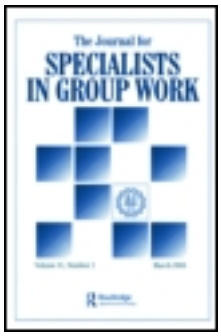

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Building empathic skills in elementary school children through group work

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Building Empathic Skills in Elementary School Children Through Group Work

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Elementary school counselors are challenged to meet the expanding needs of today's children. These counselors can best promote personal and social development through groups, in which peers contribute to development. A group focused on developing empathic skill helps children move beyond egocentrism and build the foundation for social skills. A psychoeducational group model is presented along with theoretical and practical considerations.

> The important thing is being capable of emotions, but to experience only one's own would be a sorry limitation.
>
> André Gide (as quoted in Freedman, Jensen, Rideout, & Freedman, 1998, p. 49)

The school counselor's role has been notoriously ambiguous, requiring them to provide developmental services for hundreds of children, among many other responsibilities. Recent national standards presented by the American School Counseling Association (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) emphasized that academic development, career development, and personal/social development should be equal and necessary components of recommended developmental school counseling programs. Many school counselors address academic and career needs in large-group formats and use individual counseling to meet most personal and social needs.

Although individual counseling plays an important role in helping, most professionals find group work more reflective of real life. As Thompson and Rudolph (1996) wrote, "Many counselors suggest that groups are more natural than individual counseling for working with people" (p. 382). Groups