Preventing "Schooliosis":
A Self-Help Guide For Undergraduate
Family Science Majors

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"Even if you are on the right track,
you'll get run over if you just sit there."
-- Will Rogers

Do you sometimes feel like you've been a student forever? Have you wondered lately if you're getting the most out of your undergraduate education? Are you concerned about how you will make the transition from being a student to being a professional? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, then you may be at high-risk for "schooliosis," a paralyzing condition which affects thousands of Family Science majors each year.

What exactly is "schooliosis?" According to Huber's Fictitious Medical Dictionary (Huber, 1987), "schooliosis" is the "perceived inability to think, act, or imagine oneself as a professional due to the prolonged status of being a student" (p.235). Symptoms include taking all the right courses without any fieldwork experience, getting good grades, but lacking a professional philosophy, and feeling confused about how to prepare for a career in Family Sciences. In some extreme cases, students with "schooliosis" may apply to graduate school rather than confront their symptoms.

Fortunately, the prognosis for curing "schooliosis" is good, if you treat it early. To assist you, this paper describes some successful, self-help strategies used by other Family Science majors in their efforts to overcome "schooliosis." Specifically, it offers you practical suggestions for: (a) developing a professional attitude, (b) maximizing your fieldwork experience, and (c) cultivating your contact network. Taken together, these three antidotes have proven to be quite effective in combating the spread of "schooliosis" among Family Science majors.

Developing Your Professional Attitude

"Employers hire professionals not students."
-- Anonymous

The first step in preventing "schooliosis" in family science is to develop a professional attitude about yourself, your work, and your chosen field. This attitude, which provides the foundation for all of your subsequent training and experience,
represents your personal philosophy of what it means to be a Family Science professional. Like maturity, it develops over time with increased exposure to other Family Science professionals and activities and ideas. As one employment recruiter put it: "Professionalism is more than a new suit and a brief case. It's a way of thinking that guides your goals and behavior." Here are some specific suggestions for developing your professional attitude.

**Talk with professionals in the field.** You can obtain some valuable information about what it means to be a family scientist by simply talking to professionals already working in the field. A good place to start is your college professors and course instructors because they already know you. Many of your teachers are quite willing to discuss with you their professional development if you take the initiative and ask them.

Another good source of information are the Family Science professionals employed in non-academic settings. Since most "entry level" positions for beginning professionals with a bachelor's degree are found in social service, governmental, and community agencies, spend some time talking to these professionals about their particular orientation to the field. For example, if you already know that you're interested in sex education, talk to the family scientists at your local Planned Parenthood or March of Dimes agencies.

How should you go about this task? Be creative. One student I know arranged a "Lunch-A-Month" plan for himself in which he ate lunch with a different juvenile court counselor each month of his senior year. Another enterprising student interviewed several faculty members in her department and then summarized the experience in a term paper on 'Career Paths of Gerontology Faculty.' Whether you plan it, type it, or just plain listen during an informal conversation, the experience of talking to Family Science professionals can be enlightening.

Perhaps you've already thought about talking to some Family Science professionals, but haven't done so yet because you "wouldn't know what to say." If so, the following questions may help you "break the ice" and facilitate your conversation:

- How did you become interested in family science?
- What experiences best prepared you for your current position?
- What is a typical workday like for you?
- What are the best and worst parts of your job?
- What professional organizations do you belong to and why?
- What does being a Family Science professional mean to you?
- Who else would you recommend I talk to about careers in family science?

Chances are, once you take the initiative and get started, talking to professionals in the field will become something that you enjoy -- even look forward to. In fact, you may find yourself feeling more like a Family Science professional with each interview.

**Read professional journals and newsletters.** If you're like most Family Science majors, you probably have enough reading assignments to keep you busy. However, developing a professional attitude requires that you become informed and 'stay current' about issues in family science. One way to accomplish this goal is to make time to read professional journals and newsletters.

How can you develop a professional reading habit? Select a journal, such as *Family Relations*, set aside one day each month it is published (January, April, July and October), and read it cover to cover. Or skim the table of contents of several related journals like *Annu*.

**Join a professional organization.** If your university supports your professional organization, you have special opportunities to gain support. For those who do not, there are ways to gain support. If you like, you can find interest groups through Family Science Majors.

Do students currently have an office or association that is active in sex education, children, gerontology, and other professional fields?

**Develop your own professional identity.** One way to accomplish this is that there are many things that family sciences students know how to do. Each person has personal identity. How do you want to be identified?

