

The School Counselor and the Tech Generation: Issues and Tips

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ABSTRACT

School counselors should be knowledgeable about the influence of today's technologies on common issues dealt with in counseling. This article describes several of these issues and how they are affected by use of technology. Suggestions are provided to help counselors deal with the current challenges posed by the use of interactive communication technologies.

THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR AND THE TECH GENERATION: ISSUES AND TIPS

The old saying "Fools names and fools faces always appear in public places" is no longer totally accurate. With the advent of online blogs, many of our students' names and faces are in public places – that is, the "public domain". Wherever interactive technologies are used, issues that concern school counselors may occur.

Students deserve admiration for the clever ways they use these new technologies. They network better than most CEO's of large companies. They

upload, download, create, and share like experienced webmasters. At the same time that they are working on research projects, they are playing games, enjoying their MP3's, and Instant Messaging eight of their friends simultaneously. Multi tasking is their way of life.

Unfortunately, few students have positive role models to show them the ethical and wise use of technology. How many of your students have parents that blog, or text message, or belong to a local guild in their multiplayer online gaming community? In fact, how many parents even have a desktop that is not graced with a Windows background? Our students design their desktops to reflect their personality. Technology is integrated into their lives and self image, while many of their parents are still learning how to save a file in a folder other than "My Documents". It's not that parents are not putting forth the effort to stay abreast of technologic change; it's just that it takes time and support to learn about this new social change. In the meantime, students are learning by trial and error. The older student is the model for the younger student. The risks and dangers are numerous, and often the student is simply unaware of these risks. As a

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result, school counselors must be prepared to address online issues.

COUNSELING ISSUES AFFECTED BY TECHNOLOGY

The issues or concerns brought to the school counselor are not new. However, computer technology affects, and sometimes exacerbates, these issues.

Bullying

Bullying itself is not new, but in the past, students had physical confrontations at school, at the bus stop, during lunch, and in other places when the bully was physically in their presence. They had safe places in the classroom, at home, or other places during the day. Cyber bullying using text messaging, web posting, blogs, or email provides *no escape* from the tormentors...it is often present 24/7.

- Text messaging may be used throughout the day and night to harass the bullied student.
- Unauthorized photos may be taken of the student in an embarrassing situation and then shown to other students.
- Photos may be morphed, or altered in a way that embarrasses the bullied student, and put online.
- Blogs may be created in the student's name and then groups of other students may comment to that blog using nasty and degrading messages.
- Students may use the Internet to spread falsehoods about the bullied student.

Additionally, the scope of the harassment is much larger. In the past, when a group of boys pushed one boy

around and made fun of him in a locker room, they left the situation and told fellow students about what they had done. The student was ashamed to walk down the hall because others had heard about what had happened. After a few days, most students had forgotten the incident. Now, those same students may push another student and tease him, but the bullying doesn't stop there. They use their camera phone to document the incident. Then they email it to everyone in their address book, and post it to a website with degrading comments for the world to read. The student has nowhere to go for escape and this bullying is perpetuated by the fact that once an image is posted online, it can never be retrieved. It's difficult if not impossible to find refuge from today's cyber bullying. The counselor must be aware of these important factors when dealing with students facing such harassment.

Relationships

Instant messaging, blogs, email and text messages are used to start relationships, build relationships and end relationships. These relationships quickly develop, become intense and are abruptly ended. Breaking up is hard to do, but it's even harder on the students when their attempts to communicate with their ex-boyfriend, or ex-girlfriend, are blocked. These fast, intense, and abrupt relationships produce residual emotions that the counselor must understand in order to be effective.

Rejection

Isolation can be intensified by online practices. Social networking, or blogging, focuses around the number of friends one has on his/her site. When a specific

individual is targeted to be excluded, their friend request can literally be rejected. If rejected by a whole group of people, that individual suffers from exclusion and humiliation. The same phenomena occurs when an individual's communication is consistently blocked when instant messaging or text messaging.

Sexual solicitation and exposure

Exposure to sexual content is a concern of parents and educators. Research by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Womak, 2000) revealed that 19% of students 10-17 years of age were sexually solicited online and 25% were exposed to unwanted sexual material. It is common to experience conversations about cybersex and have the opportunity to view webcams of naked individuals when visiting chatrooms as a young teen. This type of exposure at younger ages, in explicit detail, and in such high quantities may have consequences for the student's sexual development. The research that documents possible consequences is lacking at this time. It is reasonable to assume that some students being counseled have been exposed to graphic sexual content on the computer. These students may have questions, may be experiencing difficulty resisting the urge to return to those sites, and may be feeling guilty for engaging in those behaviors.

Other content and information

Sexual content is not the only type of information that is freely available to students. Information regarding cults, hate groups, prejudice, violence, illegal or inappropriate material, and gangs is freely available. In addition, sites that

offer support for behaviors such as self injury, eating disorders, or suicide are among the many accessible sites. These online groups may validate antisocial or destructive tendencies in addition to providing directions for carrying out counterproductive measures, such as cutting.

