

## CHAPTER 15

# Group Counseling in the Schools

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

What Do Counselors Do in  
School Settings?

Group Work in Schools

Group Work in the Elementary  
School

Group Work in the Middle  
School

Group Work in the High School

Group Work and Substance  
Abuse Prevention

Chapter Summary

**M**y focus in this chapter is to describe and illustrate group counseling in school settings with examples from elementary, middle, and high school. School counselors are active in a number of areas, and their work is influenced by their students' age and stage of the educational life cycle. Although discussing all the types of group work in school settings was not possible, I have chosen several with some emphasis on dealing with students with behavior problems. This population increasingly demands the attention of school counselors and can be the most challenging to work with in the group context. It is also the population for which group work may offer significant benefits.

In addition to discussing group counseling, the chapter also looks at the professional impact that the school counselor can have on system issues that emerge from practice. A focus on multicultural and social justice advocacy, as well as advocacy in general, is presented in terms of how the group leader helps the group deal with its environment—the school itself. This model could be applied to counselors in any of the six setting-specific chapters in Part 2, but I have chosen to elaborate on it here because of the crucial nature of the school environment and its daily impact on students.

Additional illustrations include prevention groups, groups to aid students in making the transition from elementary to middle school, and work with parents, as listed here:

### *Elementary School*

- Ten-year-old girls in a first group meeting with an acting-out member
- Inner-city elementary school children: the impact of violence
- A group for sixth graders in transition to middle school
- Working with mothers of underachieving sixth grade boys

### *Middle School*

- Adolescent boys group dealing with disruptive classroom behavior
- Peacemaking Circle group in the classroom—from acting out to krumping
- Informal lunchtime meeting with 9- to 12-year-old girls
- Alternative public day school: parents with children with emotional and behavioral disorders

### *High School*

- Students suspended from school for violence, weapons possession, or drugs
- Educational substance abuse prevention: is it a class or a group?
- High school students in a diversion program

## What Do Counselors Do in School Settings?

The U.S. Department of Labor's (2008–2009) *Occupational Outlook Handbook* describes the work of counselors in this area as follows:

School counselors assist students of all levels, from elementary school to postsecondary education. They advocate for students and work with other individuals and organizations to promote the academic, career, personal, and social development of children and youth. School counselors help students evaluate their abilities, interests, talents, and personalities to develop realistic academic and career goals. Counselors use interviews, counseling sessions, interest and aptitude assessment tests, and other methods to evaluate and advise students. They also operate career information centers and career education programs. Often, counselors work with students who have academic and social development problems or other special needs.

*Elementary school counselors* observe children during classroom and play activities and confer with their teachers and parents to evaluate the children's strengths, problems, or special needs. In conjunction with teachers and administrators, they make sure that the curriculum addresses both the academic and the developmental needs of students. Elementary school counselors do less vocational and academic counseling than high school counselors.

*High school counselors* advise students regarding college majors, admission requirements, entrance exams, financial aid, trade or technical schools, and apprenticeship programs. They help students develop job search skills, such as resume writing and interviewing techniques. College career planning and placement counselors assist alumni or students with career development and job-hunting techniques.

School counselors at all levels help students to understand and deal with social, behavioral, and personal problems. These counselors emphasize preventive and developmental work to provide students with the life skills needed to deal with problems before they worsen and to enhance students' personal, social, and academic growth. Counselors provide special services, including alcohol and drug prevention programs and conflict resolution classes. They also try to identify cases of domestic abuse and other family problems that can affect a student's development.

Counselors interact with students individually, in small groups, or as an entire class. They consult and collaborate with parents, teachers, school administrators, school psychologists, medical professionals, and social leaders to develop and implement strategies to help students succeed. ([www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm))

## Group Work in Schools

Groups are the medium of choice for working with a range of students. The elements of mutual aid described in Chapter 2 can be particularly helpful to children, adolescents, and teens for whom peer influence is a powerful force for learning, healing, and changing maladaptive behaviors. Groups in schools deal with prevention, education, and treatment when needed. While individual and family counseling is also important, many counselor interventions are in a group format.

Corey and Corey (2006) point out:

Counseling groups in schools consist of a wide array of topics and formats. These groups are the mainstay of psychological services offered by schools. . . . Such groups are generally brief, structured, problem focused, homogenous in membership, and have a cognitive behavioral orientation. Most of the research that has been conducted on groups for children and adolescents has also been done in the schools. This research tends to be clustered in the areas of social competence problems, adjustment to parent divorce, behavior problems, and learning disabilities. (p. 297)

These authors correctly point out that treatment of children with severe problems is generally not within the scope of counseling services offered in the school setting and is normally provided by outside agencies. However, the reality in many schools, particularly but not exclusively in urban areas, is that the number of students exhibiting serious maladaptive behaviors has grown. When students enter their schools, they may bring with them problems associated with poverty, family and school violence, racism, homophobia, substance abuse, and other challenges that can profoundly affect the ability to cope with school structure and their ability to learn. When widespread, the impact of these maladaptive behaviors on the overall culture of the school—on teachers, administrators, and other students—is serious.

An alternative model of bringing community services into the school for school-day or after-school programs, sometimes referred to as “extended school day” programs, has become more widely implemented in school districts in some states.<sup>1</sup> In addition to providing direct services, school counselors may take on the role of liaison to the

1. Some of the examples presented in this chapter were from group practice in an urban public school funded by the New York State Education Department's “Extended School Day” program, which allowed violence prevention services to be delivered during the regular school day. I have directed this project, offered in collaboration with a local agency, over the past 7 years, and it continues at the time of this writing.

agencies and coordinator of these programs. In addition, school counselors may work in special programs within a larger school or, as in an example described later in this chapter, in special schools set up for the purpose of dealing with suspended students or students with behavioral problems that cannot be dealt with in a regular school program.

## Four General Types of Groups

DeLucia-Waack (2006) draws upon the definitions of the Association for Specialists in Group Work (2000) in delineating four types of groups based on their goals and interactional processes (p. 10):

- Task/work
- Psychoeducational/guidance
- Counseling
- Therapy

She suggests that distinguishing between these types of groups is important to “aid in the selection of the appropriate type of group for different populations (e.g., age groups) with different goals (e.g., combating depression, learning social skills, preventing eating disorders):

This delineation is important because any type of group work previously and sometimes still today, is viewed as group therapy. Many people view group therapy or therapy in general, negatively, and so the understanding that groups can be preventive; focus on learning new skills, cognitive styles, and behaviors; or address developmental issues is useful in defining and promoting group work. It is very helpful in the schools and working with children and adolescents to provide all interested parties (staff, parents, children, and adolescents) with a description of what psychoeducational groups do, focusing on the preventive nature and the skill building emphasis.

DeLucia-Waack continues by distinguishing psychoeducational groups from the other three types as follows:

By definition, counseling groups “address personal and interpersonal problems of living and promote personal and interpersonal growth and development” (ASGW, 2000, p. 331), whereas therapy groups “address personal and interpersonal problems of living, remediate perceptual and cognitive distortions or repetitive patterns of dysfunctional behavior, and promote personal and interpersonal growth and development” (ASGW, 2000, p. 331). Examples of counseling and therapy groups include general interpersonal groups; training groups for students learning to be counselors or therapists; and groups directed at amelioration of specific problems such as depression, eating disorders, or sexual abuse. By nature, counseling and therapy groups seem more appropriate for persons with severe interpersonal difficulties and for adults.

In contrast, psychoeducational groups/guidance groups use “group-based educational and developmental strategies” (ASGW, 2000, p. 330), particularly role playing, problem solving, decision making and communication skills training. Psychoeducational/guidance groups teach specific skills and coping strategies in an effort to prevent problems; such skills and strategies might include anger management, social skills, self-esteem, assertiveness, and making friends. (pp. 10–11)

Although defining different group types is helpful, particularly in communicating the range of purposes of groups to the parties concerned, many of the elements of each of the groups can be found, more or less, in the others. The lines are not always so clearly drawn so that the group counselor needs to be aware of emerging purposes that were not originally conceived of when the group was first formed. For example, in one anger management group for teenagers in trouble in school and with the juvenile justice system described in Chapter 11, as the relationship with the leaders and other members developed, it soon became clear that the angry outbursts and physical attacks on others were maladaptive means for addressing posttraumatic stress resulting from physical abuse and incest in their families. Rather than simply referring the youngsters to a “therapy” or “counseling” group, a step that was eventually taken, the group leaders incorporated concepts and skills that could be drawn from other group models into their psychoeducational group. As pointed out earlier in the discussion of this example, it was important not to turn this group into a long-term therapy group but to stay focused on how their anger over their physical and sexual abuse, their posttraumatic stress, and their general cognitions of themselves as “damaged goods” affected their coping abilities at school and in the community.

The argument here is that while identifying a general group type can be helpful, recognizing how easily a group can cross a boundary and incorporate elements, activities, and leader skills from other group types can increase the skill of the leader and the success of the group.

### **Race, Class, and the Emerging Adolescent**

Levinsky and McAleer (2005) describe their group practice with young adolescents of color in an urban school setting.

Children in our inner cities face many obstacles in their efforts to experience success in school. Their families, oppressed by chronic environmental stressors such as poverty, racism, limited or nonexistent medical care, hunger and malnutrition, violence, substance abuse, inadequate housing, and limited access to employment or educational resources, are struggling to survive. Their neighborhoods are often crowded, noisy, disintegrating, and dangerous. Their schools, old and poorly funded, reveal overcrowded classrooms, facilities in disrepair, and limited support services. (p. 203)

While these environmental and family issues sorely test the urban middle school student, as well as school staff, behavioral problems can be particularly difficult in any middle school—urban, suburban, or rural. Akos and Ellis (2008) describe middle school as follows:

Conceptually, the emergence of middle schools is an attempt to attend to the unique growth and development of the emerging adolescent. The middle school format configures grades, classes, and learning opportunities to help facilitate development. Middle school counselors play a key role in the process. . . . [M]iddle school counselors advocate and systematically promote academic, career, and personal and social development. Although all three outcomes are important and interrelated, puberty often amplifies the personal and social developmental tasks in middle schools. (p. 26)

The authors point out that identity development is important in this stage of the life cycle for all students.

With so much at stake, it is important to consider racial and ethnic identity development of middle school student. For students of color, unlike their White counterparts, race and ethnicity are often central themes to identify and create differential challenges and opportunities. . . . When students of color become cognitively aware of racism and inequality in their environment, racial identity development adds an important layer to the development of the self. (p. 26)

In a recent article advocating an advocacy role for school counselors, Bemak and Chung (2008) cite the Education Trust (2006) to point out that

[r]acial/cultural disparities in academic performances have been clearly established by numerous researchers. Fifty-nine percent of African American, 56% of Latina/Latino, and 52% of Native American eighth-grade students in the United States are below a fourth-grade reading level in comparison with only 25% of their White counterparts. . . . Related research findings further indicate that low-income students are 6 times more likely to drop out of high school compared with youth from higher income families. (p. 373)

### **Social Justice, the Advocacy Role, and Idiosyncratic Credits**

Bemak and Chung (2008) cite these and other statistics to support the notion of a crisis in education related to race and class and the need for school counselors to adopt a more assertive advocacy approach that incorporates a social justice element in counselor interventions. In addressing the barriers that might make it difficult for school counselors to implement this role, they refer to a “Nice Counselor Syndrome (NCS)” and describe it as follows:

Counselors exhibiting NCS are often noted to be comfortable assuming the roles of mediator and problem solver when working with students, parents, and other school personnel. However, the value these counselors place on being viewed as nice people by others overshadows their willingness to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services that predictably result in interpersonal disagreements and conflicts with other school personnel, especially those interested in maintaining the existing educational status quo (D’Andrea & Daniels, 1999). (p. 374)

The Nice Counselor Syndrome is something of an unfair stereotype, but the concern about school counselors not engaging in social justice advocacy within their schools may be accurate for some counselors, but for different reasons. One reason is clarity of role and the answer to the question “Who is the client?” The position I have presented in this book is that every counselor in every setting always has two clients; for school counselors, the school is the second client. This assumption leads to the position that to do one’s job, the counselor must pay attention to issues of social justice as well as any other organizational problems that interfere with effective teaching and learning for all students. In this view of the role, counselors need to incorporate elements of skillful advocacy to do their job and to be effective.