**Through internships.**

**Find an expert.**

As you can see, there are many ways to create experiences in family science.
journals like *Journal of Marriage and The Family* and *Journal of Divorce* and read only those articles which deal with your interest. If you're a social creature, start a journal group with your roommate or several classmates in which you each read one article in the current *Family Issues* and then, with enough popcorn to last an hour, sit around your room and discuss your reactions to the articles. You will become better informed and more articulate in expressing your professional ideas.

**Join a professional organization.** Elsewhere in this series of articles, you will find one on professional organizations which promote family science. Contact the one that supports your particular area of interest and apply for membership. Most organizations have special "discount rates" for student members, so you won't need to sell your car to join. For the price of your dues, you typically get the organization's journal(s), newsletter, conference announcements, book club services, and employment notices. If you like, you can volunteer to serve on a committee and participate in such special interest groups as family enrichment, women's issues, or professional ethics. Ask your Family Science professors which organizations they would recommend.

Do student chapters of national Family Science organizations help develop professionalism? Yes, indeed. You can obtain valuable leadership experience by holding an office or actively participating in your on-campus family relations, education of young children, gerontology, and home economics clubs. Quite often, these groups raise funds and arrange transportation to state and national conferences. They help to nurture your professional identity in family science.

**Develop an area of teachable expertise.** One of the exciting aspects of family science is that there are many opportunities to develop a sub-speciality. Start now to carve out your niche as a beginning professional by asking yourself two questions: What do I know? How could I teach it? Dust off that old term paper on "Strengthening Families Through Intergenerational Play" and make it a 30 minute talk with several effective demonstrations. With practice, it could become your first marketable, professional skill.

**Find an outlet for your speaking and writing.** Like you, many Family Science majors have a wealth of knowledge and innovative ideas stored in their heads. Read the following list of activities and check those that could become an outlet for your Family Science potential:

- Write a column on courtship violence for the school newspaper,
- Write a letter to the television networks about sex education and condom advertising,
- Write a short story about the transition to parenthood and submit it to a popular magazine,
- Write a play based on your family genealogy and donate it to your community theatre or historical society,
- Write a grant proposal with a graduate student or faculty member,
- Write a children's story about coping with bullies,
- Speak to the local Parents Without Partners about dating after a divorce,
- Tape 30-second radio "spots" on different ethnic family traditions at holidays,
- Make a music video on parenting classes offered by your department for airing on your local Cable channel and hospital maternity wards,
- Add your own idea here

As you can see, developing a professional attitude means going beyond term papers to educate others about family sciences.
Maximizing Your Fieldwork Experience

"Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.

-- Goethe

A second way to combat "schooliosis" in family science is to make the most of your fieldwork experience. Whether you work as a volunteer for the Big Brother/Big Sister Program, a summer counselor at the Shelter for Abused Women, or as a paid intern with the Area Agency on Aging, your fieldwork experience can be a real catalyst to your career in family science. The secret lies in your ability to understand the fieldwork system and make it work for you. Here are some guidelines for getting the most out of your fieldwork experience.

1. **Be flexible.** It takes a while to become familiar with the organizational structure, office routines, and various personalities involved in any fieldwork setting. As a novice, you need to allow yourself time to observe the system and clarify your role in it. In the beginning, you may be asked to perform some unexpected clerical duties, regardless of your job description. Don't be discouraged. Once you get to know the system and vice versa, you will be better able to assert your needs and perform your duties as a member of a family science team. In some cases, your willingness to cooperate when flexibility is needed may lead to more than a good letter of recommendation. A colleague of mine discovered that she had a talent for crisis intervention work only after she agreed to answer phone calls during an emergency at her Child Protective Services placement. Of course, if your fieldwork is not meeting with your expectations, you should first discuss this concern with your supervisor. If the problem persists, then discuss it with your faculty advisor for ideas.

2. **Understand your supervisor's working style.** In most fieldwork settings, you will report to one supervisor who guides and evaluates your work. Make an effort to know your supervisor. What is her working style? Does she prefer meetings in the morning or late afternoon? Can you communicate with her via notes in the office mailbox or does she allow phone interruptions if you have a question? Some supervisors always discuss work over lunch, while others literally "choke" on the idea. Find out what type of working relationship your supervisor prefers and accommodate to that style as much as possible.

3. **Set daily goals.** This may sound compulsive, but keep a list of things you want to accomplish each day of your fieldwork. If you work 4 or 8 hour shifts on M-W-F at the County Health Department, organize your time so that you can complete at least one specific task each shift. For example, you might plan to review some literature on infant growth and development on Monday, interview the maternal-child health nutritionist on Wednesday, and write a rough draft of an article on "Feeding Facts for New Fathers" for the local media on Friday. These daily goals will help you avoid the "waiting for work" trap that can ruin a fieldwork experience. They will also help you recognize your progress as you look back on the specific projects you have completed.

