

**Application of Character Development With
Students on the Autism Spectrum**

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Abstract

School counselors implement school counseling programs that serve to promote student success for all students. Character development can be an important element within school counseling programs. This article will provide a comprehensive overview of the establishment of character development in schools and within comprehensive school counseling programs. Further, a basic primer regarding students with autism spectrum disorder is presented for school counselors. In addition, a discussion provides examples of how a character development program can be applied in working with students on the autism spectrum through the use of social stories.

Keywords: school counseling programs, character development, Character Counts!, autism spectrum disorder

Application of Character Development With Students on the Autism Spectrum

School counselors design, implement, and evaluate comprehensive school counseling programs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 2003). School counseling programs promote student success by increasing students' attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to academic, career, and personal/social developmental domains (ASCA, 2012; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 2003). In addition to the development of a national model for the development of school counseling programs, ASCA has also developed 45 position statements that identify the official stance of the ASCA organization with the intention of guiding the school counseling profession (ASCA, 2018). The position statements have evolved over time and are revised every few years. ASCA's position statements include specific and separate statements for character education and students with disabilities.

According to ASCA's position statement on character education, "School counselors endorse and actively support character education programs and include them in the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program" (ASCA, 2016a, para.1). The statement also promotes the idea that all students benefit from teaching the skills necessary for positive character development. For example, the statement provides a list of activities to incorporate into a curriculum that promotes positive character development and includes topics such as decision-making, communication, conflict resolution, and helping all students develop academic, career, and social/emotional goals (ASCA, 2016a).

The ASCA position statement related to students with disabilities states: “School counselors are committed to helping all students realize their potential and meet or exceed academic standards with consideration for both the strengths and challenges resulting from disabilities and other special needs” (ASCA 216b, para.1). In it, ASCA suggests that school counselors recognize and work with students that live with various strengths and challenges. The statement includes a list of various disabilities identified by the U.S. Department of Education’s Individuals with Disabilities Act. Autism occurs first on this list. The position also indicates that the school counselors’ role in working with special needs students includes teaching school counseling curriculum lessons and helping all students achieve their full potential.

Character education is supported and promoted by ASCA as an element of a comprehensive school counseling program that school counselors can use to enhance the academic, career, and social/emotional development and success for all students. Moreover, school counselors are committed to working with students with disabilities. Students who live with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience a variety of challenges as they navigate their school experiences, particularly with regard to social interactions and complex behavioral expectations. However, many students with autism, especially those who are high functioning, seek to engage in social interactions and to modify their behavioral patterns to be more similar to their peers.

Therefore, this article will provide a comprehensive review of the literature associated with character development and the relevance of its inclusion into comprehensive school counseling programs. Additionally, this article will explore the implementation of specific components of Character Counts! through the use of a

technique commonly used with students on the autism spectrum known as social stories. While it is important and valuable to promote character development within a school counseling program for all students, it seems prudent to provide an example of utilizing character development to help students on the autism spectrum succeed and reach their full potential as they develop and accomplish their academic, career, and personal/social goals.

Character Development

The roots of moral education were established concurrently with those of the formal educational system. Aristotle devoted his ethical work to the development of virtues in human beings and how this phenomenon was enhanced due to the existence of a strong community (Molnar, 1997). This need for community became apparent in the early 19th century when Europeans began emigrating to America. The educational system was called upon to provide for children from diverse backgrounds with the character traits they would need to become good citizens.

Good citizenry was primarily taught via a teacher's personal modeling and through academic curriculum (Lickona, 1991). Initially, the Bible served as a teacher's desk reference regarding what values should be taught; however, controversy surfaced as to whose Bible should be used and which content should be emphasized. In 1826, William McGuffey developed the McGuffey Readers, which were embraced by educators throughout the country (Tatman, Edmonson, & Slate, 2009). McGuffey incorporated popular Biblical tales within curriculum, prompting children to learn about virtues. "By 1919 the *McGuffey Readers* had the largest circulation of any book in the

world next to the Bible” (Lickona, 1991, p. 7). The successful application of this publication carried on until the Great Depression.

