



## **International Network for School Social Work**

**<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>**

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## **Electronic Newsletter March 2009**

### **Meet the school social workers of Liechtenstein**



The web site **Schulsozialarbeit Liechtenstein** introduces the five school social workers of Liechtenstein. Expect more information in a future newsletter about the work that Dominik Sele, Marcel Roth, Corinne Bänziger, Harald Kreuzer and Hansjörg Frick are doing in six secondary schools. <http://www.schulsozialarbeit.li/index.php?id=4>

## **April Fools Day**

April 1 is observed in many countries with practical jokes and tricks perpetrated on family, friends, teachers and classmates to embarrass the victim. School social workers have the opportunity to study these interactions on Wednesday and to understand their meaning, ranging from gentle fun to ridicule to outright harassment. April Fools Day shows how humor and hostility are often connected. However fun, laughter, jokes and silliness are an important part of children's development and part of good mental health. When school social workers use these aspects of humor, they have enormous diagnostic and therapeutic potential in the serious business of helping school children. Humor helps to establish rapport, relaxes tension, teaches coping skills and helps in assessing a child's problems and strengths.

### **Establishing rapport**

Games and play are recognized ways of establishing rapport when working with children. Jokes, laughter and humor are aspects of play. Using them to establish rapport helps the child see that visiting the social worker is not threatening, but fun.

### **Relaxing tension**

Talking about problems with a social worker can be even more anxiety provoking for children than for adults, especially when the child did not initiate the contact. A light-hearted approach involving play, clowning and telling jokes can reduce the tension and make a relaxed atmosphere for discussion of problems. Clowning can be a part of role-play in which difficult topics are made more palatable. Telling jokes at the end of a session can be a good tension breaker, especially when the child is returning immediately to the classroom.

### **Teaching coping skills**

People often use humor creatively to cope with difficult situations and to laugh about the problem. Laughing at one's problems and the ability to laugh at oneself are positive coping skills. Humorous metaphors can send a child a therapeutic message that he does not want to hear. For example, for the child who cannot keep quiet in the classroom, playfully sewing a make-believe zipper in his mouth can help him remember to zip it up when necessary.

### **Assessing children's issues**

A child's sense of humor helps in assessing his abilities and problems. For example a ten year old who cannot tell a joke or does not get the point may have a language deficiency or be depressed. Children who are witty show strong cognitive ability and their sense of humor can be used therapeutically. The jokes that children tell often relate directly to their problems and so give the social worker insights into the child's world.

### **Dangers of using humor**

Although humor is a rich therapeutic tool, it is often avoided because of its destructive potential. It is true that humor is frequently a manifestation of human's destructive tendencies. Most humor is either obscene or hostile. There is a danger of using humor in a way that is harmful to the child, for example teasing when the child cannot handle it, or to cover the social worker's own insecurities. However, school social workers can find types of humor that are more innocent or are reasonably mild, and must examine the purpose and outcome of using humor to make sure that it is productive. In spite of the dangers, humor and laughter are important parts of childhood and school social workers should use them with children.

### **Happy April Fools Day**

Humor is a way of coping, an escape, offers insights, reduces anxiety and expresses mastery of life's problems. Spring is a good time to celebrate all such positive parts of life. So enjoy this historic news footage from the British Broadcasting Corporation about the bumper spaghetti harvest in Switzerland in the spring of 1957 following a mild winter. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyUvNnmFtgI>