

## “HAPPY ENDING” COUNSELING

by DELMONT K. BYRN  
Associate Professor of Education  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Preoccupation with the Happy Ending is about the most common pitfall of school counseling. As a result, many quick interviews do more harm than good—not because of the limited time but because of the way the time is spent.

The frantic scramble of short-contact counseling is mainly the result of trying to reach many students with few counselors. In it the sought-after “right solution” often becomes the “counselor’s solution.”

Herein lies the danger. The counselor’s information often is negligible, his analysis hasty, and his judgment premature. Consequently, he is often dead wrong.

The ignominious “directive counseling” label, while probably contrived by psychotherapists for other purposes, actually does describe the work of many school guidance workers. Some, unqualified by personality or preparation, do “take over” the student’s problem and render advice that can only compound his troubles.

### *The Wrap-up Tradition*

Many things condition us to the Happy Ending. The half-hour T-V show more often than not resolves its plot in 30 minutes; the intervening commercials do so in 30 seconds. In the classroom the teacher, who posed many of the questions herself in the first place, usually can arrive at acceptable solutions within the class period.

Likewise, in the counselor’s professional preparation many things came in happy-ending packages. For instance, case studies in psychology or guidance textbooks usually depicted “marked improvement” within a few pages.

Even longitudinal studies of child growth or career development seem to imply that things usually come out alright in the end, regardless of what happened along the way. And the two or three-session contacts with volunteer students in the counseling practicum laboratory usually work out amicably.

The trouble with “instant therapy” is that real progress usually is neither that fast nor apparent. The student should be protected from “coming up with the right answer” in the short interview—even if that is what he specifically asked for. The time might better be spent in helping him explore his views and wrestle with approaches and alternatives.

Stalking the Happy Ending is somewhat analogous to looking only at the games won record in amateur athletics. While winning is one of several worthy goals, winning-at-all-costs has produced the well known abuses. The effective coach "builds character" concurrently with teaching sound ballplaying, which may or may not result in an immediate win.

### *Putting Time To Work*

Because time is at a premium in school counseling, it must be invested carefully. Engaging in a brisk interrogation to start the counselor toward "the right answer" probably is the most waste of time and effort. On the other hand, to postpone the start of a discussion until there is a free hour in the counselor's schedule can be equally fruitless.

In brief contacts, the counselor should invest his—and, more important, the student's—time in working with the student's views. This means using such open-ended leads as "What seems to be the trouble?" and "Tell me about it," followed by "What have you tried so far?," "Why do you suppose things aren't working right?," and "What else will you need to know or do?"

This puts the available time to good use—discussing the situation and the possible solutions as the student sees them. It is this chance to explore significant ideas with an interested adult that is a rarity in the youngster's normal day. The all-to-common "Who sent you here?"—"What did you do?"—"What did he say?" kind of interrogation precludes any such safe exploration.

With limited time available, the counselor should be thinking:  
1. How does the student see his situation? 2. How is he approaching it?  
3. What can I contribute to his task? This is quite different from thinking:  
1. What are the facts? 2. What needs to be done? 3. How can I best get him to do it?

The former approach is helping-him-help-himself; the latter is coming-up-with-the-right-answer.

### *The Ending Bonus*

The counselor should judge his performance not in terms of right answers but in terms of student progress. He should be a catalyst, not an expert. He should not mentally flip a coin to arrive at decisions with which the student may have to live a lifetime.

The Happy Ending should be an occasional bonus to the counselor—not his main purpose for being.