

School Psychologist

Making

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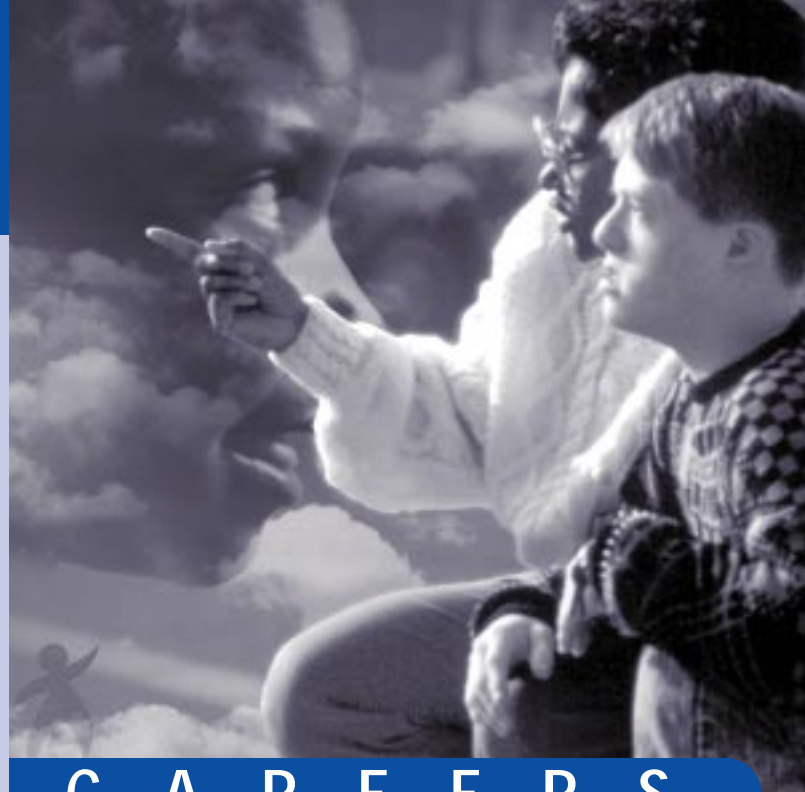
DIFFERENCE in the **lives** of **students** with **special needs**

Alicia, a sixth grader who wears a hearing aid, is about to graduate from her class of 25 children and will then attend a middle school with several hundred children. According to her mother, Alicia is so worried about the transition that she's cried every night for two weeks.

Steve, a high school freshman, has always had difficulty reading. He was a "C" student in middle school but is struggling in every class now. When Steve confided to his older brother that some of the letters in his books did not make sense, his brother laughed and called Steve stupid.

The parents of a six month-old boy telephoned the school office recently and said they heard that the school could help their child, who has Down syndrome. They have limited health insurance and are worried about the costs of educating their son.

Can anyone in the school help these students and their families? A school psychologist can. A psychologist can meet Alicia, her parents, and her current teacher. By reviewing Alicia's school records and consulting with her previous teachers, the psychologist can determine if Alicia's concerns are typical sixth-grade jitters or if a more serious reason is the cause of her anxiety. The psychologist can arrange for Alicia to meet her new counselor and homeroom teacher in middle school and, perhaps, even receive a private tour of the school.



C A R E E R S

in Special Education and Related Services

If an audiology evaluation or other testing is necessary, the psychologist will know whom to contact.

Steve needs a friend, and the psychologist can be the trusted adult who listens to Steve's concerns. If the psychologist believes that Steve might have learning disabilities, he will recommend to Steve's parents that Steve be tested by the appropriate school specialist. If a learning disability is diagnosed, Steve's immediate family might eventually receive some counseling to help them better understand the disorder.

The psychologist will assure the parents of the child with Down syndrome that their son is, indeed, eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The federal law guarantees that all children, from birth through age 21, are entitled to a free public education in the least restrictive environment. The psychologist will refer the parents to the appropriate special education professionals in school and inform them of pre-school programs within the school system.

Although the first federal legislation that recognized the importance of school psychological services wasn't passed until 1975, psychology had early roots in American education. The first psychology clinic in a school was established in 1899, and the first school psychologist was appointed in 1915. Today, one-third of all psychologists in the United States are employed in school systems.

