

# UNIT SEVEN

## Counselling support for vulnerable learners

### Introduction

It is natural for children to have emotional needs. All children seek love and affection and a person whom they can trust. Children need acceptance, stability and boundaries and also require help with understanding the changes that happen to them as they grow up. When children grow up in stable and loving families, they will instinctively look to their parents or caregivers to meet these needs. They will grow up taking the stability and love for granted, unaware of how much of their wellbeing depends on the fact that their emotional needs are being met.

However, if children's lives have been disrupted by HIV and AIDS and other factors which leave them vulnerable or orphaned, they are most likely to grow up without the physical, emotional and psychological security that families should provide. If their emotional needs are not being met, they may easily feel worthless and become unhappy. Such unhappiness may in turn lead to aggression, anxiety or depression. These are all factors that may result in children finding it difficult to concentrate in class. Often when children struggle with school work, they become disruptive and difficult to manage, or they just withdraw and switch off. Teachers therefore need to be aware that these 'difficult' behaviours may be a sign that children are emotionally vulnerable and that they need psycho-social support.

Our study showed that many schools are aware of the problem of orphans and vulnerable learners. This was generally both because vulnerable learners were identified by the more obvious external signs of vulnerability such as, hunger or neglect, but also in some cases, because teachers had identified disruptive classroom behaviours as a symptom of their learner's vulnerability.

Teachers interact directly with learners in the classroom on a daily basis. For this reason they are well placed to play an important role in the school-based support system. First, because of this interaction, teachers are able to identify those who are vulnerable. Second, also as a result of their ongoing contact with the learners, the teachers are in a good position to listen to their learners' concerns and to offer support in the form of *basic counselling*. Third, teachers can support vulnerable learners if they know *where* and *how to refer* them for professional psycho-socio support.

However, the teacher's involvement does need to be carefully managed, for, as has been stated before, teachers have a big enough job just teaching children without being additionally burdened by being expected to become counsellors as well. Added to this is the fact that unless the teachers have had relevant training, it is not appropriate to allow them to engage with distressed learners because they may (unintentionally) cause more emotional harm than good.

This unit explores the role of the school management team (SMT) in managing a strategy for the school to identify and support vulnerable learners holistically. This strategy will involve teachers at the level of the classroom and will examine a simple system for referring vulnerable learners to the appropriate services for help.

## Key questions

This unit explores the following questions:

1. What are the benefits of counselling support for learners?
2. What types of counselling support strategies can be organised?
3. What is involved in managing school-based counselling programmes?
4. Which counselling strategy is likely to be most suitable for your school?

## Outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Understand why a holistic approach to support involving psycho-social support and counselling is important
- Identify the different types of psycho-social support strategies available and what is involved in organising each one.
- Identify individuals and external organisations in the community that can offer counselling to vulnerable learners
- Identify the most suitable approach for your school to access and manage counselling for your learners.



## The importance of psycho-social support

Up until this point in the guide, we have largely focused on managing strategies that support the physical needs of orphans and other vulnerable children. But activities that support orphans and other vulnerable children need to do more than simply meet their physical needs. They also need to address their emotional and psychological needs as well as their needs for social interaction. These are termed *psycho-social* needs.

In this unit we therefore expand our examination of various support strategies to include psycho-social support. We believe that a caring school is one that tries to ensure that learners are supported, not only physically, but emotionally and psychologically as well, thus providing a holistic approach to support.

The extract from the Alliance NGO website below provides a simple account of what psycho-social support is and why it is important in the context of supporting orphans and vulnerable children.

### WHAT IS PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT?

Psycho-social support has been defined as an ongoing process of meeting emotional, social, mental and spiritual needs, all of which are considered essential elements of meaningful and positive human development. It goes beyond simply meeting children's physical needs. It places great emphasis on children's psychological and emotional needs, and their need for social interaction. Many programmes of support for orphans and other vulnerable children have focused almost completely on their physical needs only. Programmes which aim to meet the psycho-social and physical needs of a child are called holistic.

Orphans and other vulnerable children require psycho-social support because of the trauma and stress they have experienced. Trauma is an emotional shock that produces long-lasting harmful effects on the individual. Parental illness and death are causes of emotional trauma for children and young people. Stress is an emotional condition experienced or felt when an individual has to cope with unsettling, frustrating or harmful situations. It is a disturbing sense of helplessness, which is uncomfortable and which creates uncertainty and self-doubt. Psycho-social support aims to help children and young people cope with emotional trauma and stress.