I stress the term *skillful* because some arguments for advocacy seem to see the system—in this case, teachers, administrators, and even school boards—as the “other side” or the “enemy” and perceive advocacy as always confrontational. The two-client construct suggests that school counselors need to be at least as tuned in to the issues facing other staff as they are those facing students if they wish to be effective.

A passion for social justice and change has to be harnessed to a clear sense of the counselor's role and skill in being able to implement it.

In addition to lack of clarity about this core role, a second major reason that counselors may not consistently implement this role may have to do with minimal training in those skills required to be an effective advocate for organizational change. Although professional education is more consistently addressing this area of content, courses need to go beyond understanding organizational theory and the dynamics of change and focus on the strategies and skills needed to actually implement change. Student counseling interns in placements need an opportunity to put their newly acquired understanding of organizational behavior and change into practice. Intern supervisors need to incorporate this area of skill development into learning contracts even if the impact involves one small area of change. Interns who experience some success in this role will later tend to be counselors who are more likely to understand and implement their social change responsibilities within the school and the community. If the student supervisor does not feel empowered to have professional impact and communicates a cynical "you can't fight city hall" attitude, this can result in disempowering the intern and, in turn, the students in the school groups.

An important first step is to recognize the need to establish a positive working relationship with others in the school. As with student clients, a good working relationship is the medium through which professional impact can occur. An interesting exercise for interns (and counselors) is to write a brief statement on how they think they are viewed by teachers, staff, and administrators at their placement school. What would these important constituencies say about them? How would they describe the intern? Based on this first part of the exercise, how would they like to see this viewpoint changed? Finally, what steps could be taken to influence this system's view of them as student counselors? In one example, interns thought that teachers and administrators did not see them as connected to the school's day-to-day life because their class and practicum schedules caused them to be absent on key days and to miss school faculty meetings. They wanted this perception changed so that they would be seen as "team players" sharing in the responsibilities of the other staff. Their strategies to change this perception included the following:

- They would start to help out in lunchroom coverage even though this was not part of their regular assignment.
- They would take their own lunch, when possible, in the teacher's staff room.
- They would ask for release from one class for one week so they could be at the school for at least one faculty meeting.
- They would offer to help on a committee planning a faculty/staff holiday party.

These are small steps, but they started the student counselor thinking about the importance of building a working relationship not just with students but with others in the school as well. They would also be developing what Hollander (1958) referred to as "idiosyncrasy credit"—that is, the process by which a member of a group builds credits by first conforming to the norms of the group, which then allows for idiosyncratic behavior. Put another way, a student intern or new counselor would not question policies, attitudes, or norms of behavior in the first week of work in the school. The exercise described here helps the student counselor develop these

“credits,” which then allows for deviation from the norms once the relationship is established.

A third reason for not assuming a social justice advocacy role may be related to the element of risk that can be involved. A student intern or a new counselor on probation, or even one with experience and tenure, may worry that raising concerns about school structure, rules, and the administration’s approach to children, if not handled well, may result in negative consequences. In some settings, there may be validity to this concern. This concern may be related to the belief that advocacy involves “speaking loudly” when at times the counselor may be most effective by “speaking softly.” For some, the advocacy role is only associated with confrontation and conflict. As in work with clients, a facilitative confrontation raising an issue in a supportive rather than attacking manner may be most effective. This is an effort to be not a “nice counselor” but rather a professional with an astute understanding of the nature of the organizational change process and the skills required to have a positive impact.

Bemak and Chung (2008, pp. 375–376) address many of the personal obstacles that may lead to counselor inaction, including the following:

- Personal fear
- Being labeled a troublemaker
- Apathy as a coping strategy
- Anxiety leading to guilt
- Anger that may lead to ineffective responses to injustices
- A false sense of powerlessness
- Personal discomfort

After detailing a number of professional obstacles to attempting change, including working in a culture of fear, concern for job security, and turf battles, the authors suggest strategies for attempting organizational change (pp. 378–379). These include aligning the changes with the school’s mission, using data to drive change, not internalizing victimization, not taking things personally, allowing time for change while still taking calculated risks, developing political and personal partners (what I would call allying), being political astute and knowledgeable, and having a level of courage.

Although the authors address organizational change in respect to multicultural/social justice, their analysis of the issues and many of their suggestions for intervention strategies can apply to any educational change issues and all student populations. Just as not all clients are ready for change at certain stages in their lives, the same can be true for the school as an organization. Environmental issues—including the impact of the district administration, the school board, and the local, state, and national political structures—can create obstacles for change or facilitate it. The school counselor who can respect and understand the meaning of resistance to change and “deviant behavior” from colleagues and administrators has an increased chance of overcoming it. All too often professionals react from a sense of the “should,” how they expect others to respond, rather than the “is,” the reality of human nature and interaction.

A crucial principle that underlies this approach is that there is always a next step. It may not always be the step one wants to take or allow change as fast as one wishes, but it is a step.



## Group Work in the Elementary School

Each stage of developmental change with elementary school children involves some transitions and some challenges. Developmental psychologists have tended to focus on the issues of the crucial early stages of childhood, such as establishing basic trust versus mistrust, achieving autonomy versus shame/doubt, initiative versus guilt, and then usually focusing on the identify crisis of adolescence (Erikson, 1950). Less attention has been paid to one of the more difficult stages, the preteen group. These are students who have not yet left childhood but are not yet fully into their adolescence. Irrizary and Appel (2005) describe a group of 10- to 13-year-old girls who are struggling with the typical developmental tasks and stresses of this transitional stage: “By virtue of being preadolescent they were at the cognitive stage where they could begin to grasp, very likely for the first time, their marginal position: passing from childhood with some sense of loss at being compelled to give up this stage, into the unknown stage that was looming, that of early adolescence, and to feel oneself as not belonging fully to either” (p. 166).

DeLucia-Waack (2006) suggests that unlike with adults, child and adolescent groups need more structure, and the long periods of verbal interactions, common in adult groups, may be unsustainable with adolescents. The new group leader discovers just this in the next section’s example.

### ***Ten to Eleven-Year-Old Girls with an Acting-Out Group Member***

With some groups, the intensity of the issues or the particular strengths of the members will cause an internal leader to emerge and to raise the work in spite of the lack of clear contracting by the group leader. An *internal leader* is a member of the group who assumes a leadership role in a situational or ongoing basis. The term *internal* distinguishes this leader from the counselor, who is an *external leader* with authority derived from the school and his or her professional function.

#### **PRACTICE POINTS**

In the following example, the group leader is unclear in her contracting with a group of 10- to 11-year-old girls in a school setting, and two internal leaders, Harriet and Vera, emerge to give direction to the group. The leader misses some of their early signals of issues for discussion. Fortunately, instead of reacting to these two members as competing for her leadership role or seeing their behavior as “deviant” (which is often the case with an insecure group leader), this counselor relinquishes control of the group’s direction to the members. The contracting begins as the members use a book device introduced by the leader to start the feedback process.

This example also raises the issue of when, where, and how the subject of sex can be discussed in a school group. It’s important for the school administration to be involved in clarifying the group leader’s role and the appropriate boundaries. Some school districts and states require that such discussions be conducted by a staff member with specific training and certification in sex education. A school district may also require permissions from parents for their children to be involved in these conversations. A meeting with parents to discuss the purpose and limitations of such discussions is not uncommon. What the school counselor does not want is to have to explain to the principal the nature of the discussion after a concerned call from a distressed parent.

One way this can be resolved is to leave sex education to the certified counselor but leaving open permission for a general discussion of peer pressure—not just to get involved in sexual acts but also to use drugs, participate in bullying, settle conflicts with fights outside school, and to join formal or informal gangs. With the surge in school-age pregnancies as well as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), young men and women need some place in addition to home to discuss how to resist peer pressure in order to make personal and responsible decisions. Some of these issues emerge in the group example that follows. Note how they are raised indirectly in the early part of the first session by pretending to take off clothing and asking about dressing up like “hookers.” The leader misses the first offerings but gets back to them later. Note also how the group members, led by Harriet and Vera, also address the authority theme.

**Purpose:** Discussion group (with special attention to school and family problems)

**Gender of Members:** Female; age range: 10–11 years

**Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Identification of Members:** Caucasian

### **First Session**

The girls came in and sat in chairs in a circle, squirming around, flinging their legs over the chair arms. During the following conversation, the girls took off their shoes and sweatshirts. Vera and Harriet pretended to remove their shirts with their sweatshirts.

**HARRIET:** Is this group going to be boring?

**LEADER:** Do you think it'll be boring?

**HARRIET:** No.

**VERA:** Can we have parties?

**LEADER:** Well, what would we do at a party here?

**VERA:** Food, talking, dancing, and music.

**LEADER:** Yes, yes, yes, yes. Well, yes, I guess we can have parties here.

**VERA:** Today?

**LEADER:** No, not today.

**HARRIET:** Can we dress up like hookers?

**LEADER:** Is that fun?

**(SEVERAL):** Yes!

**LEADER:** Who does that?

**VERA, HARRIET:** Me!

**LEADER:** Oh, two me's! Let me tell you about the group. (Harriet mimics.) Harriet, stop.

(Harriet continues.) Harriet, that's enough. OK? It's so you'll have a place that's special, just for you guys. This is your group, with me—our group. We're going to think about fun things that we can do together, and we'll do them. And it's also a place where you can bring things to talk about like things that happen at school or at home, at the Community House, at church, with friends . . . because this might be a time in your life when lots of things are changing, or maybe about to change, and it can help to talk about it. I'd like this to be a place where you can say things and know that no one's going to tell them to anyone outside the group. Now let me show you this; this is our book, for this group. (I open to a page with three headings: “Things we want to do,” “Things we want to talk about,” and “Things we want for snack.” I put the book on the floor in the center of the circle and bring out Magic Markers.)

**PRACTICE POINTS**

The leader has given a general statement of contract but has not included any “handles for work” that would make operational the concept of “things changing in your life.” She also is unintentionally misleading in her statement about confidentiality, because she cannot guarantee things will not be shared outside the group. Although one can understand her reluctance to make clear the limits of confidentiality, it is important that she states that under certain conditions she may need to share what they say outside the group. The internal leaders return to the confidentiality issue, but the leader does not immediately respond.

**VERA AND HARRIET:** We can’t talk with Olive (absent today). She tells, she blabs, she says she won’t, but she does. (All nod.)

**LEADER:** I hope we can work together to help Olive. (To Fran, who seems quiet) What does your sweatshirt say?

**VERA:** (To leader) What color is your shirt? (Points, then pokes finger up into leader’s face) (Laughter) That’s the oldest trick in the book!

**LEADER:** Well, it didn’t feel good to me.

**VERA:** Oh, I’m sorry.

**LEADER:** OK. (Reorienting around book)

**PRACTICE POINTS**

The next comments raise issues about relationships with parents. Vera sends an early signal of the degree of stress between Harriet and her mother. This is a first offering that will be escalated by Harriet as the meeting continues.

**VERA:** (To leader) My mom likes you, and she told Jean (the leader’s supervisor).

**LEADER:** That’s nice. I liked meeting your moms. I’ve seen everyone’s mother but Harriet’s; she’s coming next week.

**VERA:** Harriet doesn’t want you to meet her mother.

**LEADER:** (To Harriet) Why not?

**HARRIET:** She asks dumb questions—don’t tell her I said that!

**LEADER:** I won’t. Like what?

**HARRIET:** Like she asked my teacher, “Are you a good teacher?”

**LEADER:** And the teacher could only give one answer, huh? She had to say yes. She couldn’t very well say, “No, I’m a lousy teacher.” (Laughter)

(Vera seems ready to write in the book. I encourage others to take a turn, but they seem content to let Vera do it. Under “Snack” she writes Oreos, pretzels, Pepsi, pizza. . . . Then she moves to “What to talk about.”)

**VERA:** What we want to talk about . . . hmm. (Laughter) (Mouthing words to leader) Sex!

**LEADER:** (Whispering to Vera) What about sex—boys or bodies?

**VERA:** Both.

**LEADER:** How do you want to write it? (Vera considers this for a moment and writes “sex.”)

**LEADER:** That’s the simplest, isn’t it? (Vera later adds “boys and bodies”—laughter, long and loud—particularly from Harriet.)

**HARRIET:** (Laughing) Sex, we want to talk about sex!

**LEADER:** Harriet, Harriet, you need to be quieter.

**HARRIET:** (More laughter) Sex!

**LEADER:** Do you want us to leave that on the paper, or does it make you too uncomfortable? (More laughter)

(Vera moves on to “Things we want to do”: cooking, drama, art, . . . I add some possibilities, some contributions from others, but most are from Vera.)

