

**Adding to the Toolbox: Using Creative Interventions With High School Students**

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### **Abstract**

This article provides a comprehensive overview of creative interventions used with adolescents in the secondary school setting. School counselors who incorporate creative interventions along with traditional counseling methods will increase their effectiveness with high school students. Creative interventions that can be delivered through classroom guidance and/or individual and group counseling will be discussed, including the use of art, props, reading, writing, music, play, and sandtray. Specific examples of ways to utilize each intervention are also provided to assist school counselors with implementation of these methods.

### **Adding to the Toolbox: Using Creative Interventions With High School Students**

Professional school counselors are on the front line of providing care to address the developmental challenges of adolescence. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model supports school counselors using developmentally based interventions to assist students with academic, career, and personal / social issues and provides a helpful framework for delivering these services (ASCA, 2005). Of this delivery system, classroom guidance lessons and individual/ small group counseling are easily amenable to creative interventions.

The high school years are an intense period within human development in which many adolescents struggle to develop a sense of self (Erikson, 1963). Adolescence is characterized by extreme developmental shifts which include; a) experiencing physical changes, b) developing abstract thought, c) facing existential dilemmas, including needing a sense of meaning and purpose, d) experiencing a need for both independence and support from adults, and e) desiring intimacy and connection with others, in particular from their peer group (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). From this intensity, however, comes an opportunity for creativity and self-expression (Emunah, 1990). Adolescents are naturally drawn to creative mediums, such as music, art, and play; these mediums provide a "means of expressing the inner explosion of adolescence" (Emunah, p 102).

There are many advantages for school counselors to use creative interventions (e.g., art, music, play) with high school students. These interventions can help build the counseling relationship and promote communication between the school counselor and student, help students recognize their own complexity, encourage self-expression, and

provide the school counselor with a variety of therapeutic tools (Gladding, 2011). Creative interventions can be used with most high school students. They may be particularly useful when working with gifted students (Peterson, 2006) or when working with adolescents who lack the ability or interest to participate in a traditional conversation with a school counselor (Paisley & Young, 1998).

Within the professional counseling literature, there are several resources for counselors who use creative interventions with adolescents in outpatient, community settings. Within the past decade, more attention has been focused on implementing these techniques in the school setting, and more specifically, within the secondary school setting. This article will provide a review of the scholarly literature on using creative interventions with adolescents and how these interventions can be implemented.

### **Guidance Curriculum**

Classroom guidance lessons are the most efficient way for school counselors to address a large number of students. However, there is a paucity of research regarding the use of creative interventions in classroom guidance curriculum at the secondary level. In a personal reflection piece, Vines (2005) described using music as a way to begin classroom guidance lessons at the middle school level. Through this creative intervention, students were exposed to a wide variety of music styles. Students were led in a discussion about the song lyrics and encouraged to consider how the words related to the life skills taught within the lesson.

In a recent work, Roaten and Schmidt (2009) proposed including experiential learning activities on diversity into classroom guidance lessons. Through activity-based

discussions, high school students were able to think more critically about multicultural issues. In one such activity titled, "drawing a house" (Pedersen, 2000), students were paired up with a student different from themselves. These student pairs were asked to hold one pen and draw a house together, without verbal communication. During the processing phase of the lesson, the students explored the way they communicated with each other as well as similarities/differences among the drawings (Roaten & Schmidt). This lesson allowed students to consider how their own culture influenced their cooperation with their partner and the drawing that they collaboratively created.

Young (2005) discussed a strategy to engage students during guidance lessons by using character portrayal. School counselors can create guidance lessons on a variety of developmental issues by incorporating notable contemporary and historical individuals. Positive role models chosen for character portrayal could be selected due to their career or character traits (e.g., Barrack Obama, Bill Gates, etc.), while anti-role models (e.g., Heath Ledger, Barry Bonds, etc.) could be selected for students to understand the consequences of making poor choices. These role-models may be more meaningful if generated by the students rather than the school counselor. This activity could further be modified for students with disabilities to focus on positive role models who had physical or mental challenges (Lockhart, 2003).