([www.ovcsupport.net](http://www.ovcsupport.net))<sup>1</sup>



Resilience refers to the positive capacity of people to cope with stress and trauma. Counselling helps learners build resilience.

In a caring school environment teachers quickly realise if children are feeling unhappy, and they often try to offer some form of comfort and advice. But apart from a demonstration of care and concern, facilitating access to skilled counselling is one of the main activities that a school can undertake to support learners coping with emotional trauma and stress.

In the course of our study we visited some schools where the SMT understood the need to set up procedures for identifying and supporting learners with emotional problems. In some cases schools attempted to provide some *basic* counselling for distressed learners. But this type of counselling was mostly provided on an *ad hoc* or informal basis by teachers who were not trained counsellors, and who listened to the children out of concern for them. However, in two cases, in particular, we noticed that systematised counselling procedures had been set up. Here counselling was provided at school level by a person specifically trained to do the job, although *how* it was implemented was very different in each case.

Let's explore these two cases and see what lessons can be learnt and how these learnings can be transferred and adapted (if necessary) to help schools to offer a sustainable counselling service.

## Counselling strategies for vulnerable learners



### Activity 1 Exploring school-based counselling support

The experience of Zwelitsha Primary School is interesting because it is a school-based counselling service that is both initiated and run by the school. As you read the case study (on the following page) keep these two questions in mind:

1. What benefits can you see to having the emotional needs of learners taken seriously by the school?
2. How does the counselling link to other care initiatives in the school?

### CASE STUDY 13 – SCHOOL-BASED COUNSELLING FOR LEARNERS

**Zwelitsha Primary School** is a township school located just outside Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape. The school deputy principal, Mrs Dladla, is in charge of the counselling service since she holds a Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree in Guidance and Counselling and has also attended several workshops on counselling run by the provincial Department of Education. She told the story of a learner who had almost dropped out of school at Grade 3 level due to HIV and AIDS related illness. The learner was said to be sick and almost bed-ridden three years ago before someone from the school visited her home. The school got medical support for the learner and provided the right type of food. The school also got sound counselling services for her, which resulted in her not only accepting her condition, but also getting to appreciate that it is possible to lead a normal life even if she is HIV positive. After getting the right support, the learner managed to regain her health and come back to school. The school continued to provide her with ongoing counselling and support with her academic work. At the time of the research, the learner's physical condition had dramatically improved. Her school performance was said to be normal and she was doing well in Grade 6. The school had made a difference in this child's life. The poor grandmother, with whom the learner stays, regards Zwelitsha School as more than just a learning centre; to her and others in the community, the school is a saviour and a source of hope. According to the principal of Zwelitsha School, there are 17 HIV+ learners in the school and all of them are getting medical, food and counselling support through the school. They are free to come to the school principal and deputy principal if they need to talk about their problems. Their parents and guardians also do the same. Because the school has been so effective in helping these needy learners, members of the surrounding community now feel free to come to the school and talk openly about their HIV or AIDS status and related problems to Mrs Dladla and to the principal. The school, in turn, refers these people for relevant assistance, mainly to facilities of the Department of Health. In so doing, the school observes high ethical standards regarding matters of confidentiality.

### Comment

*The main benefit of counselling at Zwelitsha was that it helped learners to manage their problems and build resilience. Resilient learners are better able to thrive in the face of difficult circumstances, and continue to grow and learn. This is especially true if the counselling acknowledges learners' feelings and nurtures their self-esteem. When learners feel accepted and supported, it is easier for them to manage their negative emotions in daily life. Counselling, together with practical interventions like school nutrition, aftercare and social support can also make learners more resilient by encouraging them to find practical solutions to their problems and by nurturing their coping skills.*

*At the heart of Zwelitsha's case study is the realisation that the educating function of the school can be effective only if the emotional, physiological and psychological needs of the learner are adequately taken care of. The counselling offered at Zwelitsha Primary was thus part of a wider and systematic care response. The emotional needs of learners were not seen as isolated, but were immediately related to their deeper psychological and social roots. Also, the school offered support for learners and their families, trying to strengthen the capacity for care at home. Although the school offered food and helped with medication, they also had a referral system so learners and their families could get additional help from other social services, like the Department of Health.*

The counselling service at Zwelitsha Primary is championed and driven by Mrs Dladla with the support of the principle, but in fact, this is only one aspect of the care and support system at the school. It is therefore important that we examine exactly how this counseling initiative fits into the whole care and support system at Zwelitsha.

