Engaged, Energized and Exploring: Experiential Activities for Group Counseling

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Building an Effective Group

- Group counseling relies on the interaction between group members to enhance the impact of the therapeutic work.
- Cohesiveness is critical
  - Viewed as a main factor in the development of a sense of community (Joyce, Piper & Ogrodniczuk, 2007; Breunig et al., 2008)
  - Defined as the “bond that links group members to the group, the degree to which the members are attracted to one another and the group, and the unity a group has towards its members” (Wilson, 2005, p. 238).
Impact of Cohesion

• Greater therapeutic gains occur in groups displaying higher levels of group cohesion (Burlingame, McClendon & Alonso, 2011; Burlingame, Fuhriman, & Johnson, 2001).

• Research has demonstrated that cohesive groups typically seem to outperform non-cohesive groups and have greater personal satisfaction (Evans & Dion, 1991).
Considering Cohesion

- Using the two pieces of paper and crayons/markers in front of you, please graphically display two words – one on each sheet
  - The first word should be one word that comes to mind when you think of GROUP COHESION
  - The second word should characterize HOW you think a counselor can promote group cohesion
Utilizing Group Cohesion to Strengthen Family-School Partnerships

- Power of group participation and identification can be harnessed to address the psychological, emotional and social needs of children (Evans & Carter, 1997).

- School-based interventions aimed at strengthening family involvement provide a powerful venue for addressing the developmental and mental health needs of children and adolescents (Epstein, 2001).

- Unfortunately, many schools have struggled to develop the consistent communication structures with families necessary for effective school-based collaborative efforts (Rosenblum, DiCecco, Taylor & Adelman, 1995).
Group Counseling & Children

- Children and adolescents are:
  - Impacted by peer groups
  - Impacted by family systems
  - Engaged in developmental transitions that include important group membership and identification components

- These developmental aspects render group interventions particularly powerful with children and adolescents

  Evans & Carter, 1997; Ryan 2001
Group Counseling in Schools: Family Impact

- School-based family counseling provides a unique opportunity for school mental health professionals to observe family patterns, structures, dynamics and processes and to use these observations to strengthen families and positively impact the academic success of students.
- Family patterns, structures, dynamics and processes reveal how families engage with students to set goals, tackle problems at school and plan strategies and interventions.
What we know...

- School-based interventions aimed at strengthening family involvement provide a powerful venue for addressing the developmental and mental health needs of children and adolescents.
- Schools have struggled to develop communication structures with families to create effective school-based collaborative efforts.
- Emphasis should be placed on providing school counselors in training with tools and methods necessary to engage with families.
Strengthening Family-School Partnerships with Group Counseling

- In order to best prepare school counselors, emphasis should be placed on training in group methods and family counseling strategies
- Utilizing group counseling interventions with families in school settings allows counselors to harness the power of group participation and identification while including families in efforts to address the psychological, emotional and social needs of children
Specific Benefits for Families

- Effective way for families and family members to:
  - Build self-esteem
  - Foster group cohesion
    - Develop trust within the family system
    - Develop effective communication skills
  - Learn problem-solving strategies
Activity ~ Building Self-Esteem: Group Strengths Shield

- Focus: Identifying Strengths and Resiliencies in an effort to promote cohesion
- Good for opening or early sessions
- Essence of activity: Group members identify individual strengths and then explore how these strengths are important to group success
- Rules:
  - One side of the card, each member must draw a small picture to represent their greatest strength and on the back list personal strengths.
  - Each member presents his/her card to group.
  - Other members must say how the strength presented helps their group. Each member must say one way that the strength helps.
- Process:
  - Let’s reflect on how it feels to have other group members say our strengths are important. What, if anything, made it difficult to share your strengths with others?
Fostering Cohesion

- Developing a Sense of Community & Trust
- Emphasizing Interaction Between Group Members
- Supporting Individual and Collective Learning
- Promoting Effective Patterns of Communication
Promoting a Sense of Community, Trust and Mutual Support

