

Freshman Orientation to School Social Work Services Script and PowerPoint Slide #'s*

The following script was developed by Jerry Ciffone when he was employed as a school social worker at South Elgin High School in South Elgin, Illinois. South Elgin High School (SEHS) is one of five high schools within School District U-46 in Elgin, Illinois. This script may be printed, and used as a guide for any school-based school social worker wanting to encourage students to directly access them or a social work colleague in their school building. At the time of its use the ability for students to directly seek help for themselves and their friends, and to do so at any time of the school day, was one of the key components of the SEHS Suicide Prevention Program. The SEHS Suicide Prevention Program was discontinued when Jerry retired in June 2014.

This information should be presented to freshman students within the first month of school. Groups of 30 or less would allow for greater dialog between the students and the social worker. Ideally this should be an existing class or a pull-out group of students from a class; originating from a class, or pair of classes, that all freshman students are enrolled in.

This information is written in generic terms so that it may be relevant to the practice of most social workers. It can be presented at a comfortable pace and with the opportunity for students to ask questions if at least 55 minutes have been allocated.

Slide #1

Script:

How many of you know who I am and have a pretty good idea of what I do here?

I am a school social worker and I will be spending the rest of this period talking about what I do here. Some of you may be thinking “I’m a happy kid. I have a great family. I have good quality friends. I cope well with stress. I’m doing well in school. I don’t think I’ll ever need to see a social worker at my school.” That this talk will not apply to you but it actually may. Sometimes bad things happen to someone who has everything going well and if that happens they may need help from someone like me. In fact, 9 out of 10 who meet me did not predict during a session like this that they would be in my office one day while they were a student here. Even though you may never have a big problem in school a good friend of yours may, so listening to what I have to say could help you to some day help a good friend.

Most of you will have a good experience as a student here. You will attend every day, follow the rules and be focused on school. You will work hard and get pretty good grades in all of your classes. Many of you will be involved in school sports, activities and clubs. You may have minor conflicts with your friends or parents, or minor setbacks at school, but overall you will be happy and satisfied with the way your life is going.

However, each year I meet with about 200 students who are not so lucky and they’re in a situation which messes up their ability to do well in at school.

[Slide #2] This slide shows the types of situations some students have. You can see from looking at this list that these things can happen to anyone and that even a person who usually handles things pretty well could get overwhelmed. If a person has any of these problems, and if they are getting in the way of what they need to do at school, then they should talk about it with a friend, an older brother or older sister, their mom or dad, a teacher or their guidance counselor. Students can also see me.

Sometimes a teacher, guidance counselor or parent will notice that something seems to be wrong and they will ask me to see a student.

For example, the student is missing too much school, they're sleeping in class, they're acting differently, they seem too sad, they are getting angry too often, they don't try to get good grades, they get in to trouble too much. The dean may have a student in his office and they find out for example, that a student who was sent to him was having family problems and they will ask me to meet with a student. But most of the students I meet come on their own, or like #7 because a friend brings them.

Look at #1, and #2. Sometimes students can feel some pressure building up, and they feel like they might cry in class or get really angry. So to avoid getting into trouble or an embarrassing situation they may decide to come to my office where they can privately address a problem and get themselves under control again. The best time to come is during passing period, but if a student is really upset they can ask their teacher for a pass.

What do you think most students are most worried about? - whether I will keep what they say to me a secret. The laws of this State provide that any person age 12 or older is legally entitled to confidential counseling services. What does the word "confidential" mean? - to keep information a secret. If you discuss anything on this list from #1 to #16 it may be kept private or confidential.

[Slide #3] There are some exceptions to this rule, and they involve circumstances where someone's safety is in danger; such as #17 through #20. Other than these last four, whatever we talk about can be kept confidential. This means that I won't call your parents, or tell your dean or teachers what you have told me without your permission.

[Slide #4 Ask students to answer the three questions. (T T F)]

[Slide #5] Here is a list of the ways students receive help from a school social worker. Some students may feel kind of embarrassed about the idea of talking with a social worker, and if that's the case, it's fine to come with a friend. It's no heavy analysis. I don't analyze a person's dreams or try to change their personality. One of my jobs is #1; to simply help a student who is upset to calm down or feel better so that they are able go back to class, pay attention, and be ready to learn. Another main

reason why students see me is #4 to get help in making an important decision. Most students find that even if they feel uncomfortable at first, once we start talking, they relax and find that it goes much better than they thought. I don't force anyone into talking about anything they want to keep private and I don't make students return to my office to see me a second time if they don't want to.