During the time period of the Great Depression the notion that educational systems could alter society arose. A child-centered movement emerged, recognizing personal growth as a principal objective. Schools were looked upon to highlight citizenship, ethics, character, and democracy (Lickona, 1991, 1993). These concepts were integrated into the educational fabric until the onset of World War II.

Lickona (1991) noted that following World War II, the educational system attempted to espouse an idealistic view of families and communities as characterized by the popular *Norman Rockwell* view of American idealism. During this period of American idealism, education sought to teach children right from wrong and the actions and mannerisms by which one must abide to live a good life. Conformity was encouraged. The 1960s were turbulent years in U.S. history and the educational system encouraged schools to continue the constitutional concept of *separation of church and state* (Lickona, 1993). Educators were prompted to either present an academic curriculum that was morally neutral or to avoid moral education all together (Lickona, 1991, 1993). Social opinion during the 1960s not only prompted schools to continue the separation between church and state, it also prompted individuals to question the conservative values that were held by the educational system. Two predominant educational approaches were developed to determine how ethics and values should be taught in American schools. These programs included values clarification and moral dilemma discussions (Lickona, 1993).

Values clarification emphasized that teachers be nonjudgmental of students' values. During classroom discussions, no distinctions were drawn between what was right and what was wrong; values were discussed and not taught. Lawrence Kohlberg's moral dilemma discussion focused on moral reasoning. Educators utilized this approach by presenting moral conflicts, facilitating student thought, and promoting an atmosphere that stimulated personal growth and moral reasoning. "Kohlberg's cognitive focus was on moral reasoning, however it neglected behavioral and emotional components of character" (Titus, 1994, p.2). The shortcomings of both of these programs resulted in them being judged as ineffective and were consequently rather short-lived within the educational system. The confusion surrounding what constitutes an effective approach to character education may be as controversial as the terms that are utilized to define it.

The terms *moral education* and *character education* are often used interchangeably when discussing the components of producing good citizens in conjunction with producing high school graduates. These terms often spark resistance and concern. Moral education is defined as "direct and indirect intervention of the school which affects both moral behavior and the capacity to think about issues of right and wrong" (Purpel & Ryan, 1976, p. 5). The controversy surrounding this term originates from the question of whose morals are being discussed. While past programs that emphasized morals or values received much criticism, "character education advocates deliberately choose different terms to describe their efforts and goals—quite possibly to distance themselves from what they perceive as ill-conceived efforts to develop moral reasoning or clarifying values in youth" (Lockwood, 1997, p. 5). Character education is a broader term than values or morals. It allows individuals to draw their own conclusions

regarding what is right and what is wrong and act in a way that exemplifies positive citizenry.

The term *character education* is perhaps more accepted in American schools; therefore, it is likely to be developed and implemented more fully. “Character education is defined as any school-initiated program, designed in cooperation with other community institutions, to shape directly and systematically the behavior of young people by influencing explicitly the non-relativistic values believed to bring about that behavior” (Lockwood, 1997, p. 6). Allies of character education feel it is an essential element in America’s schools due to the perception of the state of society, particularly its effect on America’s youth. Advocates of character education feel that a proactive approach within the school system may reduce the problems of America’s youth. Partly due to this belief, the Character Education Partnership was established.

Character Education Partnership

The Character Education Partnership (CEP) was founded by Tom Lickona, Eric Schaps, and Catherine Lewis in 1993. It is a non-profit, non-partisan, and non-sectarian organization that advocates for effective character education programs in K-12 schools. In 1995, CEP developed the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education Programs* that form an underlying philosophical and practical foundation to build and evaluate character education programs (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2018):

1. Core values are defined, implemented, and embedded into school culture.
2. The school defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing.
3. The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to develop character.