Nature of Work

“Not all children are happy and well-adjusted,” writes Marjorie Eberts and Margaret Gisler. Some are depressed, don’t know how to make friends, have low self-esteem, have been sexually abused, or need to know how to cope with learning disabilities or their parents’ divorce. Stepping in to help these children are psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors.”

Psychiatrists have medical degrees and, of the three professionals, are the only ones who can prescribe drugs. Psychologists are more highly trained than school counselors and can treat more serious cases of maladjustment.

School psychologists generally have offices in individual schools and serve one or more schools. Some school systems, however, centralize their psychology staff into a single building. Regardless of where school psychologists meet students, parents, and teachers, these professionals have expertise in understanding human intelligence and knowing ways of measuring it. Primarily they:

- Consult with teachers, parents, and school personnel about learning, social, and behavior problems.
- Teach lessons on parenting skills, learning strategies, substance abuse, and other topics pertinent to healthy schools.
- Research the effectiveness of academic programs and behavior management procedures and study new information about learning and behavior.
- Assess and evaluate the wide variety of behavior, skills, emotions, and goals in the schools they serve.
- Intervene directly with counseling services for students and families.

Psychologists are knowledgeable about the various kinds of tests that measure a person’s mental ability, achievement, personality, interests, and special abilities. They can also diagnose mental disorders in children and adolescents. Some disorders are severe (such as anorexia nervosa or clinical depression) and may require the intervention of many health professionals for a long period of time. Other disorders are specifically related to academic lessons and can be treated by special education professionals in the school.

When parents ask a school to screen their child for eligibility for special education, a psychologist is often the first person they will meet. This encounter is very important, because the psychologist will explain how the special education system works. Frequently, the psychologist will conduct the testing. While the tests are routine for the psychologist, they may be unfamiliar and worrisome to parents, because the tests may reveal new information about the child’s disabling conditions.

When the psychologist reviews the test results with the parents, the meeting is often the beginning of a relationship with the parents, teachers, and special education team.

Once testing is complete, the psychologist may recommend specific school services that will help the child. The psychologist works with the special education team and is available for consultation with the parents and teachers as long as the child is enrolled in the school.

Depending on enrollment size and geographical location of the school, psychologists work with a very wide range of student disorders. One colleague reported that her school psychologist “is as comfortable working with a young, severely autistic child as she is with a teenage youth involved in delinquency and gang activity.”

Education Required

With rare exception, a master’s degree in psychology or counseling is the minimum requirement. Two states (Hawaii and Maine) require a doctorate degree, and Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania allow persons with a bachelor’s degree to serve as school psychologists if they have completed the required number of internship hours.

All school psychologists must be certified and/or licensed by the state in which they practice. National certification is available through the National Association of School Psychologists and consists of a master’s degree plus 30 graduate semester hours, a 1,200-hour supervised internship, and a passing score on the National School Psychology Examination.

More than 200 U.S. colleges and universities offer school psychology programs. Students enrolled in master’s degree programs will take courses in analysis of human behavior, behavior disorders, professional and ethical foundations, interview techniques, tests and measurements, assessment of personality, and psychopathology of childhood and adolescence.

Personal Qualities

School psychologists are mature, stable, and patient and must be professionally objective in their assessment of a student’s abilities. They possess excellent listening skills, inspire trust and confidence and can articulate test results to parents who are not familiar with psychological tests. These professionals are intrigued with human behavior and have a strong desire to help students receive appropriate special education services.

PRACTITIONER'S PROFILE



Miriam Kuhn
School Psychologist
Kearney, Nebraska

Miriam Kuhn is a full-time psychologist in the Kearney Public Schools in which total student enrollment is approximately 5,000. She and two other staff psychologists do not have standard caseloads but receive referrals from teachers throughout the school system. Miriam works with students with disabilities on a regular basis.

Miriam credits her grandmother for introducing her to the field of special education. Before Miriam entered kindergarten, her grandmother, who was then a retired special education teacher in Virginia, let her visit her former classroom. "I saw children who had mild physical handicaps, but I wasn't really aware of any disabilities," she recalled. "To me, they were simply older, friendly children; and I was enchanted with the class. It was inspiring to see how my grandmother related to the students."