I have certain goals for students. [Slide #6] Here is a list of them. Some students need help with just one of these and others need help with two or more of these. A personal goal may, for example, be to learn how to manage anger, or to manage nervousness about being in school or speaking up in class. It really depends on the person and if they want to get better at something.

Some students are not sure about when to see their guidance counselor and when to see their social worker. [Slide #7] This shows the basic difference. It's up to you or your friend to decide if the problem, should, or could, be addressed by your guidance counselor or myself.

Let's pretend you have a problem that you needed to see me about today. You would come down to the Guidance office **[Slide #8]** This is a picture of the entrance to the Guidance office. **[Slide #9]** You would go in and ask the secretary (Mrs.) if you could see me. She would tell me a student is here to see me and I would try to make time for you as quickly as possible. I would come out of my office and greet you. We would walk back to my office.

[Slide #10] I would sit down with you and listen to you. I would take everything you say seriously. I would respect your right to make your own decisions rather than just tell you what I think you should do. I would help you figure out your own solution to the problem. If you are absent from a class I can excuse your absence for the entire time you are with me.

Most of the time I am able to help out a student who has a problem within in one to three sessions. But if I think the person has a problem that I can't help them solve I would suggest they see someone in the community. I don't see students in any particular pattern. For example, I may see one student for 15 minutes three weeks in a row. With another student I may see them once in December, three times in April and then not see them again until the following October. It all depends on the problem and how much the student needs to talk about it.

[Slide #11] What do you think are the two most common problems that I deal with? - conflicts with other students (#6), and conflicts with parents (#10).

[Slide #12 and give brief examples of each of the different conflict situations listed.]

[Slide #13] This is a true story. The boy on the right punched the boy shown in the framed picture. The boy who got punched suffered a direct injury to his spinal cord. He immediately lost consciousness and was taken to the hospital where he remained in a coma for eight days. Then he died. The conflict was about jealousy and a girl. Two lives were destroyed by one punch. Could this happen here at this school? -yes it could.

[Slide #14] How often does a student die at school as a result of a confrontation with another student? [Slides #15-21]

[Slide #22] Why do students fight? Do you think the boy in jail thought about the consequences of his actions before he punched the boy who eventually died? Do you think some other boy thinks about the hospital bill that his parents will have to pay if he seriously injures someone? Or does he think ahead of time that his parents may be sued thousands or even a million dollars if the person he beats up becomes paralyzed? -no he doesn't, because he acts without thinking. Those who fight usually have emotional problems, mainly problems managing their anger or fear. Some feel pressure to look tough. Some feel that they will loose their self-respect if they walk away or otherwise avoid a fight. Students who fight need help because its not normal and its not cool to fight.

[Slide #23] I'd like to talk about the problem of bullies and those who are bullied. Most people think of bullying in the form of a bigger and stronger person being physically aggressive toward a smaller or weaker person. But it is more often seen in the form of ridicule, insult and rumors, rather than physical aggression.

If a student is a bully or being bullied this is a serious situation and I want to know about it. [Slide #24] This is an example of a very rare and extreme reaction to being bullied. **[Slide #25]** This is another example. If a person is being bullied they need to come forward to an adult and get some advice.

[Slide #26] Why do students bully others? Here are some of the reasons. What does it mean that the research shows that bully behavior peaks in sixth grade? -that as a person matures he or she learns to control their negative thoughts and feelings toward others. Since there are fewer students who are being bullies by the 9th grade this would suggest that those who continue to bully are less mature than their same-age peers.

The trend is that by 9th grade most students are becoming more tolerant of peers who are different or annoying. Compared to 6th graders, 9th graders are more sensitive to the feelings of others. They are able to think longer before acting. They have developed ways to be funny or show strength without being mean to someone.

[Slide #27] If you see a person getting bullied here are some things to consider. Don't laugh or go along with the abusive behavior. If you're friends with someone who is a bully you should let them know that their behavior is uncool. **[Slides #28-29]** If you are afraid to do that because you fear they may not want to be your friend or that they may turn on you too then they're not worth having as a friend.