Zwelitsha Primary School has, as its vision, the creation of a caring school in which all children feel included and in which all children can succeed. This vision has been actualised, not only through individual acts of kindness, but through the principal and the SMT's management approach. This is reflected in the principal's open door policy, as well as in the role played by management to create systematised and sustainable, school-based structures and processes to support all forms of caring in the school.



## ACTIVITY

### Activity 2

#### **Components of, and processes for, managing an integrated psycho-social support programme**

Read the description of the overall approach to counselling and support established at Zwelitsha Primary by the SMT and the SGB (Case Study 13 continued on the following page). Take note of the various components and processes that make this a well integrated and holistic system of support.

Once you have read this case study, workshop with members of your SMT the lessons learnt from Zwelitsha Primary that you could adapt and/or apply to your school context. Think about how you could strengthen and expand any existing components of support in your school. Also think about how you might go about identifying individuals and organisations in your community that could help you achieve an expanded counselling and care programme of action at your school.

## CASE STUDY 13 – SCHOOL-BASED COUNSELLING FOR LEARNERS (continued)

### The role of the School Based Support Team

**Zwelitsha Primary School** has a School Based Support Team (SBST) consisting of seven educators and some School Governing Body (SGB) members that is responsible for taking care of the counselling needs of learners. Both the school principal and her deputy (Mrs Dladla) are part of this team, with Mrs Dladla playing the central role of coordinator. Most of the teachers in the committee were selected on the basis of their interest in providing care and support to vulnerable learners. The establishment of this School Based Support Team demonstrates the awareness the school has for the need for this kind of support initiative in the school. The main role of this team is to work with individual teachers in the school in identifying learners in need of special care, including counselling and then facilitating access to counselling support.

### Identifying vulnerable learners

Teachers identify these learners by following the patterns in their school performance (e.g. a drop in performance) changes in their behaviour, and through general interaction with learners (taking a personal interest and talking to learners). This process of identifying vulnerable learners is something that is systematised in the school. All teachers are briefed on the need to be aware of learners exhibiting signs of neglect or difficult behaviours. Identifying vulnerable learners is seen as a role that all teachers are required to play. Once a learner is identified as being in some way vulnerable or in need of support, they are referred to the coordinator of the School Based Support Team (Mrs Dladla). She then interacts with the learner in order to try to establish the nature and source of the problem/s being faced by them.

### Keeping proper records

Once the nature of the problem is established, the case is recorded in the school Intervention Book. The details of all learners deemed to have special educational or emotional needs are recorded in this book. This record is confidential and is kept in the principal's office.

### Counselling

If possible, the principal invites the parents/guardians of vulnerable learners to her office to discuss the problem/s and the needs of the child and the support action that the SBST proposes to implement (e.g. referral to the school counselling committee, referral for external specialised counselling, or medical referral, etc). The proposed course of action is recorded in this book and all subsequent interventions are also recorded – this includes providing a detailed account of the nature of the action or intervention, who is responsible for it and when and how often the action is taken.

### Tracking the learner's progress

The learner's progress is carefully tracked, so that the principal can see to it that the learner's needs are being met. The principal and SBST Coordinator schedule regular reviews of the cases recorded in the Intervention Book.

### Confidentiality

Mrs Dladla notes that client confidentiality is a very important element of counselling. Reporting on learners' progress has to be carefully managed. The amount of detail discussed depends on the nature of the case – if the case is of a more generic nature e.g. a learning difficulty, a number of teachers may participate. However, if the case pertains to a child's HIV status or deals with issues of abuse which are highly confidential, Mrs Dladla may provide only a general sense of the child's progress without revealing any specifics.

## CASE STUDY 13 – SCHOOL-BASED COUNSELLING FOR LEARNERS

### A sick bay and a space for counselling

A dedicated room with a bed and a place for storing the medical aid kit and other equipment was established in the school. This room is also used for counselling services. This ensures privacy during counselling.

### A referral system

An important aspect of the counselling programme at Zwelitsha is the fact that the school has been able to set up a referral system. For instance, through the regional South African Social Services Agency office, specialised psychotherapy may be organised for those learners who need it.

### School links with the local clinic and nearby hospitals

The principal and deputy have established support linkages with the local clinic. A trained nurse from the local clinic visits the school regularly and assists in identifying learners who need special medical attention. She also provides support to the SBST. The nurse brings health education resources like posters and pamphlets and helps in disseminating information to learners.

Links have also been established with some of the state hospitals in Port Elizabeth. Here the principal and deputy have managed to ensure that very needy learners are able to access free medical care and medication. By establishing relations with particular doctors, HIV+ learners receive expert advice on diet and generally on how best to manage their health at school and at home.