**PRACTICE  
POINTS**

The leader, having passed the first test with her “boys or bodies?” comment, encourages members to open up with other, perhaps more painful, issues. Interestingly, the leader’s own ambivalence is noted in her suggestion to modify the issue “family problems” to “families.” It is further evidenced when the leader seems to try to slow the girls down when they want to start the discussion. The leader has a plan for the session and a structure she wishes to follow related to how they should complete their sections of the book. However, the group members have their own ideas about how to begin the work. Again, a member asserts her own (and the members’) control over the process. Note the nonverbal signals sent by Harriet as she slaps herself for saying or doing something bad. It will be later in the session, when Harriet escalates her communication, that the group leader will pick up the underlying message.

**VERA:** We can talk about family problems, too.

**LEADER:** Yes, you could just write “families.”

**VERA:** OK, family problems.

**LEADER:** Yes, put down “families.”

**FRAN:** Can we talk now?

**LEADER:** Let me show you the next pages. This is our group book, and these pages are about each of you. (The page is divided into quarters. Each girl chooses a quarter. Vera describes the game as “4-square.” Then each chooses a Magic Marker. Leader asks each to write her name and nickname if she has one. Two volunteer preferred other names).

**FRAN:** Don’t laugh, but my baby cousin calls me \_\_\_\_\_ instead of my real name because she can’t say it. (No one laughs. They write their schools, ages—all are 10 or 11—birth dates, grade in school.)

**VERA:** (To Fran) You were held back in school, right?

**FRAN:** Yes. But I was the youngest in my class before.

**LEADER:** So you were young for your old grade, and now you’re with kids more your age.

(The girls then write names and ages and relationships of siblings, amid a discussion of “I hate . . .” and “We fight . . .” As we write and talk, Harriet several times slaps herself for saying or doing something “bad.”)

**LEADER:** (To Harriet) Harriet, you don’t have to hit yourself.

**HARRIET:** Yes, I do.

(One girl suggests writing down names of best friends, which precipitates a discussion of the changing nature of friendships and alliances in the peer group. The group then moves on to boyfriends.)

**VERA:** I’m a two-timer!

**HARRIET:** I’m a two-timer, too!

**LEADER:** I think at this age you’re allowed to be a two-timer.

(Several girls ask, “Are the boys going to see this?”)

**LEADER:** No.

(Several girls say, “Don’t let them! They might tell. . . . Are the mothers going to see?”)

**LEADER:** No, this book is just for the group. The rest of the time it'll be locked up in my office.

**HARRIET:** My mother better not see it—she'd kill me!

**LEADER:** Why? Are you not allowed to have boyfriends?

**HARRIET:** No, I'm not allowed to have boyfriends.

**VERA:** (Circling two boys' names) These two boys are my babes.

**LEADER:** Are boys babes, or is that only for girls? (Lots of laughter) No, really—I don't know how you use the word.

(Vera stands up, does some gestures, and says boys look at girls' behinds. This is followed by lots of laughter.)

**PRACTICE  
POINTS**

Note in the next section of dialogue how the group members, through Fran, continue to assert themselves since they do not want to follow the leader's prescription for structuring the group. Thus far, they have raised issues related to understanding sex, relationships with boys, family problems, and difficulty in school. These can all be part of the purpose of the group; however, the group leader will only hear them if she is actively listening for feedback on the group members' concerns. The counselor shows more skill as she puts her book aside and starts to respond more to the productions of the group members.

**HARRIET:** (To Vera) Don't do that. What's next?

**FRAN:** Let's talk.

**LEADER:** Well, I thought we could think of a name for the group and make a cover for our book.

**FRAN:** No, let's talk.

**LEADER:** OK, what would you like to talk about? (Putting book aside)

**FRAN:** I want to talk about what Harriet wants to talk about.

**VERA:** Sex.

**LEADER:** (To Vera) Do you really want to talk about that already?

**VERA:** Yes. (General agreement)

**LEADER:** OK. What shall we say about sex?

**HARRIET:** Well, I don't get what my period is all about.

**VERA:** I know it all already; my Dad tells me everything. He told me about the birds and bees.

**LEADER:** (To Fran) Harriet doesn't get her period, and Vera's dad tells her everything.

**VERA:** I don't get my period, either.

**FRAN:** Me, neither.

**VERA:** Neither does Olive, but she'll lie.

**HARRIET:** Yeah, she'll tell the kids in school, "This girl Harriet gets her period." But I don't!

**VERA:** We can't talk when she's here; let's talk now.

**LEADER:** I didn't get my period 'til late. I was 11, and I thought everyone else got it before me. But that's how it was.

**VERA:** I don't want a period; you get cramps.

**LEADER:** Oh, not always. I didn't used to, not when I started. That didn't happen 'til later; it sometimes did. But it's different for different people. Do you know someone who gets cramps?

**VERA:** Yes, my stepmother. We were going to go to the beach, but she couldn't.

**PRACTICE POINTS**

The discussion about a stepmother triggers a painful theme for Harriet. Also, as the session is coming to an end, the “doorknob” communication phenomenon is noted, with a member raising a most difficult issue as the session closes. She sends an indirect signal to the leader by kicking over a chair and then talks directly, and with force, about the family problems they were alluding to earlier in the session. The leader does not reach for the meaning of the behavior and instead brings out the snack. Harriet will escalate the responses until the leader gets the message and responds. Harriet also illustrates how she acts out her anger, and the hurt underneath, when she pours out the apple juice and throws a paper cup at the leader. The leader also misses, at first, the signal of the nervous laughter by the group in response to Harriet’s emotion charged presentation.

(Harriet kicks over a folding chair; leader brings out a snack.)

**VERA:** (Holding up cup of juice) To a good group!

**ALL:** To a good group!

**HARRIET:** My stepmother hates me.

(Leader looks pained—girls laugh; Harriet spits out juice.)

**HARRIET:** One time she said to me, “I wanna rip the f—in’ balls out of your head.”

(Leader shows reaction of puzzlement/annoyance at the statement. Girls laugh.)

**HARRIET:** Then my stepmother, “I know you don’t have any balls, but I wanna rip the f—in’ hair out of your head.” Excuse my language. And once when I was in the bathroom, I heard her say to my father, “When is she gonna get the f—k out of here?”

**PRACTICE POINTS**

The leader is somewhat stunned by the intensity of the emotions and the pain that Harriet must be feeling. She responds with a comment that is somewhat behind Harriet’s description since it is obvious from the statement that her stepmother does not want her there. She then tries to reach for Harriet’s hurt feelings.

**LEADER:** Sounds like she doesn’t want you there at your father’s.

**HARRIET:** My dad hates me. What did I do to make him hate me?

**LEADER:** Maybe you didn’t do anything. Maybe his life just went another way, but it hurts.

(Meanwhile there is nervous laughter from others.)

**PRACTICE POINTS**

The leader is tuning in to Harriet’s pain but misses the signal from the second client—the group—whose members are feeling anxious about the themes raised by Harriet. The laughter is a form of flight because the age of the members and the stage of group development make it difficult to address such powerful feelings. Vera also appears to be indirectly raising issues as she returns to the inappropriate sexual content of conversations with her father.

**LEADER:** Vera, it’s hard enough for Harriet to say, without you laughing.

(Harriet is also laughing, hard, almost crying, pounding her empty cup into the floor, and then she throws it at the leader. She picks up the jug of apple juice, looks at each

person, and begins to pour it onto the floor. All come forward to intervene, and Harriet puts the juice down. The leader gently takes Harriet by shoulders.)

**LEADER:** Harriet, you can't do that. If you're mad, you can tell us you're mad.

(As the leader goes back to her place in the circle, Fran, next to Harriet, also holds Harriet's shoulders kindly. Harriet lets her.)

**LEADER:** See, Harriet, Fran's also trying to help you calm down.

**VERA:** (Helping dry the rug and addressing the comment to the group leader) Look at what we put you through. . . .

**LEADER:** No, it's not that; we just can't do something like that.

**HARRIET:** I'm sorry. I spilled the juice on purpose.

**LEADER:** Yes, OK.

**VERA:** Harriet said "f" three times. . . . My father lets me swear, only not gross words, like c-nt . . . yuck.

**LEADER:** That's a slang word. Does your mother let you?

**VERA:** No. Can I say something dirty?

**LEADER:** (To Fran and Harriet) Is it OK or . . . ? (Nods, affirmation) OK.

(Vera tells about her father's collection of hats, including one with a raised middle finger, one with bird droppings painted on, and one with "boob inspector" and two plastic "boobs" on it. Harriet laughs and laughs and gleefully repeats.)

**LEADER:** If I saw someone wearing that on the street, I'd feel uncomfortable.

**HARRIET:** Not me, I'd laugh and laugh. (As she does)

**VERA:** My father was going to wear it when he took me to the dentist.

**LEADER:** What did you say?

**VERA:** I said, "Don't, you'll embarrass me."

**LEADER:** (To Fran, who has been listening intently, but not saying much) Do you have something you wanted to say?

**FRAN:** I'm not sure . . . .

**LEADER:** We'll have more chances next time. It's almost time to go now.

**FRAN:** (Starts to get giggly and jumpy) Sex! Can we write "sex" on the walls?

**LEADER:** No, we can't write anything on the walls; only in our minds but not really on the wall.

**HARRIET:** (Accusingly, to leader) Now you put it in my mind!

(The leader laughs, accepting the joke. Discussion continues about how they want to stay longer and "Can we keep talking?")

**LEADER:** You can keep talking downstairs, but I need to work.

(Someone asks, as we're all cleaning up, whether we'll meet all year.)

**LEADER:** Yes, from now until April, though we'll take a break around Christmas, because my school has a vacation.

**FRAN:** (Worriedly) Are you a teacher?

**LEADER:** No, I'm a student. I'm going to school to learn to be a counselor, and 2 days a week I'm here, working. On Fridays, from 3 to 4, I'm here with you for our group.

We might want to start thinking about some rules, like one at a time talking. . . . I was thinking that next time we might go out for a walk. Is that OK?

**HARRIET:** Just around the block, then we should come back and talk.

(We finish planning where we'll walk next week, if the weather is good.)

**PRACTICE POINTS**

It's clear that even with the uncertain contracting, the lack of leader clarity about her role, and the unresolved issue of confidentiality, the group members were anxious to have a female adult they could talk to about the themes of sex, family problems, friends, and school. It's interesting to note the leader's continued ambivalence, evident in her suggestion that they go on a walk at the next session. The internal leader, Harriet, is willing to compromise but insists that the walk be a short one.

**PRACTICE SUMMARY**

On reflection, this first meeting has raised some powerful issues and hinted at others—such as the sexually charged family life of one student and powerful feelings of rejection—which may be why these young girls are anxious to talk. The group leader has to be at least open to the idea that there may be some initial indirect offerings of themes related to physical and even sexual abuse behind some of the acting-out behavior. With good supervision and ongoing support, the leader should be able to begin to respond in more depth to the issues raised by the members. The devices, such as the book or other activities, can still be helpful as long as they are tools for the members rather than being tools for the leader.

***Inner-City Elementary School Children: The Impact of Violence in the Family***

In the next illustration, we get a good feel for some of the external community and family factors that are affecting the students' emotional and rational development and their performance in school. Students living often chaotic and at times dangerous lives cannot be expected to come to school, close the door, and leave all of those issues behind.

**PRACTICE POINTS**

The group leader makes a start in helping the members share these incidents and begin to get some emotional support. Note the counselor's willingness to examine her own feelings and fears as well as charting her next steps needed to address these powerful issues.

**Purpose:** Discussion group (with special attention to violent school behavior)

**Gender of Members:** Female

**Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Identification of Members:** Two are African American, and the third is African American and Hispanic.

***Meeting 2***

I asked if anyone had something they wanted to talk about today. Both Shaquandra's and Asia's hands shot up. I told them to decide who goes first. They pointed at each other and said, "You go first." Maria said nothing. It went back and forth for a few minutes with "You," "No, you," "No, you," when finally Shaquandra said, "Oh, I will." She launched into a long, detailed account of how her stepfather tried to kill her mother. He was hiding in the room and she tried to get a gun but she could not get it because he pushed her down. She was talking very rapidly and staring blankly. She made no direct eye contact with anyone.