4. **Ask for regular feedback.** Make a point to ask your supervisor for early and regular evaluations of your fieldwork performance. You may discover that your idea for the toy lending library at the day care center was a big hit with some low-income parents. On the other hand, you might learn that your vigorous water play before nap time makes it difficult for some children to settle down and rest. In either
Case, ask for regular feedback. This enables you to affirm your strengths and identify your growth areas before you complete your fieldwork placement.

5. **Display enthusiasm.** Like a smile in a crowded elevator, enthusiasm is contagious. You can make a real difference in the quality of your fieldwork atmosphere by showing some genuine enthusiasm for your work. Excited to be counseling at the county jail? Say so! Impressed by the inmates’ interest in your biofeedback seminars? Tell them! Your enthusiastic response to an inmate’s wish for an Alcoholics Anonymous group may be the impetus he needs to organize one in the jail. As the philosopher Bertrand Russell once wrote: “Enthusiasm is the energy that propels the will.” Allow it to propel your fieldwork!

6. **Keep work samples.** Artists and architects aren’t the only professionals who need portfolios of their work. If you’re doing fieldwork in a nursing home, start a file which contains the outline, report, and article you wrote on “Outdoor Recreation for Older Adults.” Add the poster or transparency you made for that high school career day presentation on “Job Opportunities in Gerontology.” Later, you can ask someone to videotape the workshop you love to give on “Caring for a Spouse with Alzheimer’s Disease.” In addition to enhancing your professional attitude, these work samples will augment your resume and strengthen your interview when job hunting.

7. **Do an in-service training.** You can develop your presentation skills by offering to conduct an in-service training session at your fieldwork site. Select a favorite topic in your family science specialty, (e.g., adolescent decision-making skills) and tell your supervisor that you would like to make a brief presentation at the next staff meeting or lead a one-hour workshop on the next in-service day. Then, assess your audience needs, organize your material, and practice. Many students have told me that, even though they were quite nervous beforehand, they felt a greater sense of “professional recognition and acceptance” after their fieldwork presentations. Be sure to save any handouts for your work sample file.

8. **Request a letter of recommendation.** Some fieldwork supervisors routinely write letters of recommendation for their Family Science interns, while others must be asked. If your regular feedback has been positive, your supervisor will probably be willing to summarize your strengths on paper. About a month before you complete your fieldwork, ask your supervisor to write a general letter of recommendation that can be used in future job searches. Some supervisors prefer to address the letter to your faculty advisor and give you a copy. Others like to compose a “To Whom It May Concern” letter which is tailored to your next career objective, e.g., to work with the Cooperative Extension Service. Either way, you can make the most of your fieldwork experience by asking for documentation of your professional skills and potential.

**Cultivating Your Contact Network**

“A well-written thank you note is the cement that binds professional relationships.”

---Lee Iacocca

The third defense against "schooliosis" is to cultivate a Family Science contact network. Like other professionals, family scientists depend on their colleagues in the

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field for help in brainstorming new theories, collaborating on research, reviewing manuscripts, sharing practical ideas, and finding employment. Many simply enjoy the pleasure of socializing with other family professionals. If you intend to pursue a career in family science, it’s not too early to begin cultivating your contact network. The following ideas may help you get started.

**Keep a contact notebook.** Nothing fancy is required. Just buy a notebook and organize it for keeping track of the professional contacts you make. Arrange it alphabetically by contact’s last name and include an index of persons by their research interest(s) or specialty. After your initial contact, enter the person’s name, title, business address, phone number, and professional interests in your notebook. It’s a good idea to allow some space for writing ongoing notes to yourself after each contact entry. For example, a recent entry in my contact notebook under Rosemary Blieszner, Ph.D., (an assistant professor of family and child development at Virginia Tech), reads: “Discussed her article on trends in family gerontology research. Send her info. on adult children and aging parents.” Another page contains the business card of a marriage and family therapist from Miami, Florida and the note: “Works with pediatric cancer patients; knows private practice opportunities in Florida.” Experiment and find the system that works best for you.

**Start with classmates and co-workers.** Don’t overlook your peers as valuable future “contacts.” Like you, they will graduate, grow professionally, and move around. Get into the practice of noting their professional strengths and interests, and encourage their career development. Five years from now that FCD major who took all the non-required computer courses may be a human resource manager for Control Data Corporation in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Remember, many inspiring professionals were once aspiring undergraduates!