**Having a School-based Support Team (SBST) to identify and assist with support for OVC is a requirement set out in the National Education Policy on HIV/AIDS for Learners and Educators in Public Schools (DoE: 1999)<sup>2</sup>**



## Comment

*Zwelitsha Primary School is a good example of a school in which a culture of caring and support has been developed. The starting place for this is the vision that the school has of itself as a site of caring, a vision that has systematically been translated into action by the principal, the SMT and the SGB working together. Secondly, the leadership of this school has been able to communicate the vision to the teachers and parents of their school community and by so doing, secure their buy-in and their support. Thirdly, the SMT and SGB and its subcommittee, the School Based Support Team have built on and strengthened the efficacy of their own existing resources and expertise by making links with outside organisations - the clinic, hospitals and counselling services. Finally, all the components of this support system are carefully managed by those entrusted with the management and leadership of the school. Have you noticed the principal and deputy principal's involvement in making key links and monitoring the progress of learners who need support?*

*The teachers at Zwelitsha are required to be alert to learners who show signs and symptoms of abuse, stress, hunger, ill health or any other barriers to learning that may require special intervention. This practice has gone a long way in helping to identify learners with problems early so that measures to mitigate the effects of various problems on learning can be taken early enough. The teachers work closely with the School Based Support Team which is responsible for following through on the various support actions required.*

*It is interesting to note how Zwelitsha used the 1999 DoE policy on HIV and AIDS to help set up the structures and systems designed to respond to the needs of their learners, in particular those affected by HIV and AIDS. The policy requires that the SGB set up, as one of its sub-committees, the School Based Support Team, to support vulnerable learners.*

*Having a system not only for identifying vulnerable learners but for recording, tracking and updating information on learners and supportive interventions and progress made, is a key aspect of good management. The use of a confidential Intervention Book at Zwelitsha to document and record any concerns regarding vulnerable children is a simple, cheap and yet powerful management tool that helps with the sort of record keeping that enables good management. Another positive feature of the care system at Zwelitsha is the conscious effort that the principal and her deputy put into communicating with staff and parents, thus keeping them involved in all processes, and eliciting their support.*

*There are many benefits of having clear management processes like those described in the Case Study 13. Firstly, they enable the school to provide regular support for vulnerable learners. Secondly, they protect teachers from feeling overwhelmed. Thirdly the processes also ensure effective referrals and professional help. The greatest benefit, however, is that a well managed 'care system' nurtures caring relationships among teachers and learners (as well as their families), and this in turn builds a more caring culture in the school.*



The main purpose for collecting, storing and processing information is to promote proper planning.

## Confidentiality and care

From our research it is clear that the issue of confidentiality is a complex one. On the one hand we came across those who were anxious that what they had said in confidence would not be respected, and, on the other, we came across those who almost seem to use the issue of confidentiality as an excuse for not getting involved.

We found some situations where learners and teachers had negative feelings about offering counselling at school level. They said they would not like to talk about their problems at school, because they saw schools as hotbeds of gossip. This made us realise that gossip was a problem and that it can make learners who disclose their problems become more vulnerable than before. This is especially true when learners' problems (e.g. like HIV in the family) feed prejudice and discrimination in the school.

At the same time, we also came across school principals and teachers who said that they were reluctant to approach learners and their families, even when they had observed that the learners were struggling and thought that they may be affected by HIV and AIDS, because they were worried that by so doing, they would be breaking confidentiality. However, concerns about confidentiality should not be a reason for not getting involved or for not supporting vulnerable learners.

If we want schools to offer effective counselling support for vulnerable learners, we need to ensure that vulnerable learners are approached and supported, but that at the same time, confidentiality is respected. We need to look at how information is managed at school level. We need to ensure that principals or those entrusted with sensitive information, can ensure confidentiality.



Silence around HIV and AIDS fuels stigma



### Activity 3 Confidentiality is about managing information

Read through the above Case Study 13 (Activity 2) again and think about how information is managed at the Zwelitsha Primary School.

1. Do you think the approach at Zwelitsha ensures confidentiality?
2. What else do you think the principal could do?
3. When do you think it is important to break confidentiality?
4. How should such a situation be managed so it does not undermine the trust learners have in the school?