4. The school creates a caring community.
5. The school provides students with opportunities for moral action.
6. The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them succeed.
7. The school fosters students' self-motivation.
8. All staff share the responsibility for developing, implementing, and modeling ethical character.
9. The school's character initiative has shared leadership and long-range support for continuous improvement.
10. The school engages families and community as partners in the character initiative.
11. The school assesses its implementation of character education, its culture and climate, and the character growth of students on a regular basis.

In 2014, Character Education Partnership changed its name to Character.org. According to the Lickona et al. (2018), there are many different educational-based programs that focus on character development in K-12 schools. For example, Character Counts!, Second Step, Developmental Assets, Values in Action, Character First, and Positive Action are just a few programs that focus on character development with children and adolescents (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Character.org, n.d.; Search Institute, 2017). School counselors can determine a character program to be incorporated into their school counseling program. The selection of a character development program may be decided based upon philosophy of the school, district, or state guidelines. There is no common practice or *best* character development program and counselors must determine which program meets the needs of their students and integrates well with the existing school counseling program mission and philosophy. Character Counts! is a

common and widely used character development program that is presented here as an example of a character development program that can be a useful element of a comprehensive school counseling program.

Character Counts!

One of the more successful character development programs was founded by the Josephson Institute of Ethics. Since 1987, the institute has spoken to over 100,000 influential leaders to inform the public regarding the importance and benefits of improving citizenry. In 1992, the institute released a survey that it conducted on the behaviors of nearly 9,000 high school and college students (CharacterCounts!, n.d.). The survey revealed that lying, stealing, cheating, and driving under the influence was common practice. As a result of these findings, a meeting was held in Aspen, Colorado to discuss the development of character education and how it could be implemented at home, work, and school without imposing upon political, racial, religious, gender, and socioeconomic frameworks. This discussion and its findings came to be known as the *Aspen declaration*. This meeting also produced the guiding principles for the Six Pillars of Character. These pillars reflect the six skills/competencies students can develop and build upon to demonstrate good character. The Character Counts! project was developed based upon eight guiding principles created in the Aspen declaration (Character Counts!, n.d.).

Six Pillars of Character

Character Counts! is a partnership of schools, communities, education, and human service organizations that are devoted to using the Six Pillars of Character within America's schools. These elements of character development provide consistent

language and concepts useful to school counseling programs. the Six Pillars of Character provide a framework that counselors and teachers can use to incorporate character development into their schools. It also provides a structure for students to use in making ethical decisions. The Six Pillars of Character include: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (CharacterCounts!, n.d.).

Trustworthiness relates to the idea that people have faith and/or believe in others. When students live up to their promises and obligations; they are given more freedom. In order to demonstrate trustworthiness, students refrain from self-serving behaviors. Instead, they exhibit honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty. Trust is extended to those who are honest and who demonstrate authenticity in their communication (speaking in a way that avoids deception) and in their conduct (avoiding behaviors that emphasize trickery, such as cheating or stealing). Integrity is displayed when an individual manifests conformity while making decisions in various situations. A person of integrity takes time for self-reflection, is self-confident, and demonstrates moral principles in their actions. Reliability is a trait where a student's behavior reveals dependability and an ability to fulfill obligations. Loyalty is shown when an individual protects the interests and feelings of another; concurrently, they may express devotion (Josephson, 2002). Messages to be sent to young people regarding trustworthiness would include:

- Be honest.
- Do not exhibit cheating, deception, or theft.
- Be reliable: fulfill obligations.
- Stand up for yourself and do what you think is right.

- Be loyal to those you care about and also to your country.

Respect has to do with honoring the worth of all human beings, including oneself.