Finally, she paused, taking a deep breath. I said, "Wow, that's a lot of information all at once—sounds scary." She said, "Yeah." I asked her how that felt to her. She said, "It feels bad. I'm scared of him, but he's going to jail." Asia quickly chimed in, "Yeah, it feels bad."



Then she launched into a similar story about an uncle who tried to kill her mother, but Asia hit him. “He’s going to jail too, but I’m scared if he gets out he’ll try to kill my mother again.” I asked how it felt to hit him. She said it felt good. I said, “Wow, you girls have a lot to deal with. It must be hard for you. Did you know that sometimes when kids have a lot going on at home, they sometimes have unhappy times at school?”

### **Group Leader’s Written Summary**

The major thing I would want to do if I had a chance would be to encourage a fuller development of statements the girls made. Due to my inexperience, and it’s having been only the second group meeting, I was feeling my way and did not explore as much as I would now. At the time, there was nothing coming from the group that could explain my last intervention statement. I think it meant I was scared, so I threw in a safe (for me) training manual statement! The Student Support Program at the school prepared a manual with suggested wording of statements for working with the kids. Statements such as “Did you know that when kids are unhappy at home, they often have problems at school?” is a vintage example that I took verbatim. In retrospect, I would still want to tie the school behavior together with the home problems at some point, but I would not feel so compelled to run away from the violence issues. I have a much better comfort level with tougher issues now.

#### **PRACTICE SUMMARY**

The group leader’s own summary is a good example of how reflection on one’s practice is crucial for developing increased skill. In particular, her recognition of how she felt—scared—caused her to respond in a more ritualistic manner. She realizes she was “running away” from the unexpected statements about violence, which helps her develop an ability to address them.

### **A Group for Sixth-Grade Girls in Transition to Middle School**

In the following example, the group leader recognizes that finishing sixth grade and moving on to middle school can be both exciting—the graduation quality—as well as frightening as the group members move from the familiar experiences in the grade school to starting fresh in a new setting. They also move from being the “seniors” to the “freshmen” with a loss of status and accompanying fears. The students’ stage of the life cycle, moving through adolescence, can compound the issue as self-consciousness about one’s body and the growing importance of peer acceptance can reach their peak.

#### **PRACTICE POINTS**

The example demonstrates how a group can ease the concerns associated with the transition. It also illustrates the task of helping the group members negotiate their environment. The two aspects of the environment that these girls must deal with are the school they are leaving and the middle school they will be attending. The counselor picks up this theme at the start of the meeting.

The girls began talking about going to a new school next year. Jean expressed her fear of leaving her current school, and I asked her why she felt this way. She said that she was happy at here and that she really does not want to leave. She also added that she did not know what her new middle school was like, and she had heard that they had some very strict

teachers. I replied by saying that it seems as though Jean was worried about much more than just the strict teachers at her new school, and from what she said I got the feeling that she is telling us that it is scary to be leaving this school, a school that you have been at for many years and where you know the people, and now you have to go to a completely new school with many new people and many unknown things before you.

Jean agreed that she was quite scared of leaving and having to meet new teachers and new kids. I asked the others in the group how they felt about having to go to a new school next year. All the others shared Jean's feelings and expressed their fears about leaving. Mary said that she was worried about the first day at the new school and what it would be like. I asked them if any of them remembered their first day at elementary school and what it felt like. Vera and Soula, who had come to this elementary school 2 years ago, said they had been frightened but after the first few days began to feel less frightened, especially when some kids began to talk to them.

Betty said that she thinks that it is harder to make friends in Grade 7 than in Grades 4 or 5. I asked her why, and she said that she thinks kids are friendlier when they are younger and that older kids do not always want to be friends with you. I asked Betty whether she had ever experienced this herself. She said that she had moved to a new street this year and tried to become friends with a group of girls on her street, but they did not want her as a friend. I said that she must have been hurt when this happened, and Betty replied that she felt lousy, but she was able to make friends with some other girls on the street. A few other girls related their attempts to make friends on a new street or in the hospital, with some of their attempts being successful and others unsuccessful. They were able to understand how Betty had felt.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

By asking the girls to think about their first day at the elementary school, the counselor was hoping to help them generalize from that experience to the new one that they faced. It was important that the leader neither underplayed the realities of their concerns nor allowed the group members to overplay them. Simply having them expressed this way was helpful, as it let the girls know that others felt the same way. This is an example of the mutual aid process I describe as the all-in-the-same-boat phenomenon. In this case, it was possible for the leader to try to arrange a visit to the new school. The counselor felt that fear of the unknown was part of the problem, and by helping the group members meet some of the junior high school staff and students, these fears might be lessened.

I said that from what they are saying, making friends can be easy at times, but sometimes it is not all that easy, and it is never a very happy thing when you try to become friends with people and they turn you down. I said that it is possible that it is harder to make friends as you get older, but I reminded them that in going to a new school they will probably be going with some of their old friends so it is a little easier than going in without any friends at all. Dmitra asked whether they would be in the same class with their friends. I said that I really did not know but would think that some would be together, whereas others would not. Taxia and some others said that they did not want to be separated from their friends. I said that I could understand their feelings of wanting to be together and that this would make it less frightening for them, but the decisions for this are really not in our control but are made by the principal and the teachers at the new school. I continued by saying that I realize that they are all worried about the unknowns of a new school and about being separated from their friends. These are real worries, and I can feel for them.

I told them that I had an idea that might help reduce some of their worries, and I wanted to share it with them for a few minutes. I asked them if it were possible for us to arrange a visit to visit their new school, to see the school, meet some of the teachers and students, would they would be interested. All of the girls were extremely excited and expressed their enthusiasm about the idea. I told them that I was glad that they wanted to go, and I would try very hard to see if it could be arranged, but I could not assure them that we would definitely go. The girls were able to accept this and told me that they hoped it would be possible. I then said that we would talk more about this next week, once I knew if it was at all possible, but perhaps now we could continue our discussion where we had left off before I introduced the idea.

Lola began to speak and said that she wants to make some new friends next year, but she is worried about what the kids at the new school will think of her. I encouraged her to elaborate on this point. She was concerned with what kids might think about her looks, the way she dresses, and just her in general. I asked her how she thinks others feel about her now. She said that she thinks others like her, but sometimes she is really not sure. At this point others in the group responded to what Lola said and began to express positive, warm feelings toward Lola and told her that they liked her. Lola seemed to feel better when she heard this. I credited Lola and the others for being able to express and share feelings that are often difficult to express. I then asked whether others were worried about what other kids at the new school will think about them. The girls continued this discussion for some time.

#### PRACTICE SUMMARY

In this example, the leader was able to arrange a visit to the middle school, and the girls received a positive and accepting welcoming from the new school's counselor. They were able to share their concerns and their hopes that they might be able to even be in the same class. No promises were made, but they were assured that their preferences would be considered. The middle school counselor also showed them the location of her office and invited them to stop by to say hello when they arrived in the fall. She explained that she could try to help them with any problems they had and that she thought their teachers would also be willing to help them make their adjustment. The girls returned to their elementary school excited about attending their new school in the fall.

#### ***Working with Mothers of Underachieving Sixth-Grade Boys***

In addition to working with students, counselors can also be helpful reaching out to parents to help them help their children. Recruiting parents into groups such as this one can be complicated depending on the parents' education, social class, race, and ethnicity. Parents may be intimidated at the idea of coming to their child's school. They may experience the call to attend a group as a sign of blaming them for the children's underachieving, which is a not uncommon attitude held and expressed by frustrated teachers and administrators. Also, if their own school experiences were negative—for example, if they are persons of color and they have experienced what they perceived as white teachers and staff relating to them in a stereotypical and racist manner—their reluctance to come in may be related to unfinished business from their own childhood.

Many of these barriers to participation were discussed earlier in the group formation discussion (Chapter 4). Other issues that need to be considered for parent groups include the time the group meeting is held to respect working schedules and the

availability of child care at the school. It's important to understand that if the counselor does not get an immediate positive response, or if parents say yes but then do not show up, it may not be because they don't care about their children's education. Second and third efforts, with attention to the parents' previous experiences, may make the difference, as will the provision of structural supports that facilitate attendance. One of the best ways to help the children is by providing nonjudgmental support for the parents.

The following example is a group for mothers of sixth-grade boys who were underachieving in school. The purpose was to discuss how they could more effectively help their youngsters with their schoolwork. In the first meeting, the members began with a general discussion of their feelings when faced with their children's resistance to homework, their own memories of failure at school, their identification with their children's feelings, and their recognition that they sometimes push their children because of their own need for success.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

At a later meeting reported here, the group leader recognized the need to focus on specific methods and techniques for helping their children with their work.

I said that I thought it would be useful if they described what actually happens at home concerning the issue of homework—how they handle getting the kids started on and completing assignments, and then discuss the pros and cons of the various ways of handling this. I told them that they had come up with some good ideas during the past meetings and that if they could apply these with their own children, they might begin to resolve some of the difficulties they had been describing. I said that it seems to me that they already have found some alternate ways of dealing with their children related to schoolwork and homework, and it is just a matter of seeing where they can be applied in their own particular situations.

I asked that each describe as fully as possible what goes on in their home concerning getting the children started on the homework and also to describe the means they may use to get them to complete it.

#### PRACTICE SUMMARY

The members needed help to get into the details of their experiences. It is in analysis of the specific details of their efforts at home that the leader and the group can provide help. The intervention illustrates the skill described earlier as moving from the general to the specific. When specific examples were discussed, the leader and other members of the group were able to provide specific suggestions and ideas, particularly on how to empathize with the children's struggle with school while at the same time requiring that they make the effort. In retrospect, the leader is modeling for the group members the importance of providing support (the early discussions) with demand (the request for specificity).

## Group Work in the Middle School

One of the major factors affecting student performance and behavior in general in middle schools is related to the powerful impact of puberty. Both the physical and emotional changes in this stage of the life cycle are profound. The coercive impact of the peer group may also affect behavior. However, it is this same peer group that can

become a resource for more effective and adaptive coping with school-related issues if the group leader is skillful in introducing the concept of mutual aid.

Levinsky and McAleer (2006) address the developmental tasks and issues facing seventh grade adolescent girls in a group they led:

Adolescents face a daunting set of developmental tasks and challenges as they transition, during their second decade of life, from childhood through early, middle, and late adolescence, to young adulthood. Our group members, ages twelve to fourteen years and in the seventh grade, are in their early adolescence. In addition to managing the many implications of the rapidly changing size and shape of their bodies, these young teenaged girls must also begin to psychologically and socially mature as they consider multiple, competing priorities and choices, refine their capacity for critical thinking, and self-reflection, and reassess and redefine their relationships with adults and peers. A barrage of new challenges, demands and expectations accompany this life stage, consuming much time, energy, thought and feeling. (p. 204)

Although the authors refer to challenges facing adolescent girls in their groups, many of the stressors and developmental tasks also apply to adolescent boys, as will be evident in the first group example in the next section.

DeLucia-Waack (2006) addresses the question of how child and adolescent groups differ from adult groups:

Goals for child and adolescent groups tend to be much more preventative and skill based. Regardless of the type of group, much of the focus is on teaching and practicing social and interpersonal skills. Common topics in many psychoeducational groups are the identification and expression of feelings, friendship skills, communication skills, conflict-resolution skills, brainstorming, problem solving and decision making. Even in groups for children and adolescents who have been identified as being at risk or having some kind of difficulty, the focus is going to be on teaching new, more adaptive skills, cognitive strategies, and coping skills. (p. 14)

### ***Adolescent Boys' Group Dealing with Disruptive Classroom Behavior***

#### **PRACTICE POINTS**

In this example, we see how a group leader returns to a follow-up session with a group of 12- to 14-year-old boys ready to apologize for his passivity in the first meeting and then attempts to recontract on group purpose and his leader's role. However, he makes the mistake of thinking of his job as teaching and preaching, which causes him to miss the indirect communications from the boys.

**Purpose of the Group:** To help members learn more appropriate ways to act in class

**Gender and Age Range of Members:** Male, 12–14

**Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Identification of Members:** Three of the members are Caucasian, while the other three are African American.

I started the second session of by apologizing for not talking much during our first session. The group responded by nodding. Mike then said, "Were you judging us?" I said that I wasn't. I explained that because my supervisor was there I wanted to watch and see how to conduct the group. I also explained that this wasn't the best approach on my part because it

is not mine and not my supervisor's group but it is their group and that they can help each other. At that point Mike spoke up and said, "Well, Mr. R., if it's our group, then we can do whatever we want, right?" I asked Mike what he had in mind. Mike said that because we discussed the possibility of watching a movie, he wanted to watch *The Dave Chappelle Show* in class. I looked around the class to observe the others' reactions to this statement.