## Comment

*When children talk to teachers about their problems, this should be kept confidential. This means the teacher cannot talk about it to anybody else without the learner's permission. If teachers want to report a learner's problem to the principal or a school-based counselling committee, for example, they must tell the learner what they are planning to do.*

*At Zwelitsha the principal tried to keep information confidential by keeping the Intervention Book in her office, so not everybody could get to it. Also, she tried to ensure confidentiality by keeping the circle of people who would work with the confidential information small. While all teachers were asked to look out for vulnerable learners, only Mrs Dladla interviewed them about their problems and only Mrs Dladla and the principal knew what was in the Intervention Book.*

*Another thing the principal could do is to challenge people who gossip at the school. If teachers gossip in the staffroom, the issue of gossip should be addressed and stopped. If learners gossip the matter also needs to be properly addressed. It would help to talk to the whole school about why gossip is harmful and how it can destroy trust. It may be a good idea to include the issue of gossip in your school code of conduct so that everybody is made aware of it.*

*Some schools use a post box into which learners can drop a note (even anonymously) to let teachers or the principal know about their problems in a safe and confidential way. Once a week a designated teacher or the principal opens the box and reads the notes. They know that the information has to be kept confidential and that they are tasked with addressing or referring the problem to the appropriate person or organisation for help.*

*There are times, when teachers or counsellors feel they need to break confidentiality. This can happen, for example, when learners are abused or threaten to hurt themselves. In such a case teachers must tell learners that they have to break confidentiality and explain to the learners why. The teacher must make sure the learner is safe and protected, when the information is disclosed. Confidentiality is therefore an important feature of any counselling initiative at any school. It builds trust in the school. It also allows learners to be honest about their problems and this in turn makes it easier for the school to come up with an effective and caring response.*

## Finding external help with counselling

Not all principals will have skilled and dedicated teachers like Mrs Dlada on their staff. Many schools that try to offer basic counselling find that it is not effective, because confidentiality and trust are low, or because it is done only on an informal basis, without proper training, resources and time. While it is true that all teachers can support learners emotionally by being sympathetic listeners, there are many cases in which learners need more sustained support. Children who are traumatised or grieving, need more than a kind ear. As we have said before, if teachers have to contain emotional trauma without proper training, they might unintentionally make things worse if they respond in an inappropriate way. Also, they themselves might become traumatised and overwhelmed.

These difficulties, however, do not mean that teachers cannot set up a 'care system' and offer systematic counselling at school. What it does mean, however, is that schools that do not have skilled counsellors among their staff or parents will need to set up a support network that brings these skills into the school. The experience of Oxford Primary School offers us insights into how this can be done. It is an example of how a caring and proactive school principal set up a counselling partnership with a professional organisation outside of the school.



### Activity 4 Harnessing professional skills

As you read the following case study about Oxford Girls' Primary School, take note of how the principal manages the counselling service at her school.

1. How is she harnessing professional skills in the community to benefit her school?
2. What can you learn from her experience?
3. If you reflect on Case Studies 13 and 14, what common lessons can you see?

We have discussed Oxford Primary earlier on in this guide in relation to both nutrition and aftercare support strategies. We will now look at how the principal and staff at this school manage counselling support.

### CASE STUDY 14 – MAKING LINKS, SETTING UP COUNSELLING SUPPORT WITH AN EXTERNAL ORGANISATION

We have previously noted that **Oxford Girls' Primary School** has a large number of vulnerable and traumatised children among their learners. Many of the learners are affected by HIV and AIDS and a large number are refugees. The principal realised that even though a number of the teachers had Life Skills training, they did not have the skills to support the children in their psychological needs. The principal therefore carefully investigated organisations that offer counselling services in the areas that are in close proximity to her school and identified an organisation that would assist her - the Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre (JPCCC). She then approached this non profit organisation with the proposal of working together and a contractual agreement with the JPCCC was set up. The precise nature of the services to be offered is described in a contractual agreement. It includes:

- A description of the JPCCC counsellors and their skills
- The professional supervision of the counsellors
- The day, time and duration of the weekly visits
- The nature of the service offered
- Confidentiality
- How feedback to the principal and staff would be managed
- The cost of services
- Who would pay for additional costs
- Duration of the contract
- The school's input into the service.

The school took responsibility for identifying and referring children to the counselling service and for fundraising for the service. The principal also took responsibility for communicating with the parents and the children's caregivers about the need for the counselling support service, thus securing the parents' buy-in and support.

The professional counsellors in turn agreed to come to the school to do the counselling and to remain accountable to the principal for their work. Their regular feedback and advice helped not only the children, but also the teachers to cope with the high incidence of trauma at the school. When the principal decided to look for a professional counselling service, she was not happy to simply 'hand over' the children to outside counsellors. She understood that the school was the site of care and support in the children's lives and therefore made sure that the work of the outside service provider was managed as part of the school's systematic care response.