When students respect others, they do not treat them in ways that humiliate, exploit, or manipulate others—nor do they act out against others in violent ways. Students respect others by displaying civility, courtesy, and decency—they are considerate of the views of others. Autonomy becomes an element of respect when students are encouraged to make their own decisions. Tolerance is present when students observe an individual's differences and accept them (Josephson, 2002). Messages to be sent to young people regarding respect would include:

- Treat all individuals with respect.
- Accept the differences of others.
- Exhibit good manners and language.
- Do not torment or harm others.
- Calmly resolve conflict and cope with anger.

Responsibility is a concept that occurs when students are held accountable for who they are as people and for the decisions they make. Students are responsible when they meet the demands that are placed upon them, whether due to obligation or desire. To be responsible, students must possess accountability, the pursuit of excellence, and self-restraint. An accountable student ponders the consequences of his/her behavior and accepts the blame or credit for their behavior. The pursuit of excellence is apparent when students perform tasks to their greatest ability through diligence, perseverance, and continuous improvement. Self-restraint is exhibited when

students yield to our desires and display self-control (Josephson, 2002). Messages to be sent to young people regarding responsibility would include:

- Live up to your expectations.
- Keep trying to improve and excel.
- Perform to the best of your ability.
- Display self-control.
- Consider the consequences of your actions and be liable.

Fairness centers upon consistency. Students are fair when they assess a matter and come up with a morally warranted result; they process matters impartially, gathering and evaluating information. Students exhibit impartiality by making decisions without prejudice. Equity must be displayed, following some decisions, when mistakes need to be corrected in order to attain fairness (Josephson, 2002). Messages to be sent to young people regarding fairness would include:

- Abide by the rules.
- Share and demonstrate equality.
- Attend to the views of others.
- Do not profit from the weakness or misfortune of others.
- Do not hastily shift blame onto others.

Caring is perhaps the core of ethics. Ethics pertain to how students deliberate their actions, consequences, and feelings toward humankind. Caring extends a step beyond ethics. When students genuinely care, they experience an emotional response to the positive and negative experiences of others. Caring is displayed when students choose to avoid causing unessential pain in the lives of others. Caring may be called

benevolence when one selflessly gives to others (Josephson, 2002). Messages to be sent to young people regarding fairness would include:

- Be kind to others.
- Be gracious and respectful of others' feelings.
- Exhibit appreciation.
- Exercise forgiveness.
- Assist those in distress.

Citizenship focuses on our duties and obligations to our community. Students are faithful citizens when they are aware of laws and choose to abide them. A good citizen will take on additional roles in his/her community and make contributions to better the lives of others. Making commitments to assure society will prevail in future generations is demonstrated via good citizenry. To exercise citizenship, students do not only abide to the laws of our community, they act in ways that are desirable and improve the livelihood of our fellow citizens (Josephson, 2002). Messages to be sent to young people regarding citizenship would include:

- Take an active role in improving your school and community.
- Collaborate with others.
- Take an active role in the community: vote.
- Abide laws and follow rules.
- Honor authority.

The Six Pillars of Character, developed by Character Counts!, provide a foundation that counselors can build upon to promote character development within schools. Counselors need to provide educational programs in which students acquire

various types of social skills which are built upon ethical core values. The incorporation of the Six Pillars of Character into schools will promote character traits that can be demonstrated and enhanced among students. The Six Pillars of Character integrate well with the personal/social domain of the American School Counselor Association's standards and strive to develop good character in America's youth.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Character development has been supported by ASCA as an element within comprehensive school counseling programs that enhance the academic, career, and social/emotional development for all students (ASCA, 2016a). Most often character development programs have been used to reach the general school population. One subset of students that might benefit from the establishment of character development programs are students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). As noted, school counselors are committed to working with *all* students with various strengths and challenges (ASCA, 2016b). With increased integration into mainstreamed classrooms, the lessons associated with character development are relevant and important to students with ASD.