Mike had stated that you guys (the leaders) probably don't know what we're talking about. Some other members in the group agreed. I then asked Mike if he were assuming that my supervisor and I were unaware of the content of this show. He had answered that we probably don't watch the show and that we should watch the part where Dave Chappelle does the video about R Kelly. I responded that that would be inappropriate for class. I then told the group that I did watch *The Dave Chappelle Show*.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

Once again we can see how the group leader responds to what he perceives as a negative offering by the group members. It would be interesting if he had said, "What is it about that show that you find interesting, and why are you suggesting the R Kelly video? What would I get out of it"? Instead, he responds from a critical attitude and begins "preaching" rather than listening. This is the not uncommon response of starting to respond to a question or comment before we know the meaning behind it. I referred to this as the sessional contracting issue in the chapter on the work phase, suggesting that group leaders should always begin tentatively actively listening and assuming early comments and behaviors are first offerings of themes of concern that may be related to the group's purpose.

I also explained that there is a time and a place for that behavior, and in group it is not appropriate. I then asked the rest of the group if they knew why this behavior was inappropriate. Tom had answered it was because they sometimes swear on the show. The rest of the group laughed at this comment. I responded, "Judging by your laughter and smiles, it seems like a lot of you feel that this is acceptable or even cool behavior." Sam answered yes, and it's a relief to be able to laugh after class. I then stated to Sam that because class is hectic, he feels that he deserves to be able to laugh and be silly. Sam nodded yes. "Well, it is cool, isn't it, Mr. R" answered a few in the group. "That's a good question. Our purpose in having this group is to not only identify appropriate behavior but act on it as well. You've identified that this swearing on TV is cool, but does everyone here think it's appropriate for school?" They began discussing it among themselves.

#### PRACTICE SUMMARY

If role were clear and the group leader had internalized the idea that group members were often reaching out for the very help he wishes to provide, but doing it in a way that is not direct, he might have responded to Sam's comment about it "being a relief to be able to laugh after class." This could have led to a discussion of what goes on in class rather than a discussion of the appropriateness of swearing.

The central point here, and in previous examples, is that something should happen in the group that is different from what happens in the classroom and the home. Group leaders fall into the trap of teaching and preaching when group members have heard these comments from adults before. Why should they have a different impact when spoken by a counselor in the group? One of the main differences in a counseling group should be that we are curious about the meaning of the behavior and comments, the questions behind the questions, the emotions that often drive the behavior, and so forth. A second major difference is that we recognize that much of the help provided,

certainly at this stage of the life cycle, will come from the peer group members, not the leader.

### ***Peacemaking Circle Group in the Classroom: From Acting Out to “Krumping”***

One widely used model for intervention is the use of “peacemaking circles” in the classroom. In this model, all students and the teacher are involved in periodic discussion of classroom conflicts led by the counselor. The theory is that learning to talk about conflicts and to resolve them in a peaceful manner can make the class a better place for the teacher, the students, and the learning process. Specific structures are involved in the model such as the use of a “talking stick” that is passed to members when it is their turn to speak. This device provides structure to the group and stops students from all talking at once, interrupting each other, and not treating each person’s contribution with respect.

This approach sounds useful and may work in some classrooms with some students, but the reality is that the principal often decides which classes will hold circles, and the classes he or she usually picks are ones that are currently chaotic. They may have young and inexperienced teachers who are having trouble setting limits and controlling behavior. In the school in the next example, the principal selected the special education classes, which contained all of the students who were not functioning well in their regular classes. Simply put, the students were not ready for this kind of structure, as is detailed in the description of one of the group leaders attempting to lead the circles.

**Purpose of the Group:** To help members learn more appropriate ways to act in class

**Gender and Age Range of Members:** Male and female, 12–14

**Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Identification of Members:** Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic; teacher: Caucasian

#### **PRACTICE POINTS**

The group leader soon understands that rather than fighting to impose a structure, which generates resistance and defiance, it is better to modify the structure to allow these students to use the circles in their own way and at their own pace. The krumping referred to in the subtitle is a form of dance—described in more detail later—which is also a creative means of expressing frustration and anger. What follows is one of the leader’s descriptions of the early efforts at using a circles approach.

### ***Report on the Peacemaking Circles***

Peacemaking circles at this school always involve multiple instances of acting out behavior. When working with a student individually, issues can be addressed and discussed, with some indication of the student understanding the consequences of their actions. For example, during a one-on-one discussion during lunch, 13-year-old Tiana acknowledged how her disruptive behavior—entering a classroom loudly, swearing at the teacher and classmates, threatening to beat up a student, scribbling on desks and chairs with her pen—affects those around her. She can reflect on how idle and invalidated gossip can sometimes cause her to seek revenge in violent ways. She can even start to make connections between school and the real world, considering ways her impulsivity may impact her ability to maintain a job. I let her know her insights are valued and that she can bring much to her classroom’s peacemaking circle. However, when escorting her back to class, her negative behaviors intensify, culminating in a loud and offensive entry into her classroom.

These behaviors are what we, as circle facilitators, experience during a circle, times 10. The biggest challenge for students in circles and in the school at large appears to be controlling impulses and behaving appropriately when surrounded by their peers. There is an ambience of one-upmanship, of saving face, of defending friends and self-appointed “sisters” and “cousins” from the demeaning comments and gestures of other students. The preferred method of appeasement is typically violent and belittling; fighting on and off school grounds, phone harassment, blatant insults written in bathroom stalls, and rude insults about each other and family members. This is the climate of the school, reinforced by a punitive disciplinary system of suspensions and occasional insensitive remarks by teachers and other staff. “If you don’t take off that hoodie, you’re out for five” (i.e., suspended for 5 days), or, as one teacher announced loudly to another in front of a line of students in the hallway, “All these kids need phone calls home to their parents, but the phone numbers are all wrong. Go figure.”

#### PRACTICE POINTS

It’s hard not to empathize with the feelings of frustration and impotence of the group leader writing this description. One can also understand how teachers and administrators may feel the same. Note how the leader refers to individual members of the group and suggest how hard it is work with individual problems. This represents the common mistake of not stepping back and seeing the group-as-a-whole as having a culture (norms, taboos, roles, etc.) that blocks work rather than facilitating it. As long as the leaders avoid addressing the behaviors as group as well as individual issues, they will not be able to keep up with all of the acting out. Later in this example, when structural changes are made, there is a noticeable shift in group culture. The group leader’s description continues:

To address one student’s behavior in a circle is to ignore another’s. We could ask Jesse why he chooses not to participate with the rest of us in circle, or even try to engage him as he jumps from desktop to desktop across the room, but it might be at the expense of Keisha and Jacob. Both of them have remained seated and demonstrate interest in participating but are on the verge of beginning an argument laced with insults and need support to calm down. As Tiana, Brijon, and Scott intermittently leave the room, without permission, there is an occasional reprieve and the opportunity to focus on the issue between Keisha and Jacob. When Jesse begins to throw things into the circle, the dilemma for facilitators is whether or not to ask him to stop, join the circle, seek a motive behind his behavior, or ignore him. Ideally, the solution may be to encourage Keisha and Jacob to address Jesse’s behavior, embracing the opportunity to model how asking someone patiently and diplomatically to stop doing something is often more effective than saying, “Knock it off before I beat the s-t out of you.”

These moments of direct instruction can help students take responsibility for their classroom and their circle experience, but also contribute to the disjointed nature of these circles. Staying focused on one topic for any extended period of time is often difficult because of frequent interruptions and the exacerbation of behaviors by the students themselves.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

In the following comments, one can note the increasing understanding on the part of the group leader that behavior always has meaning but that the way it is communicated by the students can make it hard to understand. Although this understanding is a necessary precondition to attempting to change the group culture, it is not a sufficient condition. A change in strategy and a modification of the structure of the circles was needed.



In terms of finding the underlying messages behind behaviors, students can be very forthright and often share the complex stories that incite their confrontational and sometimes violent reactions. "We were on a three-way on my sister's cell phone with me and Shakayla and Mia and we was at my aunt's house and Shakayla called Shannon a bitch and she my cousin and I gotta watch out for her so I told her to hang up the phone and she better watch her back and then someone kept calling back on my sister's cell phone and my aunt got pissed and said she gonna call the cops and I know it was Shakayla because LaNiece say she had my name in her mouth this morning when she was on the bus and . . . ."

The stories are difficult to follow and can often be reduced to a case of "he said, she said," incorporating issues of their lives both in and out of school and expanding to include students only minimally involved. Many students are eager to fight and seek such an opportunity. In the circles, we have addressed some of the issues, validating their anger and their desire to protect their name or that of someone they care about. Still, even after clarifying misunderstandings and dispelling rumors with the help of their peers, the urge to confront remains. What students are really trying to say through their behaviors goes much deeper, but there is not enough trust and support in the circles to break through their reticence. The students are private about the impact poverty, sexual abuse, drive-by shootings, incarcerated family members, and other realities have on their lives. There are a few exceptions that reveal just how potent bringing these issues to the surface can be for the group.

For example, one student's sharing of her struggle in foster care and her very real fear of being placed in juvenile detention elicited genuine support from her peers. The immediacy of her plight seemed to affect the students directly, as her placement in juvenile detention would mean her removal from the school. In contrast, however, a circle several months later in which students shared stories of drugs, violence, and police involvement in their lives elicited only nervous laughter and apathy. "My father beat someone up, and he shot at our house with a gun." "We ran away from the cops when they went after my brother for the drugs he had stuffed in his sock." "This guy I know came to my house naked and shot in the head, and I had to calm him down so I could pour peroxide on his head." The influence these life events have on their behaviors is obvious, but how to address them amid disruptions, apathy, and an inconsistently supportive school environment is not so obvious.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

A significant but limited change in behavior in the circles was noticed when the structure was modified in a number of ways. First, the group leaders stopped coming in with "topics" for discussion and instead opened up the beginning of the sessions as a time for sessional contracting. They also began to address some of the initial acting-out behavior as communications. Instead of engaging in a battle of wills over control, they began to verbalize these first offerings. For example, "Jesse seems upset and angry right now, and he is having trouble sitting with us. Jesse, can you tell us what happened? Does anyone in the group know why he is upset?" These comments, at times, would elicit a story from Jesse or whoever was upset, which eventually brought that member into the circle. Other times, members of the group would take turns trying to guess why he or another student was upset: "He had a fight in the hall"; "Mr. Smith (a teacher) was hollering at him in the hall"; "His cousin got shot on Saturday."

The rules were also changed so that if someone felt uncomfortable about what was happening in the circle, they could say so or simply stand up and move elsewhere in the room. There would not be a battle over getting them to stay put or come back. The talking stick

was abandoned, and the group leaders recognized that for these kids, at this age, it was sometimes hard to talk one at a time. The group leader would acknowledge this and then by taking the role of “traffic director” rather than “rule enforcer” intervention was more easily accepted by the children.

A striking change took place when at one meeting one of the most troubled boys came into the room and started “krumping.” The term was a new one for this author, and perhaps for some readers. *Wikipedia* defines *krumping* as follows:

Krumping is an urban African American street dance form that developed on the streets of South Central Los Angeles, around 2001–2002. It is characterized by free, expressive, and highly energetic moves and is a major part of the hip hop dance culture, alongside other techniques, such as: breakdance, locking, popping and freestyling. . . . According to a major krump proponent, Tight Eyez, the word Krump stands for Kingdom Radically Uplifted Mighty Praise, and this acronymic formation can be seen on his videos. It began as a way to release anger, aggression and frustration in a positive, non-violent way and is now used to also praise God. Violent gangster activity was very common in South Central Los Angeles; Krumping was developed in resistance to such street violence. (*Wikipedia* entry, July 2008)

#### PRACTICE POINTS

The group members enjoyed the introduction of krumping into their meetings and provided praise to members for their skills. The group leaders also enjoyed it if not for the artistic presentation at least for the order it brought to the meetings. On further reflection, they began to see how addressing krumping was also an opportunity to address the origins of the dance and its meaning. The *Wikipedia* description continues:

Krumping is a more aggressive dance form than clowning and is intended as an expression of anger or a release of pent-up emotion from the struggles of life through violent, exaggerated, and dramatic moves. Variation, individuality, and movement are the foundations of the Krump or bobble-bounce. “Dising” or jokes are often involved, as well as “sick” movements, such as snaking, grapples, pushing and grimey. Krumping also includes a little fight moves and gymnastics moves, as well as moments of heightened aggression called “buck” moves.

