A Social Workers Guide to working in Schools

This guide is aimed at helping social work students make the most of their school placement.
PREFACE

This guide was compiled by past social work students who undertook their placement in a school. We hope that the information provided in this guide is useful to students and that their experience in a school setting is enjoyable and productive.

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A Checklist of Things to Do When You First Start Your Placement

1. Establish with your field teacher (supervisor) which day you are going to be having your weekly meetings.

2. Discuss your learning goals with your field teacher, will you be able to achieve them?

3. If you think you are not going to achieve your goals, you can always change them.

4. Find out exactly what role your field teacher has planned for you, does it fit in with a social workers role? If not, then make your own suggestions as to what you would like to do.
A Checklist of Things to Do When You First Start Your Placement

5. Arrange for a meeting to introduce yourself to the principal and other staff.

6. Familiarise yourself with the school policies and expectations.

7. Find out where you are going to be located in your free time. You need to know so you are not feeling lost.

8. Ask a Field Education Liaison Officer (FELO) about other social work students who are based in schools and arrange to meet up with them if you feel the need.
IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

There are two Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) based documents that have been beneficial in helping students guide their practice.

The first document is based around the role of a social worker within a school context. It provides a definition of what is meant by a ‘school social worker’ as well as the knowledge and skills used by a school social worker.


The second document is based around practice standards for social workers and ways in which you can achieve an outcome. This document is useful as it provides each practice standard with indicators. These indicators allow you to know if you are meeting the standards correctly.

http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/16
This document ‘calmer classrooms’ provides an insight on the impacts of abuse and neglect on children's learning. The document also outlines the possibility of abuse and neglect leading to trauma and disturbed attachment within a child. Finally, it provides strategies on how an individual can make the classroom calmer through relationship building.


This page includes information about social workers in schools, including, what the social workers role involves and how you can apply this in the school environment.

SOCIAL WORKERS
ROLES

The following list are a selection of roles that have been used by previous students who have undertaken a school based placement.

⇒ Group work.
⇒ Community work.
⇒ Advocacy.
⇒ Raising awareness of social issues.
⇒ Role modelling.
⇒ Case management.
⇒ Counselling.
Group work in schools can be goal-oriented, with a specific purpose in mind, or it can be open-ended.

Some examples of group work in schools include:
- Establishing a support group for mums/dads/carers.
- Running cooking classes for students that are difficult to engage with.
- Running workshops about social issues such as bullying, building resilience, exploring feelings, collaborating, well-being groups and friendship groups.
- Small groups/workshops focusing on anger management.

Benefits of support groups:
- Mutual benefit in sharing of experiences, information and coping strategies.
GROUP WORK

Benefits of educational groups:
- Learning and development of social skills.
- Educate through presentations, discussions and experiences.
COMMUNITY WORK

There are many ways in which you can incorporate community work in a school environment. Some examples are:

- Social networking such as linking schools to services for students and parents to access.
- Arranging external agencies to come into your school and conduct information sessions. This could be aimed at students, teachers and parents (depending on the service).
- An analysis of the school community needs and helping to increase their opportunities through social change.
- Helping to raise awareness about mental health and well-being in students and teaching staff.
Advocacy

Advocating in schools to obtain necessary resources and supports for students and staff is another important role of a social worker.

Some examples are:

- Helping the school to source out food banks for establishing a breakfast/lunch club for students who need to access this service.

- Using your networking skills to provide the school with information about services and resources that are available within their community. One way you may achieve this, is by building a ‘community directory’ for your school. One way in which you can begin to build a community directory is by visiting relevant local agencies within your schools area.
Raising awareness of social issues

There are multiple social issues that a social worker can focus on within the school environment. Some of the issues that schools are concerned about include:

- Bullying.
- Building resilience in students.
- Learning to express feelings and emotions.
- Managing anger.
- Respecting differences.
- Not judging others.
- Self-esteem.
- Establishing positive friendships.

Some ways that these issues can be addressed include:

- Group work with students—can be either in smaller groups or the whole class.
- Writing up a survey and distributing it to the students (with permission from the principal).
Some effective social skill programs that can be put into practice include:

“What’s the Buzz”

A 16 lesson social skills program designed to encourage children to build on their social skills and friendship making skills. The program is particularly beneficial for students who find it difficult to make friends and fit in socially. Training days are available for staff, parents and educators however, they are very costly. Alternatively, the ‘What’s the Buzz’ book can be purchased for around $30 from the website [fishpond](http://www.whatsthebuzz.net.au/main-menu/outline-and-content). This book outlines the 16 lesson plans and provides other useful resources.
SOCIAL SKILL PROGRAMS

“How does your engine run”

Authors Williams and Shellenberger have designed this program to help students become aware of how alert they are feeling. Students learn what they can do before a spelling test or homework time to attain an optimal state of alertness for their tasks. Levels of alertness can include: low - when it is so difficult to get moving. One feels low, lethargic, poor motivation and hard to get going. High - when it is hard to slow down or stop. This is marked by poor attention and hyperactive behaviour and difficulty sitting still. Just right –when it is easy to concentrate, learn and efficiently complete daily tasks. A cheap version of this program book can be obtained through the website amazon.

http://www.alertprogram.com/
Role Modelling

Social workers often possess a deep sense of social justice and take pride in their work, therefore they are important role models. Therefore in the school environment, a social worker can be a very good mentor to students.

Things to do as a mentor:

- Discuss issues and problems.
- Anger management activities.
- Sport—football, basketball, etc.
- Helping in the classroom.
- Drawing or artwork.
- Friendship chats.

You may find your school already has a mentor program in place. It is best to check with school staff and ask how you can become involved in a mentoring program.
CASE MANAGEMENT

Engaging with students on an individual basis might require case management.