Autism spectrum disorder, or autism, is a neurodevelopment disorder characterized by impairments in social interactions and communications along with repetitive patterns of behaviors and often restricted interests (Pratt, Hopf, & Larriba-Quest, 2017). In the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), ASD is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder leading to impairments in verbal or nonverbal social communication, social interaction, and restricted interests, activities, or repetitive behavior that significantly impair social,

occupational, or other areas essential to function in society (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). This definition of autism spectrum disorder includes previous disorders known as autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, and pervasive developmental disorders not otherwise specified (Goodman-Scott, Carlisle, Clark, & Burgess, 2017). Individuals with ASD are eligible for services within the school system as established by the federal 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The autism movement has focused on how to provide the necessary care for individuals on the spectrum in many different areas of developmental need. Individuals with autism can experience challenges in various areas including verbal communication, repetitive behaviors, being hypo- or hyper-sensitive, experience executive function impairments, and difficulties in learning (Pratt et al., 2017). An increasingly common programming recommendation for students with autism is the use of social stories (Dev, 2014). Social stories are used to present information or to address a specific situation (Vicker, n.d.). Social stories were conceptualized in 1991 by Dr. Carol Gray, a pediatric doctor and autism researcher, as a means to model proper social interaction by giving a brief description of a situation using appropriate social cues, the perspectives of others, and a recommended appropriate response (Gray, 2018). The benefits to using social stories are many. Social stories help kids with ASD: (a) to learn self-care and social skills; (b) to understand their own behavior and to know the reasons why a person behaves in a specific way; (c) to more easily cope with changes and transitions in their everyday life as well as with distressing or stressful events that they may experience; (d) to help them understand the importance of behaving properly or following

instructions; (e) to serve as personalized and customized behavior intervention tool; (f) to learn how to join in activities, use their imaginations, play with others, make and maintain friendships; and (g) to join in group activities (Autism Parenting Magazine, n.d.).

The development of social stories to work with individuals on the autism spectrum have become more prevalent. Often social stories are created by educators, or other individuals working directly with children with autism (Dev, 2014). In addition, school counselors have the necessary training to assist in the development and implementation of social stories (Auger, 2013; Goodman-Scott et al., 2017). Further, the use of social stories fulfills the recommendations associated as part of the delivery system of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012).

Social stories have been empirically tested. General findings indicate that social stories may decrease undesirable behaviors, resulting in greater desired behaviors, recognizing, understanding, and generalizing emotions, preparing for new events, and lead to increased self-regulation (Dev, 2014; Goodman-Scott et al., 2017). Studies have indicated that social stories work best when used in a structured environment and presented through the use of visual and/or auditory aides or cues (Crozier & Tincani, 2005; Dev, 2014; Gray & Garand, 1993; Hagiwara & Smith, 1999).

Kokina and Kern (2010) conducted a metaanalysis of 18 studies associated with the efficacy of social stories for individuals with ASD. The results of this metaanalysis indicated that social stories were most effective under the following situations: used to reduce inappropriate behavior, implemented in general education settings, read by the student it was written for, utilized as a brief intervention, used in conjunction with other

social stories, written using longer sentences, incorporated illustrations, and used comprehension checks to assess the individuals understanding of the material (Kokina & Kern, 2010; Goodman-Scott et al., 2017). For further information regarding the use of social stories by school counselors see Goodman-Scott et al., 2017).

Students with autism struggle with many aspects of social behavior. Oftentimes, a counselor's or educator's focus for these students is an integration into mainstream practices of the educational system, and to provide opportunities to socially interact with other students, teachers, and staff. Due to a greater focus on understanding social settings, emotional regulation, and functioning, little attention has been paid to developing character through the use of social stories with students on the autism spectrum. The incorporation of the Six Pillars of Character, Character Counts! provides the opportunity to expand the focus of social stories, and when appropriate provide more opportunity for addressing complex social situations. The Six Pillars of Character include: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. While the focus of social stories may be specifically on the individual with autism and directed at a specific behavior, the practice of social stories to expand one's view on broader societal issues may be beneficial to students with ASD, particularly older students who are becoming more aware of a broadening world perspective.