## Comment

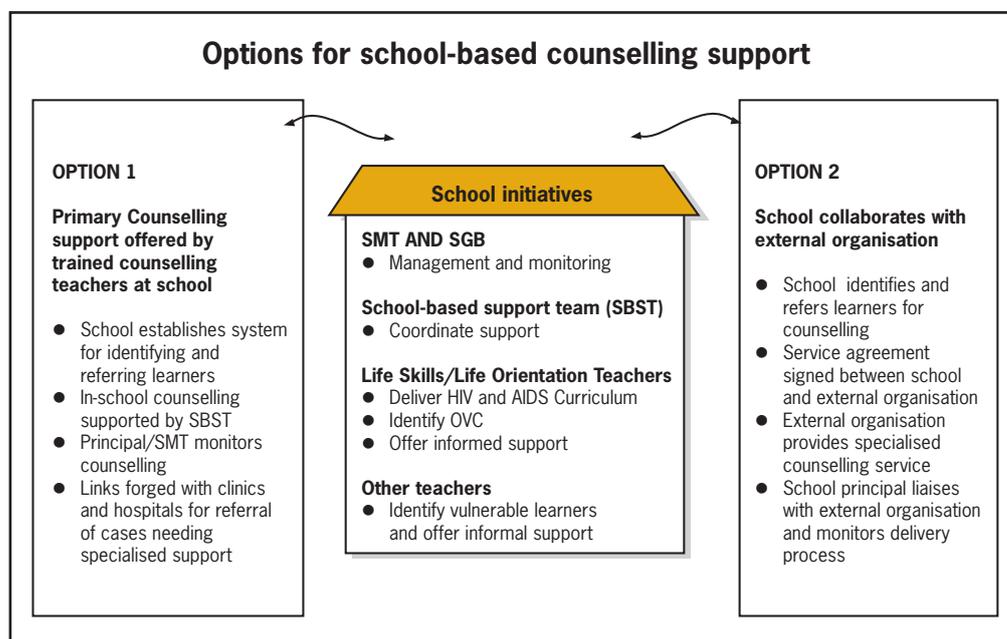
*The case of Oxford Girls' Primary School is another good example of the difference that strong leadership can make. The principal's proactive leadership and good management are critical for setting up partnerships with various outside organisations such as the professional counselling service in this case. This partnership comes with a clear contract that allows the principal to present the needs of the school and to receive feedback on the learner's progress. In this way the contract also becomes a tool for the principal to monitor what the external provider is actually doing.*

*The first lesson is that outside help is most useful when a good match exists between the needs of the school and the services offered by the external provider. The second lesson we draw from the Oxford School experience is that principals need to be realistic about the capacity for counselling among the teachers at their school. While general counselling skills are useful for all teachers and support the basic pastoral role that all teachers are expected to play, these skills do not turn them into professional counsellors overnight. It takes a long time to train as a counsellor and all counsellors need to be professionally supervised in their work. Both Zwelitsha and Oxford show us that school-level counselling needs a lot of resources, including time for administration and feedback, space and time for counselling sessions, a budget for professional fees, as well as physical resources such as a user friendly, quiet room in which to conduct counselling confidentially. The third lesson here is that networking is vital for an effective and sustainable counselling service offered by a school. Finally, both schools can teach us a fourth lesson. Counselling at school level is most effective if it is embedded in a wider and systematic care response. In both schools the care systems were proactively managed by the school principal, who promoted a pastoral culture at the school.*



**While the counselling service at Oxford Girls' Primary is effectively outsourced, the school still remains in control of the nature and quality of the service offered to them.**

The experiences of Zwelitsha and Oxford Primary, although both located in very different contexts, show that it is possible to provide some level of counselling at the school. They also show that this is most effective, if the relevant skills and processes are in place. It is therefore advisable for principals and SMTs to carefully analyse the capacity of their systems and their staff, before making any decisions about how best to offer a counselling service at their school.



### Which psycho-social support strategy is suitable for your school?

The two options above are derived from the two case studies that we have examined in this unit. It is important to note that they are not intended to be mutually exclusive. Depending on the context that your school is located in, you might find yourself more easily able to implement one or the other. However, even though Option 1 is largely driven by the in-house counselling capacity of the school, it does also make use of assistance from external specialist organisations. Equally while Options 2 is primarily reliant on specialist input from an external organisation, the principal and Life Skills/Life Orientation teachers do also engage with some basic aspects of counselling and play a key role in managing the external provider. You will therefore need to develop a counselling strategy, selecting the elements that best suit your needs and context.