In addition, packaged guidance curriculum materials are relying more on creative interventions. A well known product, *The Why Try Program*, uses visual analogies to demonstrate social and emotional principles. With the variety of materials readily available, well developed, and largely used, it is likely that school counselors will use more creative interventions in classroom guidance lessons.

## **Individual and Group Counseling**

In contrast to classroom guidance curriculum, there was more written on using creative interventions with adolescents in individual and group counseling. Much of this literature adopted interventions used within the clinical mental health setting and modified them for appropriate use within the school system. Creative interventions are a good fit for the school environment because they are both "positive and productive" as these interventions are often economical and can impact students in a short amount of time (Veach & Gladding, 2007, p. 71). Additionally, many creative interventions rely on brief therapy approaches (e.g., solution-focused or rational-emotive therapy), which are helpful considering the time constraints many school counselors face. Many are applicable to developmental issues of students (Littrell, Malia, & Vanderwood, 1995).

Since counseling groups are economical and time efficient, small group work can be especially useful in the school setting. Group counseling fosters a sense of belonging and connection; both of these outcomes are useful for adolescents who are searching for a sense of connection and purpose (Skudrzyk, Zera, McMahon, Schmidt, Boyne, & Spannaus, 2009). Additionally, many adolescents enjoy participating in counseling groups and are often invested in creative activities; thus, combining group work and creativity seems reasonable (Veach & Gladding, 2007). There are many potential opportunities for creative interventions in group work. Veach and Gladding presented a useful overview of creative group work at the secondary level, including how music, arts, movement, literature, drama, play, and humor can be incorporated into group work.

Adventure-based counseling (ABC) is a group counseling intervention (Nassar-McMillan & Cashwell, 1997) that can easily take place within a school building. The main principle behind ABC includes being in a new or different situation that includes some type of physical/emotional challenge. Examples that are appropriate for school-based applications include: group juggling (e.g., circle of participants tossing a ball by a set sequence), blind maze (e.g., leader verbally directs group through a maze), or a team task (e.g., group challenge) (Nassar-McMillan & Cashwell). Link Crew, a high school transition program of the Boomerang project has numerous group activities based on ABC concepts.

The following sections describe art, prop, reading, writing, music, and play interventions that school counselors can utilize in individual, small group counseling, classroom guidance, or other school counseling settings.

### **Art Interventions**

It is relatively easy for high school counselors to implement art into the school counseling program (Kahn, 1999). The use of art is an appropriate intervention for adolescents who present with academic, career, and personal/ social issues. Art interventions are useful when working with adolescents as they serve a variety of developmentally appropriate functions: a) provide a sense of control over emotional expression, b) enhance overall creativity, c) provide enjoyment and pleasure, d) use popular media/ images that fits both personal and social symbols, and e) increase physical and emotional energy (Kahn). Art can be easily integrated with an assortment of theoretical approaches, including solution-focused, person-centered, and cognitive-behavior therapy.

According to Kahn (1999), it is important for school counselors to a) explain the value and process of using art with students, faculty, and parents, b) encourage others (e.g. teachers) to experience the process of art interventions, and c) respect the privacy of the students' created art work. Finally, school counselors will want to remind students that art interventions focus on the process (e.g. expressing self through art) rather than the actual product. When possible, school counselors should also create an easily accessible and permanent art station within their counseling office that includes a variety of media, such as pencils, crayons, clay, drawing paper, scissors, etc. (Kahn).

The author suggested a variety of directives to be used during counseling, based on the stage model of Entry, Exploration, and Action-taking (Kahn, 1999). The purpose of the entry stage is to introduce students to art and to build rapport. As such, a directive may be, "draw a picture of your neighborhood." As the student becomes more comfortable, exploration directives may begin, such as: "draw how you see yourself in your group of friends and then how you see yourself as an individual." Finally, action-taking directives; "draw yourself in a scene 15 years from now. What goals will you need to reach during this time?" are useful in helping students define a preferred self and vision for their future. During each of these phases, processing is essential. Simple statements such as "tell me about this" can lead to productive discussions. As trust builds and the student feels more comfortable with the process, the counselor can ask more in-depth questions about the artwork (Kahn).

