

SW 499: Special Topics
Working with At-Risk Youth
Spring 2008

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Office: HH 141
Office Hrs. Tues. 2:00-3:00 pm; Thurs. 1:00-2:00 pm
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I. Course Purpose: The purpose of this course is to provide an overview of the risk and protective factors that affect the resilience of adolescent youth. In addition to building on the ecological model of understanding context as a way of viewing social problems and personal troubles, this course will cover evidence-based practice interventions from the fields of mental health and social prevention. This course is designed to build on SW 360, 361, and SW 400. As an elective, it will be of interest to those who hope to work in the field of child welfare and adolescents in the juvenile justice and mental health systems. The course is designed as a seminar with focused discussion on selected topics. Guest speakers as well as group field trips to prevention and treatment centers will be scheduled.

II. Texts:

McWhirter, J., B. McWhirter, et. al. (2007) *At Risk Youth: A Comprehensive Response for Counselors, Teachers, Psychologists, and Human Services Professionals*. Belmont CA: Thomson.

III. Course Objectives

A. Values

1. To increase appreciation for the period of adolescence as a risk factor for problem behaviors
2. To increase awareness of how sexual orientation, race, gender and poverty affect life chances and opportunities
3. To stimulate advocacy and responsible policy in meeting the problems of at-risk youth
4. To value the efforts of those who work with adolescents both within and outside the profession
5. To offer hope to youth and families who are coping with difficult life situations, such as school failure, poverty, or family chaos
6. To appreciate the role of other professionals who work with at-risk youth

B. Knowledge

1. To increase through scholarly readings the societal and personal factors that contributes to risk
2. To be conversant with high-risk vs. low-risk youth skills and competence
3. To be familiar with educational structures that lower or increase risk for youth

4. To understand how family dynamics contributes to risk or act as protective factors for youth
5. To be familiar with the literature on major at-risk categories: substance abuse, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, delinquency and gang affiliation, as well as the mental health issues of depression and suicide
6. To understand the legal and ethical issues in criminal and juvenile law

C. Skills

1. To critically evaluate programs and interventions claiming to be based on best or promising practices
2. To be able to reflect on ethical dilemmas and bias in their practice with at-risk youth
3. To refer clients and families to ethical and evidence-based programs that reduces risk and increase protective factors for at-risk youth and families
4. To apply evidence-based interventions such as Motivational Interviewing in their work with at-risk youth and their families
5. To work collaboratively with other professionals such as psychologists and lawyers who are involved with at-risk youth

D. Outcomes

1. To promote ethical and evidence-based practice with at-risk youth
2. To stimulate critical thinking about intervention and prevention policies and programs
3. To engage in thoughtful discussions and reflection in a seminar format

IV. Course Outline

I. Unit One: The Ecology of Problems

- The At-Risk Tree
- Societal Factors that Contribute to Risk
- Legal and Ethical Issues in Criminal and Juvenile Law

II. Unit Two: Families, Schools, and Skills

- Families of LGBT Youth
- Family Problems and Problem Families
- Educational Structures: Schools and Classrooms
- High-Risk vs Low-Risk Youth Skills and Competence

III. Unit Three: At-Risk Categories

- School Drop-out and School Failure
- Specific Intervention Strategies Focused on School Dropout
- Comprehensive-Competency Based Guidance
- Solution Focused Counseling

At-Risk Categories Continued

- Substance Use and Addiction
- Student Assistance Programs

- Motivational Interviewing

At-Risk Categories Continued

- Delinquency and Youth Gangs
- Profiling, Predicting, and Preventing
- Reality Therapy

At-Risk Categories Continued

- Youth Suicide and Suicide Motivation
- Forms of Depression
- Medication and Side Effects
- Assessment Interviews and Crisis Management and Response

IV: Unit Four: Prevention and Intervention Approaches

- A Comprehensive Early Intervention/Treatment Framework
- Antibullying Interventions
- Group-Oriented Psychological Education

V. Unit Five: Life Skills Competencies

- Basic Skills of Optimism and Cognitive Restructuring
- Connectedness: Teaching Interpersonal Communication Skills
- Increasing Coping: Relaxation and Visualization
- Self-Management and Self-Control

VI. Unit Six: Peers and Peer Support Networks

- Peer Mediation and Facilitation
- Peer Tutoring
- Peer Advocacy: Straight/Gay Alliances

VII. Unit Seven: Family Interventions

- The Family Checkup
- Multisystemic Therapy
- Multidimensional Foster Care
- Parent Care and Parent Support Groups

VII. Unit Eight: Conclusions and Future Directions for Research, Policy, and Practice

V. Course Assignments:

1. Seminar participation and response (50%)

This class will be conducted using a seminar format in which all of us will be responsible for actively reading and thinking about the topic. For each week's reading, you are to turn in a two-page typed response to the readings and at least two discussion questions for the seminar group to consider. You may elect to write your responses informally as reflections, or more formally as critiques, or some combination of the two. Your responses will be graded as pass/fail. To receive credit your papers must be turned at the scheduled seminar meeting.

2. Portfolio Assignment: Reflection of Professional Use of Self in Working with Adolescents (25%)

This exercise will help you reflect on a concern you may have about working with adolescents and at-risk youth. This concern might be an ethical dilemma you have had to face with one of your cases, an issue related to positive or negative transference you have experienced with an adolescent, or it may relate to an explicit or implicit bias you worry will influence your decision or judgments in working with adolescents. Sometimes referred to as conscious-use-of self, the ability to reflect and monitor our reactions is critical to the practice of social work. Write a 3- 4 page paper on your issue or concern. Summarize your case situation or issue and briefly discuss what you have learned about yourself in this exercise. How will the knowledge gained from this assignment change the way you think or work with adolescents in the future? Due: March 13th.

3. Field Observation (25%)

During the semester you will have many opportunities to visit a program or listen to a presentation by a professional working with at-risk youth. Select one of the field observation/presentation experiences and write a 3-4 page paper on your selection. Give a brief summary of your observations about the program; what you learned about the knowledge and skill needed to work with this group; and your thoughts about social policy changes that would improve the lives of at-risk youth. Due: May 1st.

VI. GRADING

Please note that this course is listed as Credit/No Credit and no letter grade will be submitted or recorded. To receive a grade of Credit all work submitted must meet the minimum standard of a C which according to the undergraduate bulletin ranges from 74-76 %. Please refer to the University Catalogue for more information.

VII. Course Calendar (subject to change by the instructor)*

Unit 1: The Ecology of Problems

January 31	The At-risk Model	Text, Chapter 1 & 2
TBA	The Legal Context	Blueprint for Change (Handout) Text, Chapter 3 Tilisha Martin, MSW/JD

Unit 2: Families, Schools, and Skills

February 14	Family Problems and Problem Families	Text, Chapter 4 and 5
February 28/29	Schools and Education:	Text, Chapter 6 and 7 Terry Heinlin, MSW Sunset High School

Unit 3: At-risk Categories

Mar. 13	Substance Use and Addiction	Text, Chapter 8
March 14	Delinquency/Gangs	Text, Chapter 10 Guest Speaker IV-E Workshop
March 27	Mental Health/Suicide	Text, Chapter 11
March 31-April 4	Spring Break	

Unit 4: Prevention, Intervention, and Treatment Approaches

April 17	Cognitive-Behavioral Strategies Family Interventions	Text, Chapter 13 & 15
April	Peer Interventions	Text, Chapter 14 Field Trip to San Pasquel Academy TBA
May 1	Summary and Future Directions	