Gambling

Romer (2005) found that an estimated 7,900,000 American teens are addicted to gambling, which is more than half of all people in the United States with pathological gambling addictions. According to estimates from another study (Christiansen Capital Advisors, LLC, 2004), nearly \$12 billion was wagered worldwide on the Internet in 2005, increasing at a greater rate than any other form of gambling. Teenage betting is growing so fast that Gamblers Anonymous on Long Island is reaching out directly to teens for the first time in its history. This is the first generation that is raised in a society of legalized gambling. Online gambling only complicates the problem with more than 2000 web sites. McNulty (2006) stated that out of 37 randomly selected online gambling sites, a minor was able to register, play, and pay at 30 of them. Considering these facts, it would be prudent to anticipate that some students may be wrestling with gambling problems.

Virtual versus real world substitutions

The line between reality and fantasy is blurring. The following are some examples of that confusion.

- Virtual community – People disengage from social and work commitments to spend time on the Internet, prompting the new label "mouse potatoes". Students that

may have difficulty in real world social situations may find community online in the virtual world. Online gaming communities form tight bonds and have even hosted online memorial services for gamers that have been killed in real life. Although these services are touching, in reality they are virtual funerals.

- Virtual Property – Individuals buy virtual property for thousands of dollars (Terdiman, 2005). Film director and gamer Jon Jacobs paid \$100,000 for a piece of virtual real estate in the Sweden-based “Project Entropia”. The property is in the Paradise V Asteroid Belt and comes with mining and hunting taxation rights, mall deeds, a land management system, a billboard marketing system, and space station naming rights (“Gamer buys virtual space station”, 2005). This trend is not limited to adults. Young children can purchase virtual hotel rooms and parties at www.habohotel.com.
- Virtual Personality – Students may assume any personality online. In some ways this is advantageous, as they can try on personas and then delete them if they are not accepted by others. One characteristic that is commonly seen online is disinhibition, where the user does and says things that he or she would not do or say offline.

Sexual enticement and grooming

Online grooming is a procedure facilitated by cyber-technologies to prepare another person to be the victim of sexual abuse. Some predators’ desired result is sexual discussion with the child

or cybersex with the child. However, many are interested in the meeting and groom the child to lower his/her inhibition in order to arrange a face to face meeting. The enticement and grooming of students by predators has become easier to do with the advent of interactive communicative technology. A predator is able to groom his/her victim at a much faster pace and is able to groom multiple victims simultaneously. The predator uses well defined grooming techniques that manipulate the victim in order to establish a relationship, develop trust, and isolate the victim from support in his/her environment. Victims of online grooming and subsequent physical abuse continue to feel a bond to their abuser after prosecution and sentencing of the abuser. In 50% of cases studied by Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2003), investigators found that victims believed they were in love with or felt close friendships with offenders.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Because of the prevalence of teens going online, it is behind the times to ask, “Do you have an online life?” Instead, it is more appropriate to ask, “How is your online life?”, or to say “Tell me about your online life”. Additionally, be aware that many, if not most, of the cybersafety issues that students are dealing with will not be reported, even when students are directly asked. Students do not want to risk losing the right to use their online devices. Their answers will be influenced by how they think the counselor will react to their disclosures (Gaunt, 2004). Students must be assured that unless they are facing imminent danger,

committing a crime or causing harm to someone else, they will continue to have online access.

Underlying problems of character or lack of knowledge must be addressed when a student has online issues. Many problems caused by the use of technology are symptoms of the character of the user. If a student is a bully offline, that student may bully online. If a student cheats on a test by copying someone's test, that student may text the answers to another student using the cell phone. However, some misuse of technology is simply a matter of ignorance. When a student does not understand copyright laws, the cut and paste function is a convenience when writing a paper. Students who are unaware that possession of child pornography is a felony may download child pictures along with adult pornography when using their peer to peer program. The attitude that if it is freely available online, it must be okay, is a common attitude among students. That is the attitude that inspires downloading music and movies, and sharing those downloads with friends. Students may not realize that what they are doing is piracy.

Parent involvement is vital; however, some parents feel that they don't understand technology and they hesitate to discuss or set rules for its use. A study conducted by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and Cox Communications ("Statistics: Teen internet safety study", 2006) shows that parental involvement in the child's virtual life is a deterrent to some of the risks. Students who had parents that addressed the online dangers tended to refrain from posting pictures, ignored messages from unfamiliar people,

refused to chat, blocked unknown senders and reported disturbing occurrences to adults. Unfortunately, a fourth of the students said their parent have never spoken to them about Internet safety. To complicate matters, half of the high school aged students report that their parents or guardians know "very little" or "nothing" about what they do on the Internet. Parent internet safety presentations are available in Georgia and may be requested by completing a presentation request form through the website www.familyinternet.info.

Specific suggestions for counselors may include the following. In instances of multiple relationship problems, include students on the Instant Messenger buddy list or the student's blog (i.e. MySpace) friends list in the session. Prior to approaching cyber issues, consider what should be done in various situations, what you would suggest regarding offline meetings, and what is legal and illegal online. Be aware that instances of recording someone without their knowledge with cell phones or digital recorders have been reported. In these situations, students record a counseling session or a classroom discussion. If baiting is used, the student may provoke the educator and then record the dialogue. Most importantly, do not abandon the skills, experience and intuitions you already have, but rather apply them to cyberspace (Gaunt, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

The advent of new interactive technologies introduces new challenges and issues for school counselors. Applying previous knowledge and experience learned from offline situations to the current online situations is the key to the effective counseling of today's technologically sophisticated generation.

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