Some ways in which you could case manage a student on an individual basis include:

- Undertaking a psychosocial assessment of the student.
- *For a comprehensive assessment to occur, you will need to obtain parent/caregiver consent and involve the student’s wider school and home environment (family and teachers).*

**Refer to appendix one for a example of an assessment**

- Conducting a psychosocial assessment will help you to gain an understanding of the student's needs.
- If applicable, keep case notes of your interaction with the students.
CASE MANAGEMENT

- Ask the school where the files/case notes can be kept so that confidentiality is maintained according to the AASW code of ethics.

Case managing selected students:
Feedback from past students suggests that they have found more direction in their placement when they are given ‘target students’ to work with on a regular basis. Talk to your field teacher and other staff to obtain a list of students which may require one on one case management.
Counselling

Counselling with students in a school environment may not necessarily be in the traditional form with the client sitting opposite us in an office. Here are some ways that counselling can take place in the school:

- While you are doing an activity with the student. For example cooking, colouring in, playing sport.
- In a small group of students that has been set up for social interaction. For example, a sewing group, friendship group or hobby group for students.

If you are facilitating any sort of group of students or working with individual students there can be opportunities to use your counselling skills.
USEFUL WEBSITES FOR ACTIVITIES TO UNDERTAKE WITH STUDENTS

Some activities used by past students have been based around social and emotional learning. This may include activities that help students identify feelings and emotions and friendship games that provide students with the necessary social skills to make friends.

*Do2Learn*

*KidsSoup*
http://www.kidssoup.com/Family-Emotions/family-emotions-activities.html

*BusyTeacher*
http://busyteacher.org/classroom_activities-vocabulary/feelings_and_emotions-worksheets/
Theories that can be used in schools

The following list of theories have been used by past students in schools.

⇒ Group work theory.
⇒ Strengths.
⇒ Empowerment.
⇒ Feminist theory.
⇒ Systems theory.
Meetings undertaken with school social workers and other departments

During placement, students have found it beneficial to meet with other organisations and social workers from the education department.

These are a few organisations students have met with:

- DECD (Department of Education and Child Development) social worker from the Northern Adelaide Regional Office. Each school has an allocated DECD social worker.

- DECD attendance counsellors.

- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
MEETINGS
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SCHOOL SOCIAL
WORKERS AND OTHER
DEPARTMENTS

How do I find out which regional office my school falls under?

One way in which you can find out which regional office your school falls under is by visiting the link below and typing in your schools name in the educational dictionary search. Once you have found your school, click on the location name and regional office details will be provided.


What if I want to meet with my school DECD social worker?

The best way to arrange to meet with a DECD social worker is to talk to your field teacher. DECD social workers are based in regional offices, not in schools on a full time basis.
MEETINGS
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SCHOOL SOCIAL
WORKERS AND OTHER
DEPARTMENTS

The social workers are usually called into a school when a critical incident has occurred. With this in mind, it may be difficult to arrange to meet with one in your school setting.

**DECD attendance counsellors**

Attendance counsellors identify reasons for non attendance in students. They will often work in collaboration with the student and their family to address attendance issues.

**How do I meet with a DECD attendance counsellor?**

If you are interested in finding out more, talk to your field teacher about arranging a meeting with a DECD attendance counsellor. Again, they are based in regional offices but can sometimes be found throughout allocated schools.
MEETINGS UNDERTAKEN WITH SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS AND OTHER DEPARTMENTS

Networking

Visiting services in surrounding areas of your school is beneficial as it helps to broaden your knowledge and expertise of what services are available to students and families.
APPENDIX ONE

Psychosocial assessment template

** Please note: It is best to obtain permission from the children’s parents before undertaking a psychosocial assessment **

Client’s personal details:

First Name (s) ___________________  Last name ___________________

Age _________  Date of birth ______________

Gender:

History of client:

➢ Note affect of client during assessment. Eg: flat, manic, irritable.
➢ Note client presentation. Eg: grooming, dress, speech etc.
➢ Note the client received information regarding confidentiality, rights and responsibilities.
Genogram:

- Explain to the client that a genogram provides important information about a client’s family structure, proximity and complexity of relationships.
- The client needs to be made aware of how a genogram is formed and what each symbol stands for.
- It may be hard for a child to know about their extended family in detail, for a comprehensive genogram it is best to contact the child’s family and any other people in the child’s wider environment.

** For younger children, it can best for the child to draw their family in picture form and then a genogram can be established from the picture.**
Education:

- Current year level the student is in.
- When did the child start attending school?
- When did the child move to the current school?
- How does the child get along with peers/teachers?
- What are the child’s favourite subjects or school activities?
- Student’s learning strengths and weaknesses (find out through general observation, asking the student and the student’s teacher).
- Any suspensions/exclusions?
- Does the student have any future learning plans or goals?

Strengths of Child

- Socially engaging
- Curious/interested
- Seems bright
- Is Affectionate
- Has at least one positive relationship with an adult
- Follows directions
- Shares excitement/interests with peers or adults
- Other ________________________________
Family history:

- Any current or past medication: what was this taken for?
- Family history of medical issues?
- Has the child ever been homeless?  Yes  No
- Is there any family history of mental illness?  Yes
- Have any family members ever been affected by substance use or abuse issues?  Yes  No
- Has the child been away from parent for an extended period?  Yes  No
- Has there been family stress or family conflict?  Yes  No
- Has the family used community resources?  Yes  No
There are many other formats that can be used for a psychosocial assessment. Please note, this is just a guide which has been altered to be more suitable to children**
We hope this guide has provided you with insight into the role of a social worker within the school context. Remember that if you are feeling unsure about your role to take the initiative to work out your own role and implement what you have learnt from university and apply it.