- Expectations for Group Counselors (Palloff & Pratt, 2005)
  - Clarify purpose and expectations for group
  - Defining environment
  - Model the process
  - Guide the process
  - Evaluation

- To promote a sense of community and mutual support, the group leader must establish clear expectations and be cognizant of his/her role in modeling and guiding the group development process

- A key component of this is designing activities to encourage the development of trust and responsibility to each other
Emphasizing Interaction Between Group Members

- Meaningful interactions
- Opportunities for reflection
- Active listening
- Activities designed to encourage trust and promote group members’ involvement with each other
Supporting Individual and Collective Learning

- Allow group members time to engage in personal reflection and group reflection
- Provide opportunities for individual activities with a balancing group activity to help integrate the individual awareness with group understanding. This helps to build cohesion!
Promoting Effective Patterns of Communication

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Activity ~ Promoting Effective Patterns of Communication Moon Ball

- Focus: Goal-Setting & Communication
- Good for opening or early sessions
- Essence of activity: Group must keep beach ball in air for a set number of times
- Rules:
  - Group sets a goal for how many times they will keep the “moon ball” in the air
  - No one can hit the ball twice in a row
  - The entire group must count out loud each time the ball is hit
- Notes: if a group is having trouble, stop activity discuss possible reasons for difficulty and devise strategies to overcome
- Process:
  - When you have to decide how to complete a challenging task, like you just did in Moon Ball, who takes the lead? When the challenge is related to school, who takes the lead? How do you decide when to make changes if your strategy isn’t working?
Fostering Cohesion Through Communication

• Opportunities for meaningful communication critically important for promoting cohesion

• Communication allows for group members to:
  ◦ learn more about each other
  ◦ demonstrate respect
  ◦ be guided by the group leader to attend to other members
Learning Problem-Solving Strategies

- Group counseling activities with families allow the counselor to observe the family’s process of problem-solving and provide modifications.

- Processing may focus on leadership roles, who in the family is most likely offer suggestions, and how the family system might transfer their process of problem solving to their efforts to address education-related concerns of their children and work with school professionals.
Activity ~ Promoting Effective Patterns of Communication: Group Juggling

- Focus: Communication, Rapport Building
- Good for second activity or early session
- Essence of activity: Group must toss beanbags in a pattern without dropping them as the counselor adds beanbags to the pattern
- Rules:
  - Person throwing must call out the person’s name to whom he/she is throwing
  - Toss must be underhand
  - Beanbags must be tossed in the same pattern
- Process
  - What would happen if one member decided not to catch or toss his/her beanbags?
  - Who is responsible for helping to ensure the student’s success in school?
  - What happens if any one person in the student’s network of support “drops the beanbag?”
Exploring Strengths Through Challenges

- Experiential activities are aimed primarily at increasing self-esteem, trust in others and improving communication processes.
- Activities occur in a group setting using noncompetitive tasks and are designed so that success cannot be reached individually (Wick, Wick & Peterson, 1997).
- Progress through tasks that are easy to tasks that are more mentally and physically challenging (Alexander & Carlson, 1999).
- After each activity, processing is CRITICAL!!!! (Harris et al., 1993).
- Overcoming challenges together as a group builds a sense of responsibility to each other and awareness of personal strengths.
Challenges and Considerations

- Abilities of group members
- Specific goals should be set for each participant before beginning
- Group goals should be set
- Acceptable behavior should be clearly defined (safety)
- Process, process, process – without this step benefits may be lost
Creative, Culturally-Specific Activities

- Discussion of childhood games and team-building activities that are culturally relevant and which could be adapted for use with group counseling sessions
For more information:

- Oxford Symposium in School-Based Family Counseling

- International Journal for School-Based Family Counseling
  - [http://schoolbasedfamilycounseling.com/journal.html](http://schoolbasedfamilycounseling.com/journal.html)
Selected references, more available upon request:


Thank you for attending this presentation.
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