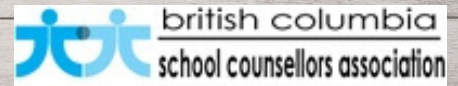




VIRTUAL SCHOOL COUNSELLING RESOURCE

Responsibilities & Rights



The following document is part of collection of resources created by the B.C. School Counsellors Association.

The purpose of providing this resource is to ensure school counsellors offer an effective, safe and secure service, while minimizing risk and protecting the students and families we support.

The USE of this document (formatting&content or content only) should ONLY OCCUR AFTER a professional COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION and CONSULTATION with your administrator.

Additionally, it important to ensure the integration of any of the recommendations/suggestions contained in this document be compliant with School District guidelines & policies regarding, security, privacy and the use of approved technologies.

All rights and permissions for use of this document, whole and in part, are granted to the end user.

Collaboration is a process not a destination!

POTENTIAL RISKS:

1. APPRAISAL

- The reduction of information such as the lack of non-verbal cues may lead to important information being missed, or the real issues evading appraisal of presenting issue/concern.
- Video links may help increase the information available but constraints on observations may remain.
- The greater error margin and lack of physical cues may mean a confident understanding cannot be made or ruling out issues/concerns cannot be eliminated.

2. MISCOMMUNICATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

- Emails may be more like postcards than letters, and may therefore increase the potential for misunderstanding.
- The reduced opportunity for spontaneous clarification may further heighten this risk.
- Cross cultural communication may increase the risk of misunderstanding.

3. BOUNDARY ISSUES

- The reduced cues may increase the likelihood of misunderstanding by the student on the professional nature of the school counselling relationship. This may require additional skill on the part of the counsellor to address these issues and to maintain school counselling boundaries.
- Extra care may be needed to maintain clear and predictable boundaries to the school counselling relationship.
- Be wary of email responses eliciting less formal and shortened expressions which may carry a risk of eroding boundaries.

4. ISSUES RELATED TO TIME

- Unexpected or unforeseen time delays may lead the student to speculate about the meaning of the delay or increase anxiety.
- Set up a formal and reasonable time frame that you are able to respond to a question or query from a student or parent.
- Delay may occur through the technology failing or the Internet not being available for a while. Such circumstance should be planned for proactively, with a backup plan agreed at the outset.

5. TECHNOLOGICAL ISSUES IMPACTING ON SCHOOL COUNSELLOR CONTACT

- Catastrophic equipment failure, e.g., the computer hard drive may become corrupted beyond retrieval, may mean that contact information, files, and details of students or the ability to contact them is lost.
- Messages may not be received, e.g., by being sent to the wrong address, being blocked by a spam filter, or by failure to deliver to an overloaded mailbox.
- Confidentiality may be breached, by internet hackers or by others accessing the email account or computer who have a legitimate right to access the computer, such as sibling, parents or partners
- The student may only have partial or restricted access (e.g., using a “shared” computer).

6. MANAGEMENT OF CRISES

- There are increased risks in the event of any crisis arising which may threaten the safety of either the student or another person.
- Establishing student identity may be difficult online. Professional online counselling may make identifying the parties and emergency contact information a prerequisite for intake, but this may be difficult to verify.

7. LEGAL ISSUES

- Legal and ethical ambiguity arises as technology advances more quickly than professional regulation and guidelines.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

1. Increased access for both student/parent/guardian and school counsellor, including services for:
 - a. students with less mobility.
 - b. those in remote or rural areas.
 - c. those who are disabled physically or psychologically (e.g., social phobias).
 - d. those in areas with few services.
 - e. time restricted people who cannot easily come to a typical day time session
(**Note:** it is NOT recommended to set virtual office hours that are outside of a typical “face to face” work day)
 - f. those who appreciate the availability and convenience of being able to send messages at any time of the day or night. (**Note:** it is recommended to set an email AUTORESPONSE that indicates the hours a student can expect a response, as well as who to call if their issue is urgent or an emergency)
 - g. those who want to approach for help (or enquire) but are too embarrassed or traumatised to do so in person or who feel using school counselling services are stigmatising.
 - h. those who are more comfortable seeking online help than face to face assistance.
2. Reduced reliance on leaving messages with intermediaries, voicemail or playing “telephone tag”.
3. A counselling activity for those who experience the process of writing as helpful. The act of writing may enhance self-reflection by allowing opportunities for review of what has been written and thereby increase the ownership of issues.
4. A record of communications to refer to later.
5. A service which some students feel is less inhibiting than in person.
6. Enhanced student autonomy by increasing choice and control. For some the internet relationship may reduce the power difference between student and school counsellor.
7. A form of communication which is less ambiguous or confused by things like body language, accent or physical appearance and therefore may be a more clear way of communicating information.
8. More culturally appropriate services for some groups in society, e.g., gamers, students who use the internet a lot, technologically advanced students. It could also be more attractive those who are very familiar and comfortable with communication via the internet.
9. Easier access to supplementary information and resource material.
10. A means of gathering information from the student prior to an appointment.

RISKS AND BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL SCHOOL COUNSELLING

EMAIL, VIDEO CONFERENCING AND OTHER ELECTRONIC PLATFORMS

Adapted from:

- Ontario HIV Treatment Network, Online mental health counselling interventions
- Features and benefits of online counselling: Trinity College online mental health community
<https://wecareon.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Features-and-benefits-of-online-counselling.pdf>
- International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO), Suggested Principles for the Online Provision of Mental Health Services
- National Board for Certified Counsellors (NBCC) Policy Regarding the Provision of Distance Professional Services
- New Zealand Psychologists Board, Draft guidelines: Psychology services delivered via the internet and other electronic media
- Canadian Psychological Association, Interim Ethical Guidelines for Psychologists providing Psychological services via electronic media
- Doctors of BC, Virtual Care Toolkit
- Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, Technology and Innovative Solution Chapter