#### PRACTICE SUMMARY

For the co-leaders of this group, both young white women from the suburbs, this experience also reinforced the importance of understanding culture in its many forms: dance, song, music, and art and the way in which these mediums of exchange can be used to communicate if the counselors are willing to watch and listen.

### ***Informal Lunchtime Meetings with 9- to 12-Year-Old Girls***

In addition to regularly scheduled in-school and after-school groups, as well as classroom groups, counselors often work with informal existing peer groups or groups that they organize. One example is a lunchtime group in which students have a chance to discuss with each other and the leader events in their lives that impact their school behavior and performance. One example follows.

**Purpose of the Group:** To discuss life events that impact their school behavior

**Gender and Age Range of Members:** Female, 9–12

**Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Identification of Members:** 8 African American female students ranging in age from 9 to 12 years old. Six of the girls were in fifth grade, and two were in sixth.

My co-leader and I, both Caucasian females, had decided to merge our two separate lunch-time groups. My group had originally come together for the purpose of attending a field trip. My co-leader's group had originally started after the girls were identified by my co-leader or their teachers as needing help with making and keeping friends. We decided to keep them together for a social skills/leadership group. This was our sixth meeting.

Before the meeting, we decided to have the girls from our two groups introduce themselves and then participate in a ball toss activity that focused on active listening and cooperation. I figured that by the time we were done with the ball toss activity, the group would be out of time (we only had 30 minutes over lunch). We had figured we would keep it light because of time.

**PRACTICE  
POINTS**

While program and warm-up exercises can be useful for many groups, especially those in schools with children, it is not uncommon for group leaders to use exercises because the leaders are the ones concerned and uncomfortable in early sessions, not the members. In this case, the co-leaders have structured the first session in a manner that guaranteed they would not have time for any substantive discussion. Once again, we note how the sense of urgency on the part of a group member, and the group's beginning trust in these two leaders who have been developing their working relationship with the girls, cause the leaders to abandon the planned program. What emerges from one member is the not uncommon story of violence in the neighborhood. Children exposed to family members and friends involved in what is often gang-related violence may maladaptively act out their feelings at home and in school. By providing a different way of dealing with these feelings, we see the beginning of the development of a mutual support system.

The group members picked up their lunch and proceeded to the room we used for the meeting. After introductions, one of the members asked if she could speak to me privately. We went into the hallway, and she explained that her cousin had been shot a few days earlier and she was very sad. I asked her if she thought it would help to talk to the group about it, and she agreed. Jennifer told the group what had happened to her cousin. While she was speaking, the other group members listened quietly. When she finished talking, tears began to stream down her face. As I looked at the group, all of the other members were crying as well. I asked the members who else had experienced a loss in her family or the loss of a friend. Every member raised her hand. For the next 40 minutes, the girls shared stories of loss and/or violence in their lives.

**PRACTICE  
POINTS**

In the next segment, one leader points out the all-in-the-same-boat connection between the girls. After some time for the expression of emotion, the second co-leader starts to help the members connect their expression of feelings to the purpose of the group. She points out how sadness can be expressed in ways that are hurtful rather than helpful. It is not uncommon for children to act out their feelings escalating their behavior until someone listens and understands.

My co-leader pointed out that the girls were not alone when it came to losing or almost losing a loved one. The girls seemed to take some comfort as they saw all of the other hands raised

as well. At this point I began to discuss emotions—how we feel—and how when we were upset our emotions like sadness can come out in other ways. The girls were paying attention, so I continued. I explained that sometimes when we were sad it was expressed with anger—anger at classmates, teachers, and family members. The group members nodded in agreement. We then discussed what we could do with these feelings and who could be helpful when they were shared.

**PRACTICE  
SUMMARY**

At the end of the session, one of the girls stayed behind and told the leader she was very upset by the discussion. When asked why she indicated that she had a fight with Jennifer early in the term, and although Jennifer had tried to make friends with her, she had ignored her. After listening to Jennifer and understanding how hurt she felt, she wanted help in how to go back to her and make amends for ignoring her. By providing a vehicle for addressing these painful feelings and pointing out the common ground, the group leaders also help the girls strengthen their support system in the school and community. This discussion helps the girls understand the “feeling-doing” connection and become more self-reflective about their behavior. It also teaches the girls how to more adaptively call for help.

***Alternative Public Day School: Parents of Children with Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties***

**PRACTICE  
POINTS**

In this example, we see the not uncommon phenomenon of clients, in this case parents of children with emotional and behavioral difficulties, using a first session to externalize by angrily raising issues of dissatisfaction with the setting (e.g., the school, hospital) or professionals. Some of these will be legitimate concerns that should become part of the group’s agenda. This behavior may also represent a form of avoidance of painful, personal issues.

In an article on the nature of the stressful event when parents need to be reoriented to the reality of their child’s disability, Roskam, Zech, Nills, and Nader-Grossbois (2008) suggest:

An emotional event, such as learning of the necessity for school reorientation for their child, provides information that is disruptive to the parents’ previous cognitions about and behavior toward their child. Because their cognitions or behavior may no longer be appropriate, parents have to engage in an adjustment process. This process may have either positive or negative outcomes. When the adjustment process has a negative outcome, parental development is seen to regress to a less-advanced stage. This means that the parents’ cognitions become rigid, and maladjusted child-rearing behavior occurs. The regression may affect the child’s autonomy because of parents’ overprotective or inappropriate involvement. (p. 133)

**PRACTICE  
POINTS**

In the following example, the group leaders do not begin with an opening statement but instead ask the group members how they wish to use the group. The group members new to the school accept the leaders’ offer to provide feedback on the group’s contract by externalizing until one member, at the end of the meeting (doorknob therapy), angrily brings home the pain they must all feel. The two student group leaders are too overwhelmed at this, their first group meeting, to be able to identify these themes as a way of helping the group

reach a consensus on purpose. Their anxiety over this session also leads them to miss the cues about “helping professionals” that may actually refer to them. However, the student author’s openness to listening and her astute postmeeting analysis bode well for her development and the group’s potential for success.

**Agency Type:** Alternative public day school, Meeting #1

**Purpose:** Parent support group for parents of children with emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties

**Gender and Age Range of Members:** Male and female; ages: 38–55

**Cultural and Racial Identification:** White, middle-class American

After introductions in which each member stated his or her name, I said that we needed to discuss how the group wanted to use the 1½ hours each week. I asked them if they would like to choose the issues and topics for discussion or if they would prefer that Dave (co-leader) and I prepare an agenda. Linda, a new parent who was sitting to my left, turned her body toward the group and said in an agitated voice, “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’ve had enough of psychiatrists, doctors, and teachers telling me what to do and that it’s my fault that my kid is screwed up!” Several other parents joined in: “Boy, I sure know what you mean!” Karen, another new mother, said, “Can you believe that Kirk’s teacher in public school last year, told me, in front of Kirk, that he’s a bad kid who’s going to end up in jail if I don’t get him help? Like he hasn’t been to shrink after shrink since he was eight!” I looked to Dave to respond, but he remained silent.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

One can understand this opening salvo in two ways: first, a legitimate theme for discussion in the group; second, an indirect offering of the authority theme with the group member expressing concern about what kind of professionals the group leaders will be. A clearer statement of group purpose at the start and clarification of their roles would have addressed this second issue. Also, a group leader comment such as “And are you wondering if we will be the same—giving unhelpful advice and seeming to blame you and criticize your parenting?” would get at this potential underlying issue.

Sharon, a parent whose child has been at the school for 4 years, turned to Karen and calmly and empathetically began telling stories about ways she and her family had been treated in the past by schools and professionals, but that this school was different. She said that the teachers and staff really cared about her son. Carol, another returning parent, agreed with Sharon and emphasized how much her son loved his teachers and counselors. Both Linda and Karen began to agree with Sharon and Carol. They said that they had noticed that, in the first month at this school, their children did seem happier. For half an hour the parents exchanged humorous accounts about their children while Dave and I remained silent.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

As the first meeting approaches the end, an example of a “doorknob” end-of-the-session comment is observed. Although humor can be an important way of coping with difficult and painful issues, it can also be a form of flight; a way of avoiding a difficult discussion. One way the group leaders could have intervened earlier during the humorous storytelling would have been to acknowledge the positive nature of the humor but also saying, “I know it can’t always be something you can laugh about. There have to be painful moments and issues as

well.” As it is, a new member takes the lead and addresses the underlying issue directly. He also does so in a way that demonstrates how he uses “fight” and his anger to cope, while his wife sits silently beside him grieving. Thus we see in the first session the use of fight and flight as a way of avoiding the underlying issues.

Finally, I said, “We have about 15 minutes left, and I want to make sure that, before we end, we are clear about the way we will use this time as a group. It sounds like you all would like to bring in your own issues and topics to discuss. Does anyone have any comments or questions about this decision?” Jack, a new parent who had been silent throughout the meeting, began speaking to the group in an angry voice, while next to him, his wife, Joan, began crying. “What I don’t understand is how all of you can laugh when you know you have a sick kid. It’s not funny. Your kids are not normal members of society!”

#### PRACTICE POINTS

In addition to raising the underlying pain and sadness, Jack was also showing the group how he and his wife Joan handled their feelings. He expresses the anger and she the pain. Although this is not a married couples’ group, the specific ways that couples handle the impact of having a troubled child and how that affects their parenting and their relationship would be appropriate for discussion. This can easily be an issue for all of the parents who may, more or less, have a similar “division of labor” between husband and wife. How can they help each other deal with this ongoing stress and with the not uncommon grieving for the loss of the “normal” child they thought they would have? With this interpretation, we see another example of how the process can be integrated with the content as the leader identifies what is happening (the process) and helps deepen the discussion on the content.

The room went dead silent as each member avoided eye contact with anyone. After a minute of silence, I said, “I think people have different ways of dealing with pain. Some use anger, tears, laughter. Each of these emotions has been expressed here tonight. Does anyone have a response to Jack?” Sharon said, “I get angry and sad all the time, but sometimes I need to laugh. If I didn’t have humor in my life, I wouldn’t be able to get through the day.” The other parents nodded in agreement. Jack was looking around the room, but not at the group. Joan was staring at the floor. Both remained silent. After a brief silence, Dave (the co-leader) said, “Looks like we’re out of time. Thanks for coming, and we’ll see you next week.”

#### Summary of My Thoughts

These parents were ready to participate in the group. Because this was the first meeting of the group, my role as leader was to provide structure and create a safe environment in which they could begin to develop as a group. This analysis has made me aware that not listening to my own anxieties, thoughts, and feelings prevented me from tuning in to the needs of the group and of the individuals in the group. There were times throughout the session when I wanted to remain silent but did not. At other times, I wanted to speak. Instead, I was quiet.

I realize that if I had had a theoretical framework to work from when I began this group, I would not have felt overwhelmed. I would have been more responsive to the group process and my role in this process. Finally, I would have communicated with my co-leader prior to the group meeting.

**PRACTICE  
SUMMARY**

Hindsight suggests that an opening statement encompassing the range of themes that emerged directly and indirectly may have facilitated a less confrontational start to this meeting. The moment of silence after the angry comment was an important form of group communication. Rather than commenting that each member had found their own way of coping, which was an important statement acknowledging that they all experienced the pain under the anger, the leader might have first simply said, "Everyone is quiet right now. I think you have all had a reaction to Jack's expression of his anger and Joan's crying. Can anyone say what it was?" This comment, addressing the process taking place in the group, would both help to establish a norm of honest communication as well as open up a central and painful issue for every parent—namely, "Our children are not normal and don't now and perhaps never will fit into our society." Given the effort to analyze her own feelings and practice in this first session, this group leader is well on the way to understanding these parents and helping them create a culture for work rather than an illusion of work. Jack is an important internal leader in this sense.

## Group Work in the High School

Although many of the student-to-student and student-to-teacher conflict issues discussed in the previous session emerge at the higher grade levels, there are also differences. High dropout rates may mean that the many troubled and acting-out students are no longer in school. Conflicts between students in the classroom, in the halls, and outside school still occur, and many of the groups described in the previous session are still appropriate. A major difference is the stage of the educational cycle and of the life cycle these students are experiencing. While the initial turmoil of adolescence may be receding, students are preparing to move into a new stage of identity development. This transition can be difficult. For most students, their formal and required education experience is ending, and they need to consider moving on to early young adult roles involving work or further education and, for some, assuming a parent role.