During college, Miriam worked with a child who had autism, and found the experience both challenging and satisfying. She majored in psychology and sociology and received a bachelor's degree from Grace College in Indiana. In 1988, she received her master's degree in guidance and counseling and a specialist degree in school psychology from the University of Nebraska-Kearney. Miriam became a Nationally Certified School Psychologist in 1995.

Daily Schedule: Miriam is assigned to five schools, four elementary buildings and one preschool program. She visits each school once a week for a half day. During that time, she typically observes students in classes, gathers data about particular students or classes, interviews parents and/or teachers, and meets with the school's special education team.

"When a child is having trouble, whether it's an academic problem or behavior problem, the teacher can refer that student to the school's assistance team," explained Miriam. "Let's say a third-grade boy is struggling with reading.

"It's very gratifying to make life a bit smoother for a child."

The team notifies the parents and encourages them to try some specific suggestions at home to help their son. The classroom teacher works with the child using different strategies, and a guidance counselor might also assist. The team monitors the child's progress; but, after a specified amount of time, they agree that the youngster has made minimal progress. This is the point when the evaluation team, including the school psychologist, is called in."

Miriam assesses the student's cognitive ability and other areas; observes him in class; and consults personally with his parents and teacher. Other team members will evaluate areas such as academic achievement, language development, and motor skills.

"My job is to gather pertinent data and work with the child's team to propose solutions and interventions," states Miriam. "Obviously, because of the size and structure of our school system, I cannot provide therapy to individual students like a private psychologist does. What I can do is refer a child to other support sources. I might see a child who's living in an abusive situation, and that certainly can affect academic performance. Based on the facts, I would probably refer that student to a school counselor or community agency such as social services."

Miriam also acts as a liaison between her schools and outside community agencies. She works closely with the Child Find program and serves on Kearney's Head Start health advisory board.

Challenges: "Helping families and teachers who are dealing with serious behavior problems can be both frustrating and difficult. Families struggle to provide consistent structure, day in and day out. Teachers have a very tough job in the classroom, and I must find ways to be supportive and helpful. I am always frustrated and saddened when I see children struggling with learning difficulties that could have been prevented—fetal alcohol syndrome, for example, or a brain injury because a child played with a loaded handgun."

Satisfaction: "Having been in my job for six years, I've had the pleasure of following real growth and progress in certain children. I've worked with infants with disabilities, helped move them into toddler programs, then Head Start, and finally kindergarten. It's very gratifying to make life a bit smoother for a child."

Job Outlook and Advancement

Although the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends one school psychologist for every 1,000 students, many school systems vary from that ratio. According to NASP, the range is from 1:800 to 1:20,000, with an average of 1:2,100.

In the 1996-97 school year, 23,815 psychologists held jobs in educational settings. Employment of psychologists in all areas is expected to grow faster than average for all occupations through the year 2005. Indications are strong that students who are affected by family life, crime, alcohol and drug abuse, and other problems will increasingly seek counsel from school psychologists.

School psychologists with doctorate degrees often find employment opportunities as administrators in large school systems or in school districts, or working at the state level in education.

How to Prepare for a Career

To study human behavior as it develops, volunteer or find summer employment in a day-care center, preschool, or recreation center that serves children. Be active in student activities that need problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Enroll in English, science, psychology, and communications classes in high school. Ask the school counseling staff if any volunteer positions are available to students.

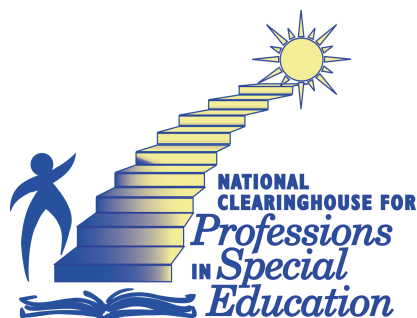
RESOURCES

American Psychological Association

750 First Street, NE
Washington, D.C. 20002
800-374-2721
202-336-5500
See website for e-mail addresses
www.apa.org

National Association of School Psychologists

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