

Ethical Issues for School Mental Health Personnel

School Resources to Support Military-Connected Students is a project by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness an applied research center at The Pennsylvania State University and is funded by the Department of Defense Education Activity Grant number HE1254-19-0009.

For more information on these resources click on the links below:

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://www.psu.edu/>

<https://dodeagrants.org/>

Our goal is to provide school personnel with free, evidence-based resources to support military-connected students. This training is part of our Suicide Prevention series.

Important Reminders

Before starting this training, please read the items below carefully and check the box in front of each item to indicate your understanding.

- The following content discusses suicide and may be upsetting to some individuals.
- Follow all district, local, state, and federal regulations. This training is **NOT** intended to replace or override existing procedures or laws.

Introduction

What is the purpose of this training?

Student support personnel may be governed by different ethical codes, but the spirit of the standards is common across professions. In this training, relevant standards from varying ethical codes will be highlighted.

Objective

The goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Identify ethical standards for school mental health personnel.

How confident are you in your ability to do this now?

Please click on the link below to submit your response.

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Gp3iBHlvhcTluR?modulenumber=suicide06

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below before proceeding with this training.

Answered the survey question in the link.

Clicked the arrow underneath the survey question to submit your response.

Recorded the ID number provided after you submitted your answer to the survey question. You will need it to complete the survey at the end of this training.

Research

What is most important for me to know?

Erbacher, Singer, and Poland (2015) highlight three key ethical standards for school mental health personnel:

No Maleficence/Do No Harm

Suicide prevention is inherent in the responsibility for school mental health personnel to do no harm. As stated by Erbacher, Singer, and Poland (2015, p. 61), these school personnel “are ethically bound to make every attempt to prevent harm to the student and protect that student from potential danger.”

Competence

Mandated trainings are critical to ensuring that school personnel including school nurses, school social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors are competent and up-to-date on suicide prevention, assessment, and intervention. Particular areas to stay well-informed of are suicide risk factors and warning signs.

Confidentiality with Students

Suicidal thoughts and behaviors constitute an exception to confidentiality that school mental health personnel can provide to students. Consider Standard I.2.3 from the NASP (National Association of School Psychologists, 2010) ethical code:

School psychologists inform students and other clients of the boundaries of confidentiality at the outset of establishing a professional relationship. They seek a shared understanding with clients regarding the types of information that will and will not be shared with third parties. However, if a child or adolescent is in immediate need of assistance, it is permissible to delay the discussion of confidentiality until the immediate crisis is resolved. School psychologists recognize that it may be necessary to discuss confidentiality at multiple points in a professional relationship to ensure client understanding and agreement regarding how sensitive disclosures will be handled.

Here is an example of how to introduce confidentiality, which should never be skipped except in the case of a crisis. Remember to consider the developmental age of the student you are speaking to.

“What we talk about is confidential, or just between you and me. But my number one job is to keep you safe, so that means sometimes I have to tell someone something that you told me. These times are: 1) when I think you might hurt yourself, 2) when I think you might hurt someone else, and 3) when I think someone is hurting you.”

Application

How might this look in my professional practice?

Remember that the goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Identify ethical standards for school mental health personnel.

In the activity below, identify each statement about the ethical standards of school mental personnel as true or false.

1. Telling a student that suicide is incredibly selfish and that it hurts others as an attempt to prevent them from committing suicide is an example of non-maleficence.

- a) True
- b) False

Correct Answer: b) False

2. School professionals should make sure that they take a suicide prevention training once, and then they can trust that they will retain the information.

- a) True
- b) False

Correct Answer: b) False

3. School psychologists and counselors should make a habit of communicating the limits of confidentiality to students, except in an immediate crisis situation.

- a) True
- b) False

Correct Answer: a) True

Implementation

How can I effectively implement this content in my professional practice?

Please review the considerations below regarding potential implementation strategies, barriers to implementation, and collaboration strategies related to this content. This will help you coordinate the next steps as you begin to incorporate the information presented in this training into your professional practice.

This information can also be found on a handout that you will be able to download at the end of this training.

Implementation Strategies

- Explicit, documented, and regular training related to the school's own suicide prevention plans and crisis procedures should be a routine part of school personnel professional development/ professional training.
- If your school district does NOT have procedures and forms for suicide it is imperative that these procedures be established.

Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

- Although some professionals may have received training about suicide, it does not mean that they should not participate in regular professional development. Providing training and regular consultation access to teachers and other professionals is critical.

Collaboration Strategies

- All teachers and staff should know who to contact and what to do if they suspect, or are informed of, suicidal thoughts or behaviors from any student.
- Be sure that you have a list of contacts ready for when you may need consultation about students at-risk.

Resources

Are there any resources available to help me implement this content?

Click on the link below to download a tool that you can use to implement this content in your professional practice.

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:46e2188a-2dc0-48c9-8bed-b176337390e0>

Feedback

How can I help improve this training?

The objective of this training was to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Identify ethical standards for school mental health personnel.

Answer the questions in the link below to let us know how well this training increased your confidence in your ability to accomplish this objective. Once you have answered all of the questions, click the blue arrow button underneath to submit your responses.

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d771mLr9ZgW3kyx?modulenumber=suicide06

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below.

Answered all of the survey questions above. You may have to scroll to see all of the questions.
Clicked the arrow underneath the last survey question to submit your responses.

Additional Readings

Where can I learn more about this content?

The following resources were used to create this training. If you would like more information about the information presented in this training, we encourage you to start here.

Erbacher, Terri & Singer, Jonathan & Poland, Scott. (2015). Suicide in schools: A practitioner's guide to multi-level prevention, assessment, intervention, and postvention.

National Association of School Psychologists Principles for Professional Ethics (2010). School Psychology Review, 39(2), 302–319.

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this training. If you have any questions or comments, please email us at schoolresources@psu.edu.

Proceed to the next training

Click on the link below to move on to the next training titled *Best Practices to Promote a Safe School Climate*. In this training, you will increase your confidence in your ability to identify and implement best practices to provide a safe school climate.

https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_07-best-practices-to-promote-a-safe-school-climate_201022/

Return to the module directory

Click on the link below to return to the module directory.

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/modules/>