This section begins with an example of work with students suspended from school for violence, substance abuse, or weapons possession. This project offers group counseling as well as ongoing educational support in a setting away from the suspending school.

### ***The VISA Center: A 2-Week (10-Day) Intensive Intervention for Suspended Students***

The VISA (Vision, Integrity, Service, and Accountability) Center was designed to offer suspended public school children in Buffalo, New York, an opportunity to explore alternatives to violence-related behaviors within a structured, supportive environment. I founded and directed the center, located at the University at Buffalo. Assignment to the VISA Center was offered as an alternative to the school district's regular formal suspension program, which consisted of 1 to 2 hours of daily home instruction provided by a teacher during after-school hours. In reality, by the time home instruction was arranged, students were often returning to school with no significant intervention or support. Resuspension was often the result. The 2-week program served 30 students at a time, in three groups of 10, with a combination of academics in four subject areas (three full-time teachers) designed to help the students not fall behind in the school work and psychoeducational groups as well as mutual aid support groups provided by full-time social workers and counselors. A summary of the research

associated with this project can be found in Appendix A. For a full report on the project, go to [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/research/projectdocs/VISA\\_Center\\_Report.pdf](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/research/projectdocs/VISA_Center_Report.pdf).

One component of this program was a mutual aid group experience, based on my group counseling model (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005; Shulman, 2008). These groups were designed to promote discussion, peer support, learning, and behavior modification among students who described their problems and difficulties in school and their relationships with adults and peers at school, at home, and in their communities. For example, students would describe conflict situations with either teachers or other students and their inability to avoid physical fights without losing face. For most of the students, these discussions also revealed the extent of community violence as well as family violence they had witnessed, similar to the discussion in the earlier lunchtime group for girls, and how these incidents affected their interactions at school.

Problem behavior in their schools that had led to their suspensions and in the VISA program itself was seen as an important signal of underlying but unstated student issues that needed to be addressed by staff. The program's philosophy was that such behavior always represented a maladaptive form of communication. At times, students were seen as acting out the very behavior that had led to their suspensions from their regular school. Staff would attempt to respond by first setting limits and then exploring the message behind the behavior. It was not unusual to find that the specific behavior was connected to traumatic experiences at home or in the community. At times, the students' behavior was discussed in the mutual aid support groups with other students engaged in the effort. An attempt was made to help the student find a more adaptive way of handling issues and feelings that were influencing behavior.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

In the example that follows, we see how the culture in the neighborhood and in the school can create pressures for students to respond to violent incidents, even ones that they are not personally involved in. For example, Tania was recently suspended and was attending her first group session:

**COUNSELOR:** Tania, can you tell everyone why you were suspended?

**TANIA:** It was not my fault! (Tania was an A student at her high school and had not been in trouble before.) My friend Latisha had gotten into a fight with another girl on Monday and gave it to her good.

**COUNSELOR:** Were you involved in that?

**TANIA:** No. But on Tuesday, the other girl's mother and two aunts came into the lunchroom and started beating on Latisha. I couldn't just stand by and let my friend get beat up. I jumped in with some other girls, and it was a real mess.

**COUNSELOR:** Wow! Her mother and her aunts were just able to come into school like that and attack her. You must have felt like you had to defend your friend even if it got you in big trouble. Can any of you (the other group members) understand that?

**JOHN:** If you don't jump in, then you lose face. Everyone knows it's your friend and you are just standing by not doing anything. What kind of friend are you if you don't stick up for your friend?

**SERENA:** If you don't stick up for them, who is going to stick up for you if you get jumped?

**COUNSELOR:** I think I understand the bind you were in, Tania, it was a tough choice. I wonder how you are feeling now.

**TANIA:** I hate this. I'm an A student! I was going to try to go to college, and now I have this on my record.



**PRACTICE POINTS**

The program recognized that it was crucial to provide feedback to the appropriate school staff in order to help staff be supportive when the student returned to the school. With intensive student contact at the VISA center, staff were often able to provide a different perspective on a student's behavior as well as a report on their use of the program. This group leader provides some reassurance responding to the student's concern and then asks the group to explore alternatives if she runs into the same problem. As the group members help Tania, they are also helping themselves.

**COUNSELOR:** You know, we write a report back to your principal when you return to school, and I can try to help him understand the bind that you were in and that this was really a one-time problem. I can also let him know that you used this program, assuming you do, to deal with this incident and that you are learning from it. Given your strong academic work and your good record, I can point out you have a good chance to graduate and go on to college but that you are worried about the impact of this incident. Perhaps that will help in terms of your record at the school. The problem is this could happen again, and if you respond in exactly the same way, then the school may not be so supportive. Does anyone have an idea of how Tania can handle this differently if it happens again?

**SAM:** I had the same problem a while back when three guys from the neighborhood came into the school and jumped my friend because of a beef they had with him. I didn't jump in to the fight, but I got the security guard at the door to come and help. He and a teacher broke up the fight and got the cops to deal with these guys. I'm glad I didn't jump in because one of the guys had a knife, and he would have pulled it if I did. I spoke to my friend later, and he understood that we both would have been in big trouble if I jumped in.

**COUNSELOR:** It seems to me there needs to be better security at the doors so you guys don't have to be worried that someone is going to come into school and jump you. Tania, did what Sam say make any sense to you? Can you still be a good friend and not get yourself into a mess that you obviously are upset about?

**TANIA:** My jumping in didn't really help since there were three of them and they were adults. We both took a licking. I guess it would have been smarter to get some help the way Sam did. Sam, if you are so smart, why are you here now?

**SAM:** I was smart that time but not so smart when I brought some weed into school. They found it in my locker when they had a locker search.

**COUNSELOR:** What did you learn from that, Sam?

**SAM:** I learned to smoke outside of school! (Group members laugh).

**COUNSELOR:** Let's leave a discussion about drugs and alcohol for tomorrow. In the meantime I want to congratulate you, Tania, for your hard work, and I think the rest of the group was really helpful. What you all need are friends like this to help you when you get back to school and have to deal with the same stuff.

**PRACTICE SUMMARY**

The combination of support and understanding for Tania's dilemma while at the same time opening up discussion of alternative ways of dealing with conflicts helped Tania consider how she might handle things differently. It was important for the counselor to also offer help with the school staff so that this one incident did not become an obstacle to Tania's future education. A report on every student was sent back to the referring school at the end of the 2 weeks in an effort to increase understanding of the student's life situation and, when appropriate, crediting his or her efforts to work on the problem that led to the suspension.

In other group sessions, students revealed traumatic situations in their homes and neighborhoods, including drive-by shootings, physical and sexual abuse in the family, family members incarcerated, rampant drug use by friends and family members, and pressures to join a gang for self-protection. In one example, when a young man was referred to an after-school job training program in construction, an area he hoped to work in, he indicated he could not go. He pointed out that attending the training center meant crossing through another gang's territory. When this was revealed by a number of students, we contacted the head of the training center and had him visit the program and speak with the students about how the center could bring some parts of the program to their neighborhood and how they could arrange some van transportation to take them safely to the center.

Perhaps the most poignant comment was by a young man who indicated he "didn't need school." He continued, "What's the point? By 21 I'm going to be dead or in jail." This triggered a group discussion about a persistent sense of hopelessness and helplessness and the need to find someone who believed enough in them to help them make it through a scary and dangerous stage of life. As pointed out in the earlier discussion of resilience, it can be one caring adult who can provide a buffer to help the student negotiate this stage of the life cycle and find a way to get through it.

## Group Work and Substance Abuse Prevention

Another common high school group focuses on prevention and education dealing with substance abuse, dating, and relationships. With increased freedom and for some students income from part-time jobs, the potential for the use of abusive substances and unhealthy interpersonal relationships is high. Concern about the use and abuse of prescription drugs that can be found in the family medicine cabinet is also growing. If students are not experiencing the problems directly, they can observe them in friends and family members and are often at a loss for what to do. Educational support groups offer help in these areas, as do diversion groups for students already in trouble over substance abuse.

Group work is a modality of choice when considering substance abuse prevention approaches. The many ways in which mutual aid can occur in the group—for example, sharing of data, the all-in-the-same-boat phenomenon, and the opening of taboo areas—lend themselves to the learning process. As children and youth come to grips with the impact of substance abuse on their own lives and the lives of friends and significant others, as they attempt to cope with the pressures of growing up that may encourage conformity to unhealthy substance abuse norms, and as they experiment and learn to use substances in a controlled and limited manner, having an opportunity to meet with other youth experiencing similar struggles and having an adult who does not judge or lecture them may make all the difference in their successful negotiation of this vulnerable stage of life.

### ***Educational Substance Abuse Group: Is It a Class or a Group?***

#### **PRACTICE POINTS**

This first example, which involves a teen group in a school, raises the not uncommon issue of confusion on the part of the school and the leader about group purpose. The school authorities have had bad experiences in the past when students have resisted substance abuse educational groups. Instead of considering that the source of resistance may be the way in

which the group was conducted, the school staff suggests offering a “class.” The leader’s confusion is evident as she struggles to lead a “class” when she really believes it should be a “therapeutic group.” In its strict sense, the term *therapy* implies something is wrong and needs to be fixed or cured. The term *psychoeducational group* would probably fit better. The alternative of offering the teens groups that can help them deal with the impact of substances on themselves and others, a group that can include educational content as well as mutual support and problem solving, was not part of the initial conceptualization. However, since this is what the group members really need, this purpose becomes evident as the group takes its members and the leaders where they need to go.

This example also illustrates the professional impact role of the school counselor as she recognizes the structural problem in how the group is conceived and begins to work with her own supervisor to bring about a change. This would be an illustration of the advocacy role described earlier in this chapter.

**Group Purpose:** Group members are 15 to 17 years old; one white female and six males (five white and one Puerto Rican); dates covered in record: September 19 to October 24

### **Description of the Problem**

My assessment of the group problem involves its hidden agenda. In the past, the school has had difficulty creating an effective therapeutic group regarding substance abuse issues. Considering the tremendous need for a group of this type, as an alternative, the school has integrated a substance abuse class within its health science curriculum. Every Tuesday morning, during the students’ health science period, I “teach” a substance abuse “class.”

### **First Session**

It was the second day of my placement and my first experience teaching a class. I had short notice to prepare a lesson plan and to prepare for my first session. I did not know what to expect. After briefly meeting the students the previous day and hearing an abundance of “horror stories” from the staff, my greatest fear was that the students would misbehave. As I explained to the students what this class was all about, I kept in mind the school’s request to approach it as a class, not a group.

“Hi, guys, thanks for settling down so we can get started. As Mrs. Haft explained, I will be working with you every Tuesday at this time. This class will be focused on learning about substance abuse. I want everyone to know that any questions and/or comments you may have are welcome.” The students remained silent. I was relieved that they were being well behaved, but I was hoping for some sort of interaction or feedback.

### **PRACTICE POINTS**

The silence may have represented a number of concerns and feelings on the part of the group members: “What does a class like this deal with?”; “What about confidentiality?”; “I’m not sure I want to be the first to speak.” If the opening statement was followed by the leader sharing some examples and then moving into problem swapping, that approach would have helped the members begin. Note how Jason responds with humor while raising a serious issue.

“Does anyone have any questions so far?” I questioned. A student asked what we would be learning about. I proceeded to briefly state that we would be covering everything from cigarettes to alcohol to cocaine, and that we would begin with substance abuse in general. Jason laughed as he asked, “Do we get to experiment with some stuff in class?”

The other students laughed and watched for my response. As I smiled and shook my head, I responded, "I don't think so, Jason, but we can definitely discuss any experiences anyone has with drugs or alcohol." Jason replied, "Cool. Rock on," as he nodded his head. I smiled and nodded my head as well.

Now looking back, I realize that would have been the perfect opportunity for me to mention the importance of confidentiality and respect within the class. We moved from the purpose and agenda of the class to the day's lesson. I provided the students with some information on substance abuse in general, gave them some time to complete a worksheet, and then we went over it together. Overall, the students were well behaved, fairly attentive, and somewhat enthusiastic. The atmosphere was that of a "class," something I enjoyed, but something to which I would have to get accustomed.