Six Pillars of Character and Social Stories

The Six Pillars of Character provide a foundation that counselors can build upon to promote character development within schools. These pillars of character development can be used in the development of a social story or a series of social

stories for students with ASD. Each of the Six Pillars of Character development and how these concepts might be utilized for students with ASD are discussed below.

Trustworthiness

As previously stated, trustworthiness is the idea that people have faith and/or belief in others. Further, trust is extended to those who are honest and demonstrate authenticity. For students with ASD, determining the trustworthiness of others can be difficult due to impairments in social communication, speech/language, and executive function (Pratt et al., 2017). Moreover, understanding the importance of behaving in a way that is deemed trustworthy is just as important, particularly as students with ASD transition into the working world. Providing social stories that teach trustworthiness in a series of steps would be beneficial as it may help students with autism to begin at the most basic level of understanding trust and transitioning into more complex constructs such as learning how to gauge the trustworthiness of others, and how they can act in a manner that proffers trust to others.

Respect

Respect involves honoring the worth of others as well as oneself. It is very likely that students with autism who benefit from the use of social stories will already have had exposure to the concept of respect. Due to challenges associated with the initiation of conversations, and struggles with maintaining eye-contact, respect is often incorporated into the use of social stories, particularly in regard to showing respect to adults and respecting others' opinions. The addition of character education provides another venue for the development of social stories associated with respect. Further, it may provide another context for which students with ASD can work to understand the

importance of respect. Finally, character development includes respect of oneself, which introduces another layer of complexity to the concept of respect. This aspect of respect is especially important as the student nears the end of the educational process. Respecting oneself and understanding what this involves could be vital to students as they enter into the work environment.

Responsibility

This concept is defined as the idea that students are held accountable for who they are as a person and the decisions that they make. This concept can be difficult for students with ASD, as it may not be immediately possible for them to understand the long-term ramifications of decision making, nor may it be easy for them to grasp the idea of accountability. It is not uncommon for students with autism to struggle with the concept of time and time order (Pratt et al., 2017). Understanding complex behaviors and the impact that these behaviors might have in an unknown future context is even more challenging for students with autism. Regardless of the complexities involved, these concepts are very important to the well-being of the student and their ability to function within the working world. Therefore, the use of character development through social stories provides further opportunities for students on the autism spectrum to learn about and incorporate responsibility into the learning environment.

Fairness

This concept involves consistency in decision making associated with equity, following through with decisions, and the correction of mistakes when needed. For students with autism, the correction of mistakes can create a litany of different responses. In order to best meet the needs of the student, it is crucial to understand the

ability of each student to receive feedback associated with making mistakes. Correction as illustrated within the social story should be addressed in varying levels of correctness. The story should demonstrate how students correct mistakes and how making mistakes is part of the learning process and not something of which to be ashamed. With regard to fairness, some students with autism experience impairments with executive function, which can cause rigid, inflexible thinking. Additionally, students with autism may demonstrate impairments in social communication, including issues of staying on topic, turn-taking, or asking appropriate questions in conversation (Pratt et al., 2017). These impairments impact the student's ability to comprehend aspects associated with fairness. Social stories should focus first on the skills associated with rigid and inflexible thinking and then incorporate the ideas associated with fairness.

Caring

Caring is the emotional response to the positive and negative experiences with others. The ability of students with ASD to understand the emotions of others, particularly body language, can be challenging (Pratt et al., 2017). The comprehension and understanding of emotional cues are often areas of social story development. In considering character development in students with ASD, this concept can be expanded further to not only understanding emotional cues, but caring about how another person feels in a given situation, as well as to provide a context for why it is important to care for others.

