GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE:

COUNSELLING SERVICES AT ACS INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

ACS INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

UNDERSTANDING THE SCHOOL COUNSELLOR'S ROLE

School counsellors are part of a wider team of educational professionals devoted to the personal and academic success of all students. Through a culturally competent lens, the professional school counsellor serves as a leader, an assertive advocate for all students, a consultant to families and educators, and a collaborator to promote equity and access by connecting school counselling to the School's purpose, vision, and values. Counsellors at ACS have appropriate qualifications and experience to lead the design, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive school counselling programme. This programme supports all students' academic, personal, and social development while promoting success and a safe learning environment.

This programme is grounded in the ISCA (International School Counsellor Association) International Model, which emphasizes the counsellor's role as a leader, advocate, and collaborator. This model outlines a comprehensive approach that is both proactive and preventative, aiming to equip students with the knowledge, mindsets, and skills to navigate developmental challenges before they escalate. It's a structured approach that ensures school counselling services are systematic, data-driven, and accessible to every student, not just those in crisis.

THE SCHOOL COUNSELLOR'S ROLE WITHIN THE ACS EARLY HELP FRAMEWORK

At ACS, the school counsellor's role is a key component of our Early Help offer—a system designed to provide intervention and support the moment an issue emerges. This approach is a short-term intervention designed to enhance a family's resilience and prevent concerns from worsening. It operates on the principle that providing support early on can prevent the need for more intensive, long-term interventions later.

ACS school counsellors, as part of the Divisional Counselling Support Teams, collaborate with teachers and parents to provide targeted support. Their primary counselling focus is on situational and short-term needs related to social and emotional wellbeing. Counsellors also serve an important role as points of contact and continuity for students with longer-term needs, for example by helping to coordinate support with families and external medical and mental health professionals and agencies.

School counsellors offer all students social/emotional and academic support through a variety of delivery methods, including individual conversations, small group support, or classroom instruction. Counsellors also liaise with Advisory and PSHE programme leads as a subject matter expert on social, emotional and mental health.

UNDERSTANDING THE SCHOOL COUNSELLOR'S ROLE

Each school counsellor works with a specific caseload of students within a flexible and collaborative framework, allowing them to build strong relationships and a deep understanding of student needs.

Common themes addressed by our counsellors include:

- Anxiety and stress, particularly around academic pressure, exams, or social situations.
- Friendship challenges and social skills, helping students navigate peer relationships and resolve conflicts constructively.
- Concerns related to school or family transitions, such as moving to a new country, school, or grade level.
- Self-image and bullying, fostering self-esteem and providing strategies for dealing with harmful behaviors.
- General wellbeing/mental health (supporting students in areas like building resilience, healthy coping mechanisms, practicing social skills).

At ACS, all school counsellors are trained as Deputy Designated Safeguarding Leads (DDSL). In this capacity, counsellors support the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) to ensure the safety and well-being of all students. They share the responsibility of implementing and upholding our safeguarding policies and procedures, working closely with the DSL to create a safe environment for all children and young people.

School counsellors play a critical role in providing short-term, solution-focused support. They also take on the responsibility of responding to crises within the family or school community by acting as part of a crisis team to ensure student safety and well-being.

In addition to school counsellors, ACS provides university counsellors who support students in developing their career aspirations and post-secondary educational opportunities.

SCHOOL COUNSELLOR SERVICES

School counsellors provide direct services to students that includes collaborating with Advisory, PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economics, and RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) teachers to deliver a core counselling curriculum with a wide range of social-emotional learning outcomes. They assist support teams with developing individual student plans for behaviour, attendance, self-management, and personal growth. Counsellors also provide indirect student services through referrals, consultation, and collaboration with both schools and community resources.

To address students' immediate and future needs, a school counsellor provides responsive services on an as-needed basis. These prevention and intervention activities can be necessitated by a range of events and conditions in students' lives, and may include:

- Individual or group counselling: This involves meeting with students individually or in small groups to address specific concerns in a safe and confidential environment. These sessions are typically brief and focused on developing coping strategies and problem-solving skills.
- Consultation with parents: This collaborative process allows counsellors to share insights and strategies for supporting a student's success. It's a critical way to ensure a consistent support system for the student both at home and at school.
- Peer learning and support: counsellors may facilitate peer-led support groups or deliver educational content to students on topics like mental health awareness, stress management, or healthy relationships.
- Intervention and advocacy: This involves identifying school-wide issues and working with administrators and teachers to implement changes that benefit all students, but especially students who may be vulnerable or need ongoing low-level support in order to thrive at school.

HOW THE SCHOOL COUNSELLOR'S ROLE DIFFERS FROM THERAPEUTIC COUNSELLING

While a school counsellor may provide "counselling" in the school setting, their role is fundamentally different from a licensed therapeutic counsellor or psychologist in a clinical setting.

Aspect of the Role	School counsellor	Therapeutic counsellor (in a clinical setting)
Primary Focus	Proactive and developmental. The focus is on educational and personal growth, prevention, and short-term intervention.	Reactive and clinical. The focus is on diagnosis, treatment, and long-term therapy for specific mental health disorders.
Duration of Support	Short-term and solution-focused. Support is typically provided for a limited number of sessions to help students resolve immediate concerns.	Long-term and in-depth. The therapeutic relationship is ongoing, delving into root causes of issues and providing sustained treatment.
Training & Licensure	An educator with experience and training in school counselling, often with advanced qualification/ licensure. Their knowledge and skills focus on educational systems, social and emotional learning curriculum, and developmental psychology within a school context.	A licensed mental health professional (e.g., licensed clinical social worker, psychologist, or licensed professional counsellor) with specialized training in psychotherapy and diagnosis.
Confidentiality	Follows legal and ethical standards for school settings. Information may be shared with parents, teachers, or administrators on a "need-to-know" basis to support the student's success, with specific exceptions to confidentiality when there is a risk of harm.	Adheres to strict privacy laws (e.g., HIPAA) and maintains a higher level of confidentiality, with limited exceptions related to imminent danger.

