

# Integrating A Solution-Focused Model into SAPs

**Most SA professionals agree that a strengths-based approach is effective, but what does that look like in practice? Photocopy and use the questions in this article and find out.**

*By Deborah Barlieb, Vicki Liberto and Jane Roberts*

The primary goal of student assistance programs (SAPs) is to help students overcome a variety of problems so they can remain in school, achieve academic success and advance to the next grade or graduate (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1997-8). SAP aims to identify troubled students and connect them with helping services in the school or community (Richardson Independent School District, 1997). According to Milgram (1989), SAP has six basic functions: early identification of problems, assessment, intervention, referral, support and case management. Student assistance teams have typically been trained to collect problem-focused data on students. This article proposes that components of the solution-focused model can be incorporated into the student assistance program model. This would allow the SAP process to become more effective by identifying student strengths and utilizing in-school supports.

A solution-focused model can be used by many practitioners, including employee assistance professionals, psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, student assistance staff, school counselors, nurses and others (Bonnington, 1993, Minicucci 1994).

## **What is the solution-focused model?**

The philosophical approach of the solution-focused model (also termed competency-based) is to collect and discuss non-problem data when solving a problem (Metcalf, 1995).

Solution-focused theory emphasizes non-pathology rather than pathology, or mental health rather than mental illness. The solution-focused model promotes finding solutions that are generated by exploring client/student strengths and competencies, as opposed to solving problems by identifying limitations.

This approach originated as a scientifically researched therapeutic model. Rather than exploring a person's past looking for emotional aches and pains, the client/student is asked to recall a time when the problem presented did not exist.

Essential and unique information can be generated from this perspective. No problem exists 100% of the time. It is important for the student to recognize these times of exception to problem behavior and name the resources used to create and maintain the exceptions (Matthews, 1999). The goal is to identify, rename or possibly reframe behaviors and beliefs as strengths that will facilitate a move to solution.

Some of the unique assumptions of the solution-focused model (Walter & Peller, 1992) are:

- A non-judgmental focus and positive expectations.
- Unique, individualized solutions evolve through conversation.
- Recognizing exceptions leads to solutions and supports.
- People are resourceful and resilient.
- Change occurs all the time.
- Small changes lead to larger changes.

These guiding concepts impact on the process by defining it as collaborative, strength-focused and goal-directed.

## **What does a solution-focused SAP look like?**

Some key terms guiding solution-focused SAPs include:

- Collaboration
- Invitation
- Solution
- Success

When we look at the student assistance team through the filter of a solution-focused model, the team is defined as consisting of not only school personnel, but also students and parents. Each member of this team

is valued for the particular area of expertise he/she provides the team. All team members are equal in the process of identifying referral sources and school-based supports.

The solution-focused SAP process automatically generates respect for students and parents as collaborators. Best practice indicates that parents need to be involved with the team from the onset. However, some teams are reluctant to involve parents or concerned that a parent will refuse to assist. And, in fact, only 27% of parents contacted in one state did participate in the process when their children were referred to SAP (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1997). Might part of the difficulty be that teams collected only problematic information about a student to convey to parents? But if parents are presented with both strength-based and problem-oriented data on their child, they may be more likely to cooperate or participate in the process.

#### How to integrate a solution-focused model into SAPs

The easiest way to integrate the components of the solution-focused model into a SAP is to modify the data-collection process to include strength-based questions to every member of the team. Students are more than merely a problem description. Competency-based questions elicit student strengths and create a broader student description and resources already available in a student's environment. It's important to remember that environments may differ for each student in relation to culture, gender, age, etc. The suggested questions identify additional supports and methods not usually a part of the traditional SAP process, such as religious groups, extended family members, community groups, school and social activities or mentors. The competency-based SAP team searches for solutions unique to each student.

To elicit competency-based information from each team member interviewed, consider the following questions. The questions are not necessarily listed in order of presentation. Some questions may need to be asked more than once, based on the information being generated.