Examples of other art interventions include activities titled, *About Me* and *Decorating My Bag*, involved students decorating a piece of paper, poster, or bag with pictures or art that expresses and reveals something about themselves. Other activities



such as, *Feel Wheel* and *Volcano*, encourages students to draw their feelings while *Road Map* directs students to plot their life goals (Newsome, 2003).

Finally, Kahn (1999) provides a number of ideas for school counselors who seek to learn more about the use of art interventions. School counselors can learn directly by experimenting with the process on their own (e.g., drawing, painting, sculpting, etc.) as well as utilizing packaged guidance materials that include art components. Collaborating with an art teacher and art therapists may also enhance a school counselor's overall understanding of different art mediums and processes.

### **Prop Interventions**

The use of props can have a powerful impact on students and can be a helpful way of engaging students to participate in counseling (Schimmel, 2007). Props are defined as physical objects that illustrate a concept and/ or facilitate the counseling process. It is important to note that props are not the same as toys, and the process be confused with play therapy interventions (Schimmel). Through the use of props, school counselors can help students gain perspective on their issues, including stress, self-esteem, anger, and decision making.

For example, a dollar bill can be used to explore self-esteem. A school counselor can show a student a one dollar bill and ask the student how much it is worth. After the student's response, the school counselor can crumble the bill and step on it. The school counselor then asks, "How much is it now?" The student inevitably realizes that the worth has remained the same. Through this intervention, the student will learn that their worth will not change based on what has happened to them in the past or what will happen to them in the future (Schimmel, 2007). Prop interventions can be conducted

with other, easy to find objects such as rubber bands (Schimmel, 2007) (explore tension) and paper weights (explore anger, guilt, etc. that may be weighing the student down).

In a final example, a handheld video game controller can be a powerful prop intervention. With a game controller, students can show the school counselor a series of "moves" used when navigating a video game; for example, with a PlayStation controller, a student may hold down the X and the O button simultaneously to produce an action. The school counselor could have the following dialogue with the student by encouraging them to imagine that they need to jump over a canyon in a video game in order to get to the next level. The school counselor asks, "What happens if every time you went to jump over the canyon, you hit the X and the O buttons, but you missed the jump and fell?" The student may reply, "Well I would do something different!" The school counselor would clarify, "You would do a new or different move, something that would get you what you want?"

After the student responds "Yes," the counselor then can ask, "How is doing the same moves over and over again in your own life working out for you?" This realization of doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results (e.g., a solution focused principle) can be very powerful for students. The school counselor could then ask the student, "Discuss the moves that you seem to be choosing to do over and over again in your own life, and what actions could you do differently?" Overall, the use of props makes the discussions more memorable and emphasizes the concepts discussed.

## Reading Interventions

Bibliotherapy is defined as the use of literature for therapeutic value (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986). Pardeck (1994) found that reading interventions provided both information and insight for the reader. When working with high school students, reading can also enhance or stimulate the therapeutic conversation. Reading has been found to help adolescents; a) gain new attitudes and beliefs about the self and world, b) develop awareness of how others have coped with similar issues, and c) consider possibilities for problems (Pardeck).

When using reading interventions with adolescents, counselors should select books that bring about a sense of connection to authors, characters or ideas between the student and the book as having this connection maximizes the helpfulness of the reading process (Bruneau, Bubbenzer, & McGlothlin, 2010). There are several resources for choosing books. For example, the *Bibliotherapy Education Project* is an online database that helps connect counselors to resources on bibliotherapy. Visitors can read reviews of books by various age levels and topic areas as well as evaluate books for review by others. Another resource, *Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Resources in Mental Health*, is a comprehensive listing of self-help resources for a variety of clinical concerns and developmental challenges, including depression and anxiety (Norcross, Santrock, Campbell, Smith, Sommer, & Zuckerman, 2003).