As in the previous units, where you were required to start thinking about how to implement a strategy for dealing with nutrition or aftercare, the purpose of the following activity is to get you assess your own context carefully and to start thinking about relevant options for implementing a counselling service. However the detailed planning will happen when you engage with Unit 8 in which all the various aspects of supporting vulnerable learners come together in a school care and support plan.

**ACTIVITY****Activity 5**  
**Identify a counselling strategy for your school**

The challenge for you and your management team is to come up with ideas for a workable counselling strategy. This is essentially an initial planning activity that requires you to assess your current situation: You need to assess “ how big the problem is”: how many vulnerable learners are there in your school and how many are in need of counselling? You need to establish what resources, both human and other, you already have and identify what additional resources your school may need to establish a well run counselling programme. You also need to assess what processes and procedures are already in place and how you can strengthen them if necessary.

**TOOLKIT****Tool 25**  
**What kind of counselling service can your school offer?**

This tool will assist you to do a systematic assessment of your current situation and an analysis of the elements that you would need to introduce in order to enhance your current offering or to establish a counselling service from scratch, if needs be.

**Comment**

*Before you even consider counselling support it is necessary to examine the nature and the scope of the challenge of providing such support at your school. How many vulnerable learners do you have at your school? How do you establish whether they are need counselling or not? What are their most urgent needs? What are the implications of setting up, managing and maintaining such a programme? The examples you looked in this unit will have given you a good idea of what is involved.*

*A good starting point may be to think about how best to draw in the support of the parents and community representatives on your SGB. You need to strategise around how to establish, or strengthen (if necessary) the capacity of your School- Based Support Team (SBST) whose responsibility it is to facilitate support to vulnerable learners. Discuss with your SMT the processes and procedure that the (SBST) should follow. What will your role as principal be? What role can other members of the SMT play?*

*The SBST need to be encouraged to forge links with relevant government or non government organisations in your area, such as clinics, hospitals, the regional South African Social Services Agency (SASSA) and church-based organisations that may have some counselling facility.*

*Your choice of counselling option is dependent to a large extent on the environment in which your school is located and the capacity for counselling in your school. Find out what exists in your area. If there are already any existing counselling organisations in or around the area where your school is situated you may decide that it would be beneficial to look for ways of accessing the services they provide. If no counselling support exists, but you do have one or more teachers who have counselling qualifications, you would need to develop your strategy around how best to maximise the use of their skills. If neither is an option, you may need to think about identifying one or more staff members to undergo training in this field.*

You may not necessarily be able to implement a full counselling programme with skilled counsellors and a referral system at once. As discussed in previous units, an incremental approach may be used. You can build up the counselling programme gradually, possibly starting with a discussion with teachers on how to identify vulnerable learners and the importance of confidentiality. Then establish a simple system for recording and tracking vulnerable learners. Establish a SBST that can refer learners to a state clinic or hospital and so on.

You can start with a few activities that you can manage easily with resources that you are assured of. At the same time, keep your eye on the big picture and keep expanding the range of support and services until you have an integrated system in place. Do not become complacent by sticking with a programme that offers minimum support.

### **Comment**

*From the many school visits in this study we concluded that schools seem to have a greater capacity for offering counselling if the culture of care in the school is strong. It is carried both by the school's good intentions (expressed through values and vision), and the day-to-day behaviours of teachers and learners at the school. A caring spirit among the staff, therefore, is a great strength. We have also found that school management and teachers who have good listening skills, who keep their eyes and hearts open, and who are able to plan and implement projects are an asset to a school.*

*Counselling aims to help people cope better with situations they are facing. This is true for counselling children and young people too. This involves helping the child to cope with their emotions and feelings and to help them make positive choices and decisions. Doing this involves:*

- *Establishing a relationship with the child*
- *Helping the child tell their story*
- *Listening carefully*
- *Providing correct information*
- *Helping the child make informed decisions*
- *Helping the child recognise and build on their strengths*
- *Helping the child develop a positive attitude to life.*

*When teachers are motivated and caring, they will find many opportunities to make a difference in the lives of vulnerable learners. They will look for chances to learn more about counselling or connect with counselling organisations such as Childline for support. Many service providers are very aware of the plight of vulnerable children and will readily enter into service contracts with schools to support them.*

*Unfortunately, we have also seen many examples of schools in which, despite the best intentions, nothing actually happened because people spent a lot of time talking, but in the end nobody got around to doing anything about their concerns. Too much talk and lack of strong management undermines the trust vulnerable learners may have in the systems the school is trying to create. Often, another weakness is the lack of confidence and skills among staff and parents who are not used to working with emotional needs.*