Use the following questions when meeting with parents:

- May we meet to talk about your child and how he or she is progressing in school?
- What are your concerns, if any, about your child?
- How do you handle the situation (related to the specific situation)?
- What do you see as your child's strengths?
- Are you and your child involved together in any activities?
- Does your child belong to any organizations or clubs in or out of school?
- Have you noticed any changes in your child's behavior since I first called you?
- What have you observed in your child when s/he does better at home or in school?
- What do you and your child like best about school?
- What are you doing when your child does well in school or at home?
- What kind of change would you like to see?
- How can we work together to ensure your child's success in school?
- How can we work together to encourage change?

Do not impose the team's view of the problem and recommendations on the parents and their child. Instead, invite them to help the team create a picture of the student with problems and strengths.

Ask these questions of the student to identify successes:

- What reason do you think your teachers will give for meeting with us today?
- What do you want to get from school?
- How would you like things to be in class?
- Are there any classes in which you do well? Why? How?
- What does your teacher do that helps you?
- Do you have a teacher with whom you feel comfortable? Who? Why?
- Describe the times when you are less depressed or less tired or less bored.
- What do you do when you are less depressed/tired/bored?
- How do you cope with stress?
- When do you not drink?
- What steps have you taken to cut down your drug use?

Consider these questions for other team members:

- What have you observed about this student when he or she does better in class?
- What will you see him doing that tells you things are better?
- What do you say or do with this student that helps him or her be successful?
- What activities does this student seem to like?

- Are there any activities in which this student is successful? Please list them and be specific.
- Do you have good rapport with this student? What makes it good?
- Does this student get along well with other students in the class? Who? How? When?
- How often do you see this student and under what circumstances?

By asking competency-based questions, the team will learn many things, such as if a student does better in a particular teacher's classroom. "Better" might mean that the student can sit quietly without disrupting the class or that he has a D average rather than an F. The team also finds out:

- What transpires between that teacher and student interpersonally and academically.
- Particular activities the student successfully completes in class/es.
- Areas of academic strength.
- The kinds of projects and hands-on activities that are available in class.
- What the teacher does to create a comfortable climate in the classroom.
- Coping mechanisms used by the student.
- What helps the student control emotions or substance use.

### **Conclusion**

A solution-focused model, blended with the traditional SAP concept, ensures the inclusion of strength-based facts, not only about students but about their parents and teachers as well. This paints a more complete picture of each student and identifies specific needs for support as well as adequately describing the problem. In addition, the information is useful to a mental health or alcohol and other drug specialist to whom a student may be referred. By asking competency-based questions the team elicits perspectives that lead to individualized solutions. Successful outcomes are more likely at every step of the process if strengths are identified. The solution-focused model expands upon the SAP process to construct a successful environment for the student at school, at home and in the community.

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### **Sidebar:**

#### **Case Example**

##### **Problem-focused SAP model**

Brian is a junior who was caught with drug paraphernalia in school. He was referred to the SAP. Data collected includes failing four out of five classes, occasionally sleeps in class, is often tardy, is sometimes disruptive in class, lack of participation in extracurricular activities, poor academic record, possible family concerns.

The team recommends to the student and the parent that Brian receive an alcohol and other drug evaluation in accordance with school policy and that he participate in a school-based support group. Disciplinary action at school is less severe if the student goes for and follows recommendations of the evaluator.

##### **Solution-focused SAP model**

Data collected includes passing math class, student has positive rapport with his teacher Miss Jones, really likes his part-time job, goes to motorcross on weekends, alert in music class. The team (including parent and student) generate the following suggestions: attend a school-based support group, ask Miss Jones to act as a mentor, assign Brian as a math tutor, ask teachers to greet Brian at the door by name, and receive an alcohol and other drug assessment. Disciplinary action at school is less severe if the student goes for and follows recommendations of the evaluator.