#### **PRACTICE POINTS**

The students' growing confidence allows her to be flexible in response to the issues raised by the members. Driving under the influence (DUI) is a serious issue for students this age. Their own driving, feeling under pressure to get into a car with a friend who is driving and is drunk or stoned on drugs, and even parents and family members who have been convicted of driving under the influence are all real issues for students and should be discussed in this group. If the leader identifies some of these issues, the discussion will deepen.

#### **Second Session**

I entered the second "class" with a sense of confidence. I had adequate time to prepare a lesson, a good idea of what would occur, and had begun to develop a relationship with four of the seven students whom I had seen individually. "How's everybody doing?" I questioned as I entered the classroom. A few students responded as they settled into their seats. "What are you going to teach us about today?" questioned Derik. "I thought we would start with alcohol," I responded. "Are we going to talk about drunk driving and stuff?" asked Michael. "I hadn't planned on covering drunk driving until next week, but if that is something you want to discuss today, we can. Anytime anyone has something they want to discuss, please feel free to bring it up," I responded. I wanted to emphasize that we could talk about what they wanted, and that we did not have to abide strictly by the lesson plan.

#### **PRACTICE POINTS**

Although the leader attributes skipping the confidentiality discussion to the school's perception of this group as a "class," the real reason is more likely that group leaders do not like to emphasize authority issues early in the relationship. They fear that bringing up the subject will cut off discussion, and this aspect of their role is often experienced as uncomfortable. In reality, raising it clears the air and actually encourages more discussion as participants understand the boundaries.

In the next excerpt, the student group leader begins to renegotiate the contract with her supervisor. Her honest sharing of her dilemma helps the supervisor respond positively. It also would have been helpful if she could have been as direct with her group members, thus helping them address group purpose and the working agreement.

#### **Third Session**

After spending a great deal of time thinking about the last class, I expressed my opinion to my supervisor regarding the "class" versus "group" dilemma. I explained that I understood

where the school was coming from but that I had a strong feeling that the students would be willing to participate in and benefit from an integration of educational material into a group regarding substance abuse. My supervisor was very supportive as well as pleased to openly bring a therapeutic aspect into the students' substance abuse course. After all, a therapeutic substance abuse course had been the school's original desired goal.

**PRACTICE  
POINTS**

The leader's comments underline how important supportive supervision can be for a student and a relatively new counselor. In the next excerpt, the group leader drops the "agenda" and begins to respond to the productions of the group. We see a clear example of the sessional contracting skills described in the Part 1 discussion of the middle phase of group practice.

I entered the third session with my eyes and ears wide open for an opportunity to begin the shift. I felt prepared, supported, excited, and somewhat anxious. "OK, is everybody settled?" I questioned, as an attempt to get all of the students in their seats. "Last week we went over various facts about alcohol and issues related to it. We also completed some worksheets and had an opportunity to discuss questions some of you had in regard to alcohol. I thought today we could all talk about some reasons why you think people drink and abuse alcohol." As I looked around the classroom, I noticed heads nodding in agreement, but no one said a word. For a moment, I began to have doubts about making the "shift."

I contemplated recontracting but felt it was too soon, and I needed to observe a desire among the students to express personal experiences before I recontracted. However, I thought this was an appropriate time to mention the importance of confidentiality—not only to protect the rights of the students, but to increase the comfort level for sharing within the entire "group." "I just want to let all of you know that anything anyone shares in this class is confidential and is left in this classroom among the group. Does anyone have a comment, concern, or question about any of this?" All of the students felt good about the idea, especially the confidentiality.

**PRACTICE  
POINTS**

The student leader's first instinct to recontract was a good one. If she was concerned that it might be too early in the group, she could have shared that as well. Her handling of the group during the first sessions has started to build a sound working relationship that she could draw upon if she were direct with the members. As is often the case, the discussion of confidentiality is incomplete and unintentionally misleading. There are some things that, if shared in the group, the group leader is mandated to report. She would have been more accurate to limit confidentiality by explaining exceptions to that rule. She provides one exception in response to a question; however, there are others as well. For example, she would have been mandated to report illegal activity, such as drug dealing, and to report if a member were in danger from others (e.g., experiencing sexual or physical abuse) or could be a danger to others or a danger to themselves.

"Also, guys, it is important to remember to have respect for someone when they are talking. How does that sound to everyone?" I looked around the room for a response. All of the students nodded in agreement, and some commented "cool" and "sounds good." Paul (a student whom I see individually) questioned, "No matter what we say, you won't tell our parents?" "No, not unless you express harming yourself or someone else . . . and that is for your protection." "Rock on," commented Jason. I glanced over at Jason and, as I smiled,

commented, "Jason, maybe you can start out and tell us a reason why you think people drink and/or abuse alcohol?" "To get drunk and forget about sh-t, you know," responded Jason. Jason's response was the true beginning of the shift. As the class/group continued, I got a strong sense the "group" atmosphere was truly developing among the students. Each student added something to the discussion. However, I noticed that the students whom I see individually expressed much more personal experiences than the others. I think their comfort level and counseling relationship with me may have something to do with it. As the period was about to end, I reminded the students about the confidentiality and thanked everyone for sharing.

#### PRACTICE POINTS

The leader begins to note an interesting and not uncommon pattern in the group. Members she sees individually tend to respond in a different way than members who have just met her in the group. It is very possible that members have noted this difference as well. It is often helpful to simply acknowledge that two subgroups exist and that she has had time to develop a stronger positive relationship with some members than others. She can also indicate she hopes that she can do the same with members who are new to her. Just acknowledging this dual relationship with some group members can go a long way to removing any negative impact.

In the next session, the leader makes a significant shift by recontracting with the members. Although she may feel that the members are now ready, in reality, she is the one who is now ready. Her clarity about purpose sends that message to the group members.

#### Fourth Session

I entered the classroom with enthusiasm and a bit of anxiety. Shortly after entering the classroom, when the students were settled, I stated, "OK, are we all ready to move into the lounge to watch the movie?" The students responded positively, and we all moved into the lounge. After everyone was seated, I stated, "Each of you know that today we're going to watch *When a Man Loves a Woman*. This is kind of a 'tear-jerker' and may hit on some areas that are tough for some of you, but that is what the discussion with the group afterward is for. If anyone feels they need to leave, feel free and you can go to Mrs. Crawford's room." As I looked around, the students nodded their heads in agreement.

"Some of you may have noticed that we've been doing a lot more talking in this class lately and sort of developed into a group. I think it is important to learn about substance abuse, but the feelings involved and the effects of it are just as important as the factual information, if not more. It seems that substance abuse in some way affects just about everybody's life." (As I spoke, I noticed the students were listening intently.) "I think it is important to have a place where these effects and feelings can be shared and expressed as well as comforted and supported. How do you guys feel about having this class be a group where that can happen?"

"It sounds pretty good. I like that anything we say doesn't leave the room," responded Nicole (a student whom I do not see individually). I nodded my head empathetically and in agreement as she spoke. "Yes, the confidentiality is extremely important in a group like this . . . it helps to really develop trust, respect, and comfort, which make sharing a little bit easier," I responded. Derik commented, "I would still like to have you teach us some stuff, but I think it's pretty cool to talk about a lot of stuff, you know." "Does that sound OK to everyone? That we can learn some facts and then have a discussion as well?" I questioned and then looked around the room for a response. I observed several nods and "yeahs."

The shift seemed to be unanimously desired among the group. "Rock on, let's get the movie going," shouted Jason. The students laughed and then focused on the television. I started the video.

As the movie ended and the discussion developed, I felt the atmosphere of a group strengthen among the students. Some students appeared to be apprehensive at first, but as others shared, more students opened up. As the group ended, I went over the recontracting and the content of that day's group. I also checked in with the students that everyone was "OK" with the group. It seems as if all the students were comfortable with the shift and had already begun to form a bond.

#### PRACTICE SUMMARY

These high school students were receptive to the offer of the group; and once the group leader was clear about the contract and the structure, they responded eagerly. All too often educational groups such as this take on a "teaching" and "preaching" approach that students have heard from adults, including their parents, and they simply tune out. Straight talk and an opportunity to connect the content to their life experiences and their own struggles or those of friends or family members will be experienced differently. However, as the next example demonstrates, it isn't always that easy.

#### *High School Students in a Diversion Program*

#### PRACTICE POINTS

In the following excerpt from a middle-phase group meeting with older teen members, participants admit having used drugs prior to coming to school. The group leader must also face the challenge from one member for her to disclose her own drug use. While substance abuse is included in the contract in this group, it is only one issue among others. The leader is attuned enough to recognize that the members' disclosure of drug use prior to the meeting is a first offering, a way of both testing the leader and raising the issue. All of the members of the group have been assigned to a diversion program in a special school as an alternative to sentencing to a detention center. While the group members are older than those in earlier examples of work with teens, their behavior seems more adolescent. This is not unusual for older teens "stuck" in the stage of the life cycle that coincided with the beginning of their serious substance abuse.

**Agency Type:** Clinicians on the mental health agency staff lead or co-lead a number of school-based groups from the elementary to high school level.

**Group Purpose:** The group is made up of the students enrolled in the Diversion and Mainstream class at the local high school. The purpose of the group is to provide a safe haven where members can discuss their concerns, questions, thoughts, and feelings. The group focuses on issues related to self-esteem, conflict resolution, peer and familial relations, and substance use/abuse.

**Gender of Members:** Male

**Age Range:** 17–18

**Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Identification of Members:** One is African American, one is Hispanic, and the remaining five are white.

### Meeting 13

After a brief check-in with members, Don, Matt, and Jake began discussing their drug use prior to the start of the school day. I questioned their ability to participate in group while under the influence of drugs. Jake reported that it was easier to come to school high than straight. Others laughed. Mike jumped in, responding, "You guys are stupid, man. How the hell can you come here high? That's f---ing stupid!" I asked Mike if he has had an experience with using before school. Mike shook his head. Members laughed at Mike and called him a "fat liar." Referring to the contract, I emphasized the issue of respect for one another. Bob (a usually silent member) disclosed his history of drinking before school and firmly stated his decision against drugging. I thanked Bob for sharing and asked if he could say more about his experience. Before Bob could answer, Matt turned to me and questioned my history of drug use. I remained silent as I looked at my co-leader.

#### PRACTICE SUMMARY

While not falling into the trap of a battle of wills over the drug use prior to the meeting, and demonstrating some level of attunement as the leader starts to explore the reasons for this behavior, she does not ask the members to elaborate on the joking yet very serious comment of needing to use drugs in order to come to school. The group must also deal with the issue of limits and the leader's expectations that members will not be high during meetings. This is acknowledged by the group leader, but the limit is not clearly set.

Finally, the authority theme test experienced by the leader in the request for her drug history is, in part, an accurate perception. However, the question may also be an attempt to get at the experience of others who may have used drugs but are not currently addicted. An honest response could take many forms. For example, "I don't feel comfortable answering that question, yet I am asking you to share your experiences." Or "I did experiment with drugs, as all of my friends did, but at one point I decided I had to take control of the drugs before they took control of me." Or "I think I faced many of the same pressures you experience around drugs. I also didn't think any adults could understand and that most of them were just preaching to me and were hypocritical, since they used alcohol." There is no correct response to this question, only honest responses that may differ for each of us. The important thing is to address the real meaning of the question without turning our response into a full disclosure of all of our own experiences, if we had them, with drugs and/or alcohol or a defensive response designed to increase our own comfort at the expense of our group members. This is definitely a moment not to respond with "We're here to talk about you, not me."

## Chapter Summary

The focus of this chapter was on group counseling in the school setting from elementary to high school. Selected examples illustrated how the group counseling framework presented in Part 1 can be elaborated taking into account the different group purposes, level of education, age and stage of the life cycle of the students, and other factors that introduce the variant elements of practice. For example, the difficulties faced by older elementary school students facing the awkward transition stage to adolescence created unique challenges to be addressed. Illustrations of dealing with the impact of stressful family life on school behavior as well as the normative transition process from elementary school to middle school illustrated the importance of recognizing the impact of the life cycle.



Examples of work with middle and high school students focused on group purposes that included violence prevention for suspended students as well as substance abuse prevention. The importance of including both educational material as well as discussion of the impact of violence and substance abuse on the lives of members and those they cared about was stressed.

Special emphasis was placed on working with urban students and dealing with the impact of violence in the family, the community, and the school. A multicultural/social justice advocacy approach for the school counselor was also explored, with the argument advanced that the school was the counselor's "second client."

Examples of support groups for parents that avoided preaching or making parents feel more guilty or responsible for the children's difficulties were also presented.

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