

School Social Work Services and Maltreated Children

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School social work exists in some form in the majority of states in this country, and it is one of the largest and oldest specialty areas in the field of social work (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). Several universities offer special training programs to align with state certification requirements established by departments of education. Children who experience maltreatment are disproportionately poor, guaranteeing that most of these vulnerable children will have contact with public schools. The high proportion of maltreated children in specialized school programs such as Special Education (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000) and among populations with behavior problems makes social workers likely to have substantial contact with this population of children (Jonson-Reid et al., 2007). The literature is largely lacking, however, on exactly what services are provided to these children by school social workers or how widespread the potential coverage is. The goal of this article is to lay the groundwork for understanding not only what currently exists but also what *could* exist in practice.

Who Are Included as Maltreated Children?

It is first necessary to define who maltreated children are so that we can quantify just how large this group of children may be. Academics and policy makers disagree about definitions, and clinicians are likely to disagree further. Traditional means of categorizing maltreatment, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse lay the foundation for the “what” of child maltreatment but do not help us much with “who.” Much intervention and prevention work has focused on a subset of children deemed *maltreated* by virtue of a label of “indicated” or “substantiated” by a child protection agency (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2009). Unfortunately, the research suggests that this definition of *maltreatment* excludes the much larger and similarly at-risk group of children who are contacted by child protection but are not substantiated. This is unfortunate, as unsubstantiated children are virtually at the same risk and need for services as substantiated children (Drake, 1996; Hussey et al., 2005; Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009). Beyond this, there is an unknown, but undoubtedly large, number of “undetected” children (Sedlak et al., 2009).

Within the group of maltreated children, there are variations in the degrees of children’s involvement in other service systems. For example, indicators of abuse or neglect that are cause for concern may not meet the legislative standards required to warrant the involvement of child protection services (Kopels, 2006;

VanBergeijk, 2006). This may mean that a child is not receiving services from a child protection agency and has total reliance on the school’s programs. Other children who are served by child welfare agencies may remain in their homes but may still need collaborative or additional support. Still other children are removed and placed into foster care. They need different types of school social work services that are focused on supporting the child’s academic success. However, this help may not necessarily be given with expectations of outreach to the home.

What Is the Burden of Maltreated Children for School Systems?

A study in Omaha using linked records related to child maltreatment, schools, and special education found an overall rate of 14% of children in the school system with official records of maltreatment—and a rate of over 31% among children in special education (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000). This study defined *maltreatment* as occurring in “a child having had at least one substantiated report.” This also means that the number of children who were reported to child protective services but not substantiated is not known, but it is certainly higher. Child maltreatment rates also vary by community (Drake & Pandey, 1996), so for some schools, the rate is likely much higher. Also, because the 2003 revision of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) required child welfare agencies to refer children in substantiated cases to early childhood programs, the rate may be increasing. Many studies also indicate that children who are maltreated are at higher risk of behavioral and academic problems (Crozier & Barth, 2005; Jonson-Reid, Drake, Kim, Porterfield, & Han, 2004; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001; Staudt, 2001).

The number of school children with documented maltreatment is large, and the heightened risk for various untoward outcomes for them at school increases the likelihood of referral to some sort of school-based service. One study found that 20% of all school social work cases were referred for suspected or known maltreatment (Jonson-Reid et al., 2007). Because this was a study of school social work case records only, it is not known how many other students on the caseload may have had prior histories of maltreatment that were not a part of the referral. The question remains, What exactly will the nature of the service be, and is it likely to be provided by a school social worker?

Data from the recent school health policies and programs study indicate that fewer than 14% of schools have full-time school social workers (Brenner, Weist, Adelman, Taylor, & Vernon-Smiley, 2007). School social work roles vary, and while they may include direct services, they may also focus on consultation, coordination, or program development (Constable, 2009). Social workers may operate at the district level in coordination positions, may provide itinerant direct services to multiple schools, or may provide direct services at a single site. In the aforementioned study that found 20% of the school social work caseload was maltreatment-related, the participating districts employed an itinerant model, meaning school social workers had large caseloads and provided primarily crisis intervention and case management (Jonson-Reid et al., 2007).