Citizenship

Citizenship is the focus of duties and obligations to our communities. This concept is perhaps the most important to students with ASD in the sense that it most

likely is not a concept associated with ASD, nor an issue addressed in social stories. The focus for most students with ASD is integration into the school environment, both academically and socially. Therefore, the concern is most often on the individual student, strategies used to modify behaviors that cause them to stand out from their peers, and ways to explain social situations that are difficult for students with ASD to understand. In regard to citizenship, students with ASD have the opportunity to realize that they have a commitment to bettering the environment in which they live. Social stories that are carefully constructed could be exponentially important to a student with autism, particularly one who desires to fit in with others. Too often the challenges in communication that are associated with ASD make social integrations and the formation of friendships difficult (Pratt et al., 2017), particularly as the student ages. For those that desire acceptance and inclusion, traversing these challenges can be difficult, frustrating, and at times unsuccessful. Providing the student with the notion of citizenship may demonstrate to the student with ASD ways in which they can contribute to the community. In certain circumstances, the concept of citizenship may help the student with autism to feel valued, accepted, and like they are a contributing member of the school- or local-community. The social story or series of social stories would need to be crafted with care in order to provide the student with not only information as to how to participate, but potentially the opportunity to participate. This could include any school-based activity in which the student could be encouraged to participate. Providing lessons and opportunities for citizenship for students with ASD will not only work to increase participation and collaboration for the student, it may also benefit other students with whom the student with autism interacts.

The utilization of the Six Pillars of Character as part of a comprehensive school counseling program provides the opportunity to improve the academic, career, and social/emotional development for students (ASCA, 2016a). Moreover, it provides the ability to enhance the learning experiences of students with ASD through the incorporation of character education through the use of social stories. Using social stories provides the means by which to take aspects of character education and present it to those on the autism spectrum in way that is individualized and meaningful. Additionally, it allows the lesson on character to be integrated into or built upon other social stories for the student with autism.

Implications for School Counselors

In considering the use of social stories for use with students with autism, it should be noted that social stories will not work for everyone. Additionally, the level at which the concepts of character may be delivered should be determined not necessarily on age of the student, but rather the student's ability and desire to engage and integrate into the school community and society. The student's ability to understand certain social contexts and emotional cues of others should also be assessed prior to the use of social stories.

Given the diversity in (a) the symptoms of autism, (b) the complexities of the exhibiting behaviors of autism, and (c) the level of interest of social interactions, it is not plausible nor beneficial to provide specific social stories for school counselors to implement as part of a comprehensive school counseling program. Rather, it is important for school counselors to develop social stories specific to the needs and

interests of the student and, when possible, with the collaboration with other school staff.

The literature is wrought with guidelines and suggestions for the development of social stories. There are several sources available that provide information on how best to work and interact with student on the autism spectrum. While students with autism many share similar traits or characteristics, how a student with autism acts within various social setting is completely unique. Autism Speaks provides a school community tool kit (AutismSpeaks, 2018) that can be beneficial to understanding the best practices for working with a student with autism. Additionally, Indiana University Bloomington has a website that provides tips for working with students with autism (Vicker, n.d.). A one-size fits all approach to working with students with ASD is counterintuitive. Therefore, it is recommended that social stories be created specifically for each student with autism, developed utilizing the students interests, and, when appropriate, include peer group members (Dev, 2014) as a means by which to formulate the social story for each pillar of character development.

Summary

The application and use of character development as an important component to comprehensive school counseling programs has long been established. This article has provided a comprehensive overview of the establishment of character development and the benefits associated with its incorporation into comprehensive school counseling programs. The idea of using character development as means for additional educational opportunities for students on the autism spectrum were addressed and a basic primer on autism for school counselors was offered. Lastly, an overview of applying character

development practices through the use of social stories and resources for the development of social stories were provided. A central focus of school counseling programs is to promote student success by increasing students' attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to academic, career, and personal/social developmental domains (ASCA, 2012; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 2003). The use of character development within comprehensive school counseling programs is an important component of achieving this goal for all students.

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