School counsellors are an integral part of the educational team, providing essential support that complements, but does not replace, the services of external mental health professionals. The school counsellor is often the first point of contact and can serve as a bridge to connecting a student with more intensive therapeutic services.

ACS facilitates access to professional therapeutic counsellors (Level 3 Counselling, a parent-paid service), and our school counsellors work closely with external counselling professionals in the best interests of our students.

CONFIDENTIALITY IN SCHOOL COUNSELLING

For a UK international school, the confidentiality of student-counsellor sessions is guided by principles that balance a child's right to privacy with the school's duty of care. These principles are known as Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines.

Gillick competency refers to the legal standard that allows a young person under the age of 16 to consent to a medical treatment or, in this case, a counselling session, without a parent's permission, if they are deemed mature and intelligent enough to understand the situation and its consequences. The Fraser guidelines are a more specific set of criteria that apply to a counsellor providing advice or treatment related to contraception and sexual health to a minor without parental consent. While both originate from a legal case about contraception, Gillick competency is now widely used in other contexts, including school counselling.

The extent of confidentiality, therefore, depends on the individual student's maturity, not just their age. Our school counsellor will always work sensitively with students, encouraging them to involve parents in the discussion in a professionally appropriate way. However, if a student demonstrates they are "Gillick competent," the counsellor may not be required to share information with parents.

Despite these guidelines, there are strict limits to confidentiality, especially in the context of an international school's duty of care. The most important limit is when a counsellor believes there is a safeguarding concern, meaning the student or someone else is at risk of serious harm or abuse. In these situations, the counsellor's primary responsibility is to ensure the child's safety, and they are legally and ethically required to break confidentiality and report their concerns to the appropriate child protection authorities, even if the student does not want them to. The school will always strive to communicate this intention to the student first. This balancing act ensures that students feel they can trust their counsellor, while also guaranteeing that their wellbeing remains the highest priority.

ACS guidelines for disclosure and information sharing are explained in detail in our Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy.

RECORD KEEPING AND COMMUNICATIONS

Counsellors maintain secure digital communications and digital records. ACS provides a dedicated counselling record management system and secure email facility. Counsellors must keep accurate and truthful records of their interactions with students. They must clearly explain what data they are collecting (and what will happen to it) in a way that children and young people can understand.

Counselling records are subject to ACS Data Protection, Data Retention, and Privacy Policies. In most cases, these records are confidential and not subject to UK GDPR Subject Access. Sharing without consent is usually not in the best interest of the child. In the UK, children from 13 years old can be consulted and provide consent to share personal data. For children younger than 13, ACS will seek parental approval.

SUPERVISION

ACS provides regular internal and external advisory clinical supervision to support school Counsellors and to ensure the quality and equity of our pastoral provision.

HOW COUNSELLORS WORK WITH THE SCHOOL'S WIDER WELLBEING TEAM

In an educational context focused on the "whole child," the school counsellor acts as a specialist, helping to shape and deliver the school's wider pastoral/ wellbeing provision. While every teacher plays a vital pastoral role in their classroom by knowing their students well, the counsellor's function is distinct and strategic. They are the foremost experts in the school on student mental health, providing a crucial and highly skilled tier of support. The counsellor's work underpins the broader pastoral program, ensuring that students with complex or acute needs receive appropriate support (and referral) that goes beyond teachers' training and responsibility.

By collaborating closely with teachers, counsellors empower them with understanding and strategic interventions that foster a supportive classroom environment and identify students who may require additional, targeted interventions. This partnership ensures that pastoral care is not a separate function but an integrated, cohesive system that holistically supports every student's academic, social, and emotional development.

Other people who work closely with counsellors in our school

- Head of School and Divisional Heads/Principals
- Designated Safeguarding Lead
- Advisory Team (including Heads of Year)
- ACS Level 3 Counsellors
- External agencies (referrals)

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When and where do counsellors meet with students?

Counsellors are available throughout the school day. They have dedicated office space to meet with students in a calm, safe environment. On request or referral, students may meet with school counsellors during scheduled classes. However, we prioritise academic wellbeing, limiting interruptions to learning by scheduling support during breaks/lunch/ independent study whenever possible. Counsellors also work with students in group and classroom settings.

How can teachers and parents make a referral to the school counsellor?

Adults who are concerned about a student's mental health and wellbeing should consult with our pastoral care staff (teachers, advisors, year group leaders, boarding resident tutor/ House Parent, school wellbeing leader, or Designated Safeguarding Lead) or discuss their concern directly with the school counsellor.

Students can always self-refer by asking to meet with their counsellor, booking an appointment, or seeking support via their weekly digital wellbeing check-in.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

Counselling services at ACS schools are informed by good practice in international contexts, with reference to

- International School Counsellors' Association International Model and Student Standards
- CASEL Framework (evidence-based practices for effective Social and Emotional Learning)
- Social and Emotional Learning and Child Self-Protection (SELCSP) Standards and Benchmarks for International Schools
- BACP Ethical Framework for Counselling Professions
- ACS Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy, and Wellbeing Strategy