[Slide #30] Don't be a passive bystander, because you may feel really guilty someday for your inaction. When we laugh the victim notices those who joined in during that event. Studies show that if peers laugh along with the bully it confirms that the bully is right about the mean things he or she says about the victim.

Talking to the victim during the event is very helpful and effective in getting the bully to stop. If you didn't take any action at the time but chose instead

to go up to the victim later that can be the very helpful. Especially if you say “I didn’t agree with him; or she was wrong about you.” That level of social support helps the victim to not believe the mean things that were said. It gives them something positive to hold on to and they may feel more empowered to stand up to their bully.

If any of you ever feel threatened here consider doing some of these things. [Slide # 31] The first thing to do is to let the bully know you want them to stop, or don’t like what they are doing. Second, you have to defend yourself otherwise you are viewed as an easy or safe target. [Review the remaining suggestions on the list. Emphasize that going to an adult can stop the problem immediately if it’s handled properly.]

[Slide #32] Bullying can also occur electronically and this can be just as harmful as other forms of bullying. Here are some things you can do to deal with people who try to hurt you or others online.

[Slide #33] If you yourself are being mean to someone you should really think about your behavior and stop what you are doing. You too may someday regret it. Plus your parents would be very disappointed in you if they found out what you are doing to another student.

[Slide #34] When I learn about a conflict between two students I get the students involved to come to my office as quickly as possible. There are different ways to work things out so that it doesn’t look like one person told on another. I also don’t make both parties meet unless they agree to do so ahead of time. I try to get them to really say what they are upset about, or I clear up misunderstandings. My goal is to find a solution both sides can live with, and resolve the conflict. If a student confronts another student on their own in a public place, where other students are hanging out, what do you think may happen? – There could be a fight and someone will get hurt, maybe have to go to the hospital and maybe get expelled from school. But when I have the chance to get them into my office, and get them to talk about why they are so mad I’m usually able to prevent a fight. If we can come to a good agreement I won’t get anyone else involved.

Another way that students use my office would be for #9 as a place to gain the privacy they need to work through a problem. If you are upset with a friend you may not want to try to deal with it in a public place where

others might overhear or try to get into your business. I can meet with you and your friend. Or, if I think it's necessary, I may let you talk alone with your friend in a room in the Guidance office.

Peer conflicts also apply to boyfriend and girlfriend relationships. I know that relationships are really important and that a break up can be very upsetting and it may be hard to attend class and be focused. So if this is the case I am willing to meet with individuals or couples to help them understand or resolve a problem they're having with each other.

[Slide #35] For #10, I know that it can be very hard to do well in school when a person is upset with their mom or dad. When there is a serious conflict with a parent, I try to help the student figure out what is really bothering them about their parents. Sometimes I help the person put into words what is bothering them, and we write it down so that when the time is right they can either give it to their parents or refer to it when they are talking to them.

[Slide #36] Looking at #17 and #20, I know from experience and research that students usually hear about weapons and threats before the adults do. In most of the shooting incidents in schools in the last few years, a warning was made to a fellow student, and that warning was not passed on to a trusted adult. This school will remain a safe place to learn if we all look out for each other. If you know of an unsafe situation, we want you to let us know. When I say us I mean me, your guidance counselor, your dean, our police officer, or any other adult that you trust. We need to know if someone is making a really strange or threatening comment, even if it seems like they are joking.

[Slide #37] I am here all day, Monday through Friday. If you or a friend thinks the problem needs to be addressed immediately you don't need to make an appointment. Just come down as soon as you need to.

Most students come during study hall, lunch, or between classes. As I said before if you or your friend were to come down I would try to make the time to talk right away. If I'm too busy I will make an appointment to talk as soon as possible. If you come and I'm not there, then you can leave a note with your name and the best period to send for you and I will usually get you in that same day.

[Slide #38] I'd like to summarize what I've said.

[Slide #39] How many of you feel like you know who I am and have a pretty good idea of what I do here?

[If time permits show slide #40 and ask: We have a few minutes left, do any of you have any questions or is there is something you would like me to explain further?]

Endnote:

A PDF version of PowerPoint slides used for this presentation can be viewed by going to: www.jerryciffone.com/fossw/ A Word version of this transcript and an editable PowerPoint file for these slides can be readily obtained, at no cost, by contacting Jerry Ciffone at: jerry.ciffone.lcsw@gmail.com.

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