angry that her mom is incarcerated and that she has to live with her aunt. She is embarrassed when she comes to school with dirty or torn clothes. Her self-esteem has also been affected. She does not view herself as pretty or popular with the other students. She is often loud and confrontational with students and teachers. Her grades are borderline failing grades because she is not able to concentrate in class. She often thinks that the other students are talking negatively about her, thus her focus is on what the students are saying. She is often alienated from groups because of the constant bickering. Also, students have often complained that Tabitha has stolen something from them. As a result of these actions, Tabitha chooses to work independently and isolate herself from the class. She feels sad because she thinks no one wants her, not her aunt or her classmates.

#### *Solution-focused Brief Counseling Techniques*

According to Rakauskiene and Dumciene (2013), SFBT is an effective counseling technique to use with adolescents who are dealing with psychosocial issues. Therefore, one might surmise Tabitha's feelings of anger, sadness, and her declining grades can be helped with the solution-focused brief counseling techniques and strategies. Tabitha will greatly benefit from the positive approach of this type of counseling. She will learn that she can achieve her goals and change her behavior with small changes. One reason why I like this approach is because any small change is viewed as a positive step in the right direction for future changes. Tabitha needs to hear positive comments and boost her self-esteem. This approach will help her to see that she is capable of making good

decisions, and that she has many strengths and positive attributes. In order to help Tabitha, solutions will be developed for her academic and behavioral issues. One immediate solution to one of her problems is providing her with new school uniform clothes. I will ask the parent center at our school to donate a few new uniforms for Tabitha to wear. This will diminish the amount of teasing that she has been experiencing.

The first step is for Tabitha to establish a goal or goals for herself. In my previous experience with Tabitha, she has stated to me that she wants to improve her grades and be able to control her temper. As the counselor, I will encourage Tabitha to believe in her ability to achieve her goals. I will inform her that small, positive changes can help her accomplish those goals and lead to successes in school. She could possibly have goals of taking notes in class, completing her homework every night, and writing in a journal about her feelings instead of bickering with other students when she becomes upset.

After engaging in goal setting with Tabitha, I will ask her a miracle question. The miracle question is a technique designed to shift the client's focus away from troubling situations to a problem free future (Weatherall & Gibson, 2015). In this case, the miracle question will give Tabitha the opportunity to think about her life without any problems. For example, I would ask her to imagine if she had a magic wand, and she could wave this magic wand to change anything in her life; what would you change in your life? This strategy is powerful because the responses from the student will give the counselor insight as to what the student truly wants to change in her life. Tabitha would begin to visualize

what her school life would be like if she took the steps to achieve her goals. This strategy helps the student to focus on her goals and transform her miracle into reality.

One of the most commonly used techniques in SFBT is scaling (King, 2013). As the counselor, I will use scaling questions to help Tabitha rate her current school situation and to establish a baseline to measure her progress toward achieving her goals. I would ask Tabitha the following: "on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being the worse and 10 being your miracle, how would you rate your satisfaction with school?" Any rating above a zero will let me know that there are some good or positive moments for Tabitha at school. I like the scaling technique because it also gives the student a chance to see that the situation is not as bad as he or she has thought. The scaling technique also gives the student an opportunity to move up the scale in a positive direction; therefore, enabling the student with the power to change.

I believe the technique of cheerleading will have a profound effect on students with low self-esteem. Cheerleading is described as offering praise to support and encourage a client's success (Sklare, 2014). Because Tabitha does not recognize her own strengths and successes and focuses on what she is doing wrong, I will highlight Tabitha's strengths and successes through cheerleading. For example, I will give her praise for helping another student in class, completing her homework, and remaining calm and not bickering with other students. I would also praise her for doing well in Spanish and Art class. The words of praise and encouragement will influence Tabitha to continue demonstrating positive behaviors. Cheerleading is definitely an

appropriate technique to use with Tabitha because she needs to hear kind words and to know that she is doing something right. Many times, she is hearing what she is doing wrong or hearing negative words from other students. Cheerleading will make Tabitha aware of her good deeds, strengths, and successes.

The technique of writing a message to a student at the conclusion of a counseling session is another powerful tool for counselors to use (Sklare, 2014). The message provides compliments to the student on his or her efforts, achievements, and past successes. I like the use of the message because it allows the counselor to give something tangible to the student that is positive. The message also reaffirms to the student that the counselor is genuinely concerned, attentive, and caring for the needs of the student. In the case with Tabitha, I would first read my entire message to her, and then I would provide to her a shorter version of my original message so she could share it with her family and teachers. Tabitha wants to prove to everyone that she can do better in school, so the message gives her an opportunity showcase her strengths and successes. An example of a message that would write to Tabitha is: "I am really impressed with your commitment to staying focused in class and how you want to control your temper with others. You recognize that controlling your temper is an important step in making friends and getting along with other people. You realize that changing your attitude can lead to positive results. You also realize that taking notes in class will help you understand the subject material more and help you study at home. I am happy to hear that you are committed to completing your homework every night. You realize that doing your

homework is practice for the skills that you have learned in class and that this can help you improve your grades. I would suggest that you continue to stay focused in class and even participate in class discussions. Just by asking me for help, you are already on the path to accomplishing your goals."

## Conclusion

Students come to school with a plethora of issues that can interfere with their ability to be focused in school due in part to the unique challenges posed by educational and socialization expectations, and physical and psychological developmental changes (Patel, Aronson & Divan, 2013). As a result, school counselors are confronted with an increased number of students with problems. The solution-focused brief counseling approach allows for counselors to help more students in a limited amount of time. In addition, SFBT has been reported to be a promising early intervention treatment for emotional, behavioral, and academic problems in schools (Franklin, 2015). I like this approach because it provides quick solutions to the student's problem, which means the student, can concentrate more on learning and not his or her problem. The strength of this approach is that it emphasizes the student's strengths and successes. I believe that this approach teaches students to be focused on solutions and not focused on problems. This approach compliments my personal beliefs of focusing on the positives in any situation. It is very easy to point out the negatives, but it is better to concentrate on the positives. Students, especially elementary age students, need reassurance about the things that they are doing right. By focusing on the strengths and successes of students, this approach gives them a new perspective on how to

deal with problems. All in all, I believe the solution-focused approach gives students hope that they are capable of achieving their goals.

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