**Ask for introductions.** Many of us are too shy when it comes to asking for introductions. We forget that our professors and supervisors already have contacts in the field. Ask them to help you make some professional connections at your next family science conference or informal department gathering. If you’re job hunting, consider asking three of your favorite professors for the names and addresses of five friends in family science to whom you could write for employment leads. Even if you fail to find a job through these “introductions,” you will have succeeded in establishing at least 15 new professional contacts before you graduate.

**Write to authors.** The next time you read a thought-provoking family science book or an impressive journal article, write a brief note to the author expressing your positive reaction. Most journal articles contain the necessary address to contact for reprints. Use it to tell the author how helpful his or her literature review was in writing your term paper. Or ask for more information about the instruments used in the study. Most family scientists who get their work published are probably busy preparing the next manuscript, so keep your letter short and avoid time-consuming requests. However, don’t let this discourage you from complimenting their work in writing. Few authors can resist responding to “fan mail.”

**Attend professional meetings.** One of the best ways to make contacts in the family science field is to attend a professional meeting. Find an upcoming conference that sounds interesting and make plans to attend. If you get a conference program in advance, note the workshops that you want to attend and check the presenters you would like to meet. Then, after the workshop is over, introduce yourself to the presenter. Occasionally, presenters need to hurry to the next activity, so offer to meet later at the conference, you might open your card to the presenter and say, “I was just talking with your students, and they mentioned that you are an expert on...” Professional meetings are a great place to network. Wear your business card to other conferences or meetings and hand it out to other professionals. You never know who might be a valuable contact. A professional network is an important part of the family science profession. If you are a student, you can start networking now by attending your school’s annual conference or participating in a professional organization for students. If you are a professional, you can increase your network by attending professional meetings and networking with other family professionals. The more people you know, the more opportunities you will have to find a job or find other professional contacts. If you are just starting out, your network may be small, but it will grow as you attend more conferences and get involved in professional organizations. As you become more experienced, your network will grow and you will have more opportunities to find a job or find other professional contacts. The more people you know, the more opportunities you will have to find a job or find other professional contacts. If you are just starting out, your network may be small, but it will grow as you attend more conferences and get involved in professional organizations. As you become more experienced, your network will grow and you will have more opportunities to find a job or find other professional contacts. The more people you know, the more opportunities you will have to find a job or find other professional contacts.
later at the conference or exchange addresses so that you can correspond. Anticipating this, you might consider investing $15 for 200 business cards to give to your new contacts or writing to them in advance to arrange a time to meet during the conference. Regardless of your approach, remember that most of the "networking" that goes on at professional meetings is unplanned and informal. So be ready to spend time hanging around the registration area, the message board, the book exhibits, and the employment services. Wear your name tag, volunteer to help with registration, and introduce yourself to other conferees who might be riding the elevator in silence. As songwriter Tom Waits has noted: "We're all perfect strangers until we say hello."

Request information in newsletters. If you can't afford to attend professional meetings, generate some new contacts by placing a request for information in several family science newsletters. For example, if you're doing an internship at the local children's hospital, your request might look like this:

Child Life Specialist is seeking ideas, articles, and book lists on helping children cope with chronic illness and hospitalization. Send information to Andy Dillaway, St. Eligius Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02199.

Some publications may require that you place an advertisement in the classified section, while others may include your request "free" under professional inquiries or letters to the editor. Either way, your name, address, and area of interest will be read by hundreds of other family scientists, some of whom may reply. Once you receive the information you requested, you can respond to your new contact in a way that will foster further professional sharing and correspondence.

Express thanks in writing. Remember how you felt the last time someone sent you a thank you note -- not the store-bought kind with a rhymed verse and signature, but a well-written, sincere letter of gratitude? You can generate that same "appreciated" feeling in your Family Science contacts by thanking them in writing whenever they:

- send you an article for your term paper
- give you a ride to a professional meeting
- introduce you to a Family Science colleague
- nominate you for a scholarship
- tell you about a job opportunity
- write you a letter of recommendation

This simple practice enables you to cultivate professional relationships that are based on courtesy, affirmation and respect. Thank someone in writing and watch your contact network grow!

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

"If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

-- Henry David Thoreau

In this paper, you have been offered some practical suggestions for preventing "schooliosis" as Family Science majors. These strategies were aimed at developing your professional attitude, maximizing your fieldwork experience, and cultivating your contact network. However, good ideas are not "rules to obey" or "recipes to follow" without
modification. Instead, they are meant to serve as stepping stones in the stream of your own creativity and resourcefulness. So find your own cure for "schooliosis," but remember: professional development is a life-long, social process. Be sure to take time for your own family relationships, and support others in their growth as Family Scientists.

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