

What Parents Need to Know About Confidentiality

When it comes to their children meeting with a school counselor, some parents are reluctant to support such a decision. They may fear the child will share “family secrets,” which will then be spread throughout the school. Or that all the teachers in the faculty lounge will learn of their child’s specific problems and hold it against the student.

In fact, such concerns couldn’t be further from the truth.

A student’s right to privacy and confidentiality is the basis for an effective counseling relationship. Confidentiality ensures that school counselors won’t share students’ disclosures with others except when the student authorizes it or when there is a clear and present danger to the student and/or to other persons.

And, should parents to be called in to meet with the school counselor as well, in a collaborative effort to help the student, parents must also realize that confidentiality is the hallmark of a school counselors’ work. When students enter into a counseling relationship with their school counselor, the school counselor will educate the student about the purposes, goals, techniques and rules of procedure under which they may receive counseling. This disclosure notice, which the school counselor will explain in terms appropriate to the student’s age and cognitive ability, addresses the limits of confidentiality, such as the possible need to consult with other professionals, privileged communication, and legal or authoritative restraints. Consulting with other professionally competent persons is essential in the school setting when this is in the student’s best interest. The parents/guardians are informed of the confidential nature of the counseling relationship between the counselor and student. Information is kept confidential unless disclosure is required to prevent clear and imminent danger to the student or others, or when legal requirements demand that confidential information be revealed.

As counseling with a student progresses, it may become beneficial or necessary for the school counselor to consult and collaborate with parents. Either the parent or the professional school counselor may initiate the collaboration process. It’s the school counselor’s responsibility to reach an agreement with the student about what information to share with the parents. Unless, of course, there is a clear and imminent danger to the student or others.

The school counselor and parents need to build a relationship of mutual respect and trust to make the best decisions about the child. Trust means that what is shared is confidential and related to the child. The relationship between parent and school counselor develops through working together. With a primary obligation to the student, confidentiality is balanced with an understanding of the parents’ legal and inherent rights to be the guiding voice in their children’s lives.

While respecting the rights and responsibilities of parents/guardians for their children, the school counselor works to establish a mutual relationship with parents/guardians to maximize a student’s development. In addition, school counselors respect students’ values and beliefs without imposing their own personal values on the situation. School counselors also adhere to laws, local guidelines and ethical standards of practice when assisting parents/guardians experiencing family difficulties interfering with a student’s effectiveness and welfare. School

counselors are sensitive to diversity among families and recognize that all parents/guardians, custodial and noncustodial, have certain rights and responsibilities for their children's welfare. School counselors also make reasonable efforts to honor the wishes of parents/guardians concerning information regarding the student, and, in cases of divorce or separation, exercise a good-faith effort to keep both parents informed with regard to critical information, with the exception of a court order.

Confidentiality is limited and is much more difficult to guarantee in group counseling than in individual counseling. Group counseling, which involves a number of students working on shared tasks and developing supportive relationships in a group setting, presents different issues. Group counseling is an efficient way of to deal with students' problems and concerns, allowing individuals to develop insights into themselves and others. However, confidentiality is much more difficult to maintain, and school counselors will disclose these limitations as part of the group counseling process.

The limitations of confidentiality don't include information of possible abuse or harm to a child. By law, school counselor must report any case of abuse or neglect to the appropriate authorities. School counselors inform parents/guardians or appropriate authorities when a student's condition indicates a clear and imminent danger to the student or others. This is done after careful deliberation and, where possible, after consulting with other counseling professionals. The school counselor will attempt to minimize the threat to a student and may choose to: 1) inform the student of actions to be taken, 2) involve the student in a three-way communication with parents/guardians when breaching confidentiality or 3) allow the student to have input as to how and to whom the breach will be made.

Confidentiality of information received in the counseling relationship is protected to some degree by federal and state laws, policies and ethical standards. Counselors have a responsibility to protect the privileged information received through confidential relationships with students, parents or guardians and with staff. Such information is only to be revealed to others with the student's informed consent, consistent with the school counselor's ethical obligation. In some situations, school counselors must also respond when subpoenaed in court. If reports are required, the school counselor makes every effort to limit information to what is relevant to the legal proceedings.

Student records and release of personal data is protected under confidentiality in accordance with prescribed laws and school policies. Student information stored and transmitted electronically is treated with the same care as traditional student records.

Confidentiality of records and access to confidential information is a concern of school counselors. School counselors have a responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of records and encourage school administrators to develop written policies concerning the ethical and legal handling of all records in their school system.