While simply reading a book has merit, the discussion about the book often brings about the most insight and change. School counselors can lead discussions that encourage a thoughtful reflection of the reading process, while highlighting connections and personal insights gained along the way. Pardeck (1994) recommended several

creative interventions including creative writing (e.g., synopsis from a character view point), art activities (e.g., a collage about the book), and role-playing (e.g., mock trial between characters).

Finally, school counselors are very influential in determining the types of books that are available to the students. By building a professional library, school counselors can ensure that students have access to books that are developmentally appropriate and useful for bibliotherapy and/or self-guided reading. In particular, school counselors should have books on issues relevant to adolescents (e.g., relationships, depression, suicide, academic issues, career choice) and specific to certain groups, such as the needs of LGBTQ youth (Frank & Cannon, 2009).

### **Writing Interventions**

Just as books can be powerful to read and reflect upon, the actual writing process can also be useful. When working with adolescents, writing usually takes four forms: poetry, letters, journaling, and storytelling. Poetry can be a safe and powerful form of self-expression (Alexander, 1990). Bowman (1992) provided a rationale for using poetry therapy with students who were experiencing an identity crisis or seeking intimacy and independence. Often, poetry writing can help the adolescent grow into a more mature individual through the process of self-discovery (Bowman).

Therapeutic letter writing can be used in two separate ways. When working directly with students, school counselors can have students write a variety of letters to themselves; this form of letter writing may assist students in self-exploration and self-change (Kress, Hoffman, & Thomas, 2008). In particular, future-based letter writing involves a student writing a letter to his view of himself months or years into the future.

Three examples of future-based letters include the personal accomplishment letter (to be read after a big event such as graduation), the rainy day letter (imagining when the student is doing well in the future), and the older, wiser self letter (written from the perspective of having more life experience) (Kress, Gimenez Hinkle, Protivnak, 2011). Overall, these creative letter writing interventions help students imagine themselves in a different place, literally and figuratively.

Oliver, Nelson, Cade, and Cueva (2007) suggested using therapeutic letter writing as a way of maximizing the effectiveness of direct service with students. With this narrative therapy based approach, letters are written to the students as part of the counseling process, and may be written to the parents to strengthen ties with the family. Letters may be used to affirm positive changes made, to provide support to the student or family, and strengthen the counseling relationship.

Journaling is another writing technique that can be a helpful school counseling intervention (Zyromski, 2007). Journaling may involve students writing when they feel particularly stressed or something that they do daily regardless of their mood. It can be as structured (e.g., compiling reports of their day, responding to counseling prompts) or unstructured (e.g., writing for the next ten minutes about anything) as it fits the student (Newsome, 2003). Additionally, the use of blogging, an electronic version of journaling, may fit for students who have an interest in both writing and technology (Lent, 2009). School counselors can also develop online journaling sites that supplement individual counseling, group counseling, and guidance counseling lessons (Zyromski).

For those students who do not enjoy writing, an alternative option would be to participate in storytelling. Storytelling involves the school counselors asking the

adolescent to create a story that has a moral lesson (Newsome, 2003). While typically appropriate for younger ages, there are some high school students who may enjoy playing with puppets or action figures. The student and school counselor can choose to create and act out a story through the use of puppets or action figures. This creative intervention adds humor to the counseling session and makes the intervention memorable while helping the school counselor understand the student more clearly.

### **Music Interventions**

High school students are significantly influenced by music (Gladding, 2011; Hendricks, Robinson, Bradley, & Davis, 1999), and they may use music as a way to express themselves, cope with stress, and to relax and have fun (Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007). Additionally, music may play an important role in shaping how adolescents perceive and experience their world (Glass, Curtis, & Thomas, 2005).

Within school counseling, music can be used in several ways. Kimbel and Protivnak (2010) provided several examples of music interventions for school counselors to use with high school students including; music listening/sharing, lyric revision, improvisation, and music interventions incorporated into classroom guidance lessons. Hendricks, Robinson, Bradley, and Davis (1999) stated that incorporating music into group counseling could be useful in reducing the amount of depression among adolescents. In these groups, adolescents chose a song that was important to them, shared it with the group, and discussed why they selected the song.