*Finally, the two biggest threats to setting up counselling initiatives seem to be like two sides of the same coin. On the one side we have the low level of trust in school communities, and on the other side, apathy or lack of involvement under the guise of not wanting to break confidentiality. The first – low levels of trust – is made worse by gossip that feeds stigma and discrimination. The second, hiding behind the notion of not breaking confidentiality, perpetuates the silence and stigma, especially regarding HIV and AIDS.*

*School principals will have a hard time setting up an effective counselling initiative if they do not at the same time open up discussion about these two key issues and try to limit the harm that comes from these attitudes.*



**Silence around HIV and AIDS fuels stigma and perpetuates discrimination**

## Establishing and maintaining a caring culture

It is helpful to remember that the caring culture of a school is not determined by one-off projects or interventions, but rather by the daily routines and interactions, when nobody is watching. In the caring schools we visited, teachers and learners listened to one another respectfully in all daily interactions. Gossip was not condoned. Teachers and learners cared enough to approach a child or a teacher who was clearly distressed. Rules were respected and enforced. There was also a commitment to the greater good of the community. This was largely expressed in the way in which children were treated, not as learning machines, but as precious individuals, even if they had difficult lives. The acceptance of vulnerable children and generosity toward them in daily interactions changed the learning environment of the schools. They were experienced as warm and hopeful places, despite the many real limitations and problems they faced. A counselling initiative worked best in a culture of care, but the reverse also seemed true. Counselling and other care initiatives were of benefit not only to vulnerable children. They also were excellent ways of building up the school's resilience and compassion, making them stronger from within.

Andy Dawes<sup>3</sup>, well known for his work on the impact of HIV and AIDS on the lives of children suggests that, though some children may need special counselling, the broader challenge of psycho-social support for children is not a matter for specialists: *Rather it lies in creating school environments within which children feel safe and supported, rather than excluded and vulnerable.*



### Tool 26

#### Towards creating a safe and supportive school environment

This tool provides some basic guidelines that can help your teachers to build up a trusting and safe relationship, in which learners feel free to share their anxieties.

## Key points

In this unit we have seen that psycho-social support in the form of counselling is vital to supporting successful learning. A learner's ability to participate fully in learning hinges as much on their emotional sense of well being as it does on their physical well being. We have therefore seen that an integrated and holistic approach to the support of vulnerable learners is important.

The two counselling initiatives we examined revealed the different ways in which counselling programmes can be set up and managed. We looked at key support activities that need to be institutionalised, from informal support offered by individual teachers to specialised counseling offered by qualified counsellors and psychologists. We noted the key roles and responsibilities of school management and leadership (the principal, SMT, SGB and its committees such as the School Based Support Team) in facilitating and monitoring delivery of any school counselling programme. We also examined the nature of the support provided by external organisations such as state clinics and hospitals, the South African Social Services Agency (SASSA) and NGOs offering counselling like the Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre (JPCCC).

### In Unit 7 we explored:

- What the benefits of counselling support for learners are.
- What types of counselling support strategies can be organised.
- What is involved in managing school-based counselling programmes.
- What counselling strategy is likely to be most suitable for your school.

### Some important insights we gained:

1. School-based counselling requires professional skill. This poses a challenge for SMTs to ensure that staff with adequate skills are employed or that specialist training is organised to up-skill at least one or two staff members or that the services of one or more professional counsellors are bought in. Each of these has its own pros and cons and each option will have its own resource requirements and management implications. These will need to be carefully weighed up by the SMT.
2. Counselling is most effective if it is part of a larger system of care. As has been established in this guide, the support and care of vulnerable learners needs to be approached in an integrated and holistic way to be effective. Counselling as a support strategy needs to involve proper planning, accurate information collection and management, coordination and monitoring of counselling activities.

3. Counselling as a support strategy ideally needs to be linked to learners' academic progress as well as to other aspects of support, such as the school aftercare programme (if one exists).
4. Principals and SMTs must ensure confidentiality during counselling. Gossip needs to be stopped. At the same time using the notion of confidentiality or the issue of the sensitivities around HIV and AIDS as an excuse for not acting also needs to be urgently addressed – both these attitudes fuel stigma and discrimination.
5. Principals need to carefully assess the capacity of their systems and their staff before setting up a counselling service at the school. Proper planning must take place. This includes thinking about the necessary funding to support your counselling strategy.