So how do we think about school social work services and maltreated children? One important question is whether maltreated children should be an automatic target population for school-based services, irrespective of whether the children are demonstrating difficulty in school. In other words, should identification of child maltreatment automatically initiate a set of activities to prevent further harm? If so, the literature on child abuse or trauma-specific treatment might inform such an approach. Reviews of best practices or promising practices can be found online and are nicely summarized in the *Children's Advocacy Center Directors' Guide to Mental Health Services for Abused Children* (Child Welfare Committee, 2008). Many mental health treatment approaches, however, may not have

been adapted for use in school settings, and many lack direct application to cases involving neglect without abuse.

Two interventions have been researched, show promising results, and could be executed by school social workers. They include peer-mediated treatment for maltreated preschoolers and Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS). Peer-mediated treatment uses the assistance of professionals to stage play situations that facilitate positive peer interaction and support among maltreated preschool-aged children who display socially withdrawn behaviors (Fantuzzo, Manns, Atkins, & Myers, 2005). CBITS was designed for use with school-aged students who have been either directly victimized or indirectly traumatized by witnessing violence. The program includes a short-term group-delivered curriculum and short-term structured individualized sessions, and it can be implemented by school social workers (Stein, Jaycox, & Tu, 2005). Of course, such approaches would likely be difficult in a district where school social workers are limited to providing itinerant case management and crisis intervention.

Another option for targeting the entire population of maltreated children is to consider them part of a broader at-risk population rather than in need of school-based services specific to maltreatment. Such an approach might mean connecting these children with general prevention programs that encourage prosocial behaviors and school success. Examples of programs that could be integrated into schools include Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)

or the Child Development Project (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, & Solomon, 1996; Domitrovich et al., 2010). In such a case, the school social worker might help develop and implement the larger program and refer the appropriate children rather than providing direct services.

Still another focus might be to support the school success of children who are involved with child welfare agencies, either receiving in-home services or in foster care. Several authors have recommended collaborative approaches between school social work and child protection agencies in these cases (Barth, 1985; Ayasse, 1998; Jonson-Reid et al., 2007; Scannapieco, 2006). These approaches range from the collaborative development of programs improving services to maltreated



children, to school social workers providing additional case management, and to formal partnerships providing early intervention services with families (USDHHS, Children's Bureau, 2003; Jonson-Reid & Stahlschmidt, 2009). Although the Children's Bureau (2003) has conducted a review of previously funded projects related to school-based services and child maltreatment, almost all of these projects involved agencies outside the school collaborating with the school to provide services rather than evaluating existing school-based services, such as school social work.



Two exceptions exist regarding known models of school-based support for children involved with child welfare, but the only available data are evaluation based rather than data from controlled research trials. The first exception is Foster Youth Services in California, a statewide set of programs that includes school-based models to support the success of children in foster care (most of whom have maltreatment histories). These programs vary but include some combination of educational record tracking, case management, counseling, and tutoring (Ayasse, 1998). Second is a model that has existed for some time in Missouri and involves the direct referral of preventive services cases (where child care concerns haven't risen to the level required for formal child protection involvement) from child welfare to a school district that has provided additional home visiting and school support for these children (Jonson-Reid & Stahlschmidt, 2009).

School social workers are, and will continue to be, a resource for children experiencing child abuse and neglect. However, practitioners seeking to access or develop services for maltreated children must carefully consider the scope of the population to be served and the fit with available resources in the local schools. If the target of intervention is all children with alleged maltreatment, this population will likely be quite large, so approaches that can be implemented realistically in schools is essential. Further, the type of approach must be considered—individual or group, trauma-specific treatment, large-scale prevention programming, or collaborative school-based support. The match between the desired targets, the proposed intervention, and the availability of school social work services in a given area must be considered. If a school currently utilizes its school social worker for large-scale program devel-

opment activities, this would not be conducive to providing individual or group treatment. If this model is to be adopted, the school social worker may be a valuable ally and collaborator in the development and implementation of the program, but not necessarily the provider of direct services. Or, if having the services provided directly by school social workers is desired, it is likely additional school social work staff will be needed.

In conclusion, much work still needs to be done to understand the nature of current service provision, training, and the potential impact of school social work services with maltreated children. It is clear that the needs of maltreated children are relevant to the educational and social goals for schools and that maltreated children do regularly attend school. Although this provides a logical rationale for providing school-based services, it is insufficient to simply declare schools as the ideal resource to serve maltreated children. We need to understand the services that are available, identify gaps in needs and training, and test new models that leverage school social work to support the ongoing well-being of maltreated children. We have hope that articles such as this one will encourage this work and result in increased knowledge about the effectiveness and efficacy of such efforts.

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