Gladding et al. (2008) found that using song lyrics can be very helpful in counseling. School counselors could utilize song lyrics interventions by; 1) listening to lyrics with students and discussing the importance of the lyrics, 2) relating the lyrics to

the student's experiences, 3) helping students connect lyrics to other lyrics, 4) asking students to rewrite lyrics to familiar melodies, 5) developing a list of fun songs to help students when feeling down, and 6) helping students create a playlist of songs/ lyrics that are soothing or enjoyable (Gladding, Hendricks, Robinson, Bradley, & Davis, 1999).

Finally, school counselors need to develop culturally diverse interventions to utilize with an increasingly multicultural population of high school students. Elligan (2000) proposed that rap therapy (e.g., a five-stage process for creating music and meaning through rap music) was a useful method for school counselors as it used the language and culture of the adolescents, and helped to build rapport. School counselors should be aware of the importance of music for the typical adolescent as well as the received messages. As play is the language of children, music is often a way to connect and understand the adolescent. Additionally, school counselors should notice the student's musical selections as they may provide helpful information about the nature of their issues (e.g., isolation, suicidal ideation, etc.; Glass, Curtis, & Thomas, 2005).

### **Play Interventions**

Play is an intervention that is often used with younger children, particularly in the elementary school setting. However, play is very natural for adolescents (Gladding, 2011). Play interventions assists adolescents in thinking differently about themselves, their family and friends, and school issues through the use of fun and non-threatening activities. Play also provides opportunities for socialization and relationship building skills (Breen & Daigneault, 1998). Play interventions with high school students should include developmentally appropriate techniques and focus on concerns that are typical of adolescents, (e.g. family, friends, career, and personal identity) (Breen & Daigneault).

Play interventions can provide a way to calm students (Breen & Daigneault, 1998). For example, working with clay can be a useful stress reliever. This intervention can be used in both a directive and nondirective manner. School counselors could direct the student to mold themselves, family members, friends, or symbolic figures. Allowing the student to work with the clay can provide tactile stimulation, which can improve focus and behavior. Additionally, stuffed animals can provide a sense of comfort and security to the upset student. The school counselor could encourage the student to self-soothe by hugging, squeezing, and petting the stuffed animal and then later, processing the student's experience.

Games are a form of play that can be used to establish rapport with the adolescent and teach socialization skills. Playing packaged games (e.g., *Chess*, *Jenga*, etc.) can help the school counselor and student to build a relationship and learn more about each other (Newsome & Gladding, 2003). Simple games such as *Checkers* or *Rummy* can also be used with adolescents. School counselors can make comments about the students' process during the game (e.g., "It's hard to decide what to do next" or "Making decisions is never easy"); games can be a useful medium for making therapeutic comments (Kottman, 1990). By playing games, rapport can be established and students are given permission to discuss emotions in the moment.

Sandtray is a popular play intervention that involves the student using miniatures, or small representations of the world, to create images in a box of sand. During this process, students select miniatures from a collection, create a sand world in the tray, and then discuss their creation with the counselor (Draper, Ritter, & Willingham, 2003). The miniatures represent aspects of the adolescent and his/her world. For example, a



student could be asked to make a "scene" in the sandtray that represents their family, their relationship with a friend, or their career goals; and then have the characters interact. Specific questions and directions for sandtray work will vary based on theoretical approach (see Taylor, 2009 for an example of sandtray and solution-focused therapy), and sandtray can be used in individual or group counseling; refer to Shen and Armstrong (2008) for an example of group sandtray for improving self-esteem for adolescent girls.

When doing sandtray work with high school students, school counselors should allow students to select from a large collection of miniatures (collections are relatively inexpensive as miniatures can be found at garage sales, thrift shops as well as discount stores). When the tray is completed, students may be asked to title the tray as this provides a sense of completion and gives the counselor another way to understand their scene. Finally, the school counselor can also have the student explore what they would like to be different about their scene and process these statements.

A final play intervention that may be applicable when working with adolescents is recreational play or leisure time. In a study that focused on elementary school students, Powell and Newgent (2008) found significant results when using a disc golf intervention on disruptive classroom behaviors. An adolescent may be no different. In fact, adolescents who exhibit defiant or resistant characteristics may be more open and connected during recreational play (e.g., shooting a basketball, showing skateboard tricks, etc.). School counselors may be more effective with adolescents when working outside of the traditional office setting.

## **The Impact of Technology**

A discussion of creative interventions is not complete without addressing the use of technology. School counselors can use a variety of technology to more effectively connect with high school students (Sabella, 2010b). Media rich school counseling websites can appeal to high school students, and may help to remove barriers between the counselor and student (Sabella). Websites may contain various components, including discussion-based forums, podcasts, videos, tutorials, educational brochures, information relevant to the student's academic success (e.g., calculating GPA), information relevant to school success (e.g., study tips, choosing a college), and interactive, web-based school counseling lessons (Sabella, 2010a; 2010b).

School counselors can work with the technology teacher to design an interactive website specifically to meet the variety of academic, career, and personal/social needs of students. Daily e-mails on a listserv and/or text messages to students and parents could be sent to reinforce school counseling related information (e.g., inspirational messages, information on how to deal with a variety of problems, application deadlines, group activities, etc.).

Electronic collages or digital photo books may be particularly helpful for this population. Instead of using magazines to locate images, students can use image databases (e.g. Google images) or digital photos to select images that are powerful to them and/ or that represent something meaningful in their lives. Students can then use a variety of computer programs to create the collage or photo book. Clearly, with technological advances, school counselors have the ability to connect with high school students in creative ways.

## **Tips for School Counselors to Get Started in Using Creative Interventions**

Creative interventions are easy to implement within the high school setting. School counselors are only limited by their imagination and their willingness to use creative methods and interventions. It is the hope of the authors that the interventions mentioned here will spark a curiosity and a desire to learn more about creative methods in school counseling. To help the school counselor get started, a number of strategies may be useful:

1. Consider the types of creative methods mentioned in this article. Are there specific interventions that appealed to you? What led you to choose those interventions? How might you be able to begin implementing one of the activities mentioned in the article?
2. Select one of the creative interventions discussed in this article (e.g., compose a poem or create a playlist of music) and carry out the intervention on your own. Afterwards, consider your experience and how this intervention was useful/ not useful to you. How might this insight help you when using creative interventions?
3. Select one of the creative interventions discussed in this article and practice leading a coworker through the intervention, including the processing component.
4. Create your own creative intervention that either focuses on writing, play, music, reading, prop, or the visual arts. Provide an outline that includes the following: goals, time, materials, target population, directions, and process questions.
5. Consider how to incorporate creative interventions that blend well with your theoretical orientation (e.g., solution-focused, person centered).
6. Research possible ethical considerations when using creative interventions within the high school setting.

In addition to these activities, school counselors should stay current on the research and consider ways to incorporate creative methods into their practice. Often, creative methods used in clinical mental health settings and/ or the elementary school level can be easily adapted to the high school setting. School counselors can also consider additional training on creative approaches in counseling, such as play, art, music, etc. as well as becoming involved with the American Counseling Association's division for creative counselors, the Association for Creativity in Counseling.

### **Conclusion**

Engaging and working with high school students can be a challenge. Using creative interventions during individual counseling, group counseling, or classroom guidance lessons can create an environment where students are able to express their thoughts and feelings in new and exciting ways. Creative interventions help school counselors meet the developmental needs of high school students, help counselors connect with students, and help keep students engaged in the counseling process. These interventions can have a powerful impact on the student, thus, making counseling more memorable for the student.

Finally, creative interventions are easy to implement and may help to speed up the counseling process, which is particularly useful for a busy counselor. The creative interventions presented in this article provide a brief introduction to the world of creative counseling. These interventions provide the school counselor with a variety of "tools" that may increase their efficacy in addressing the unique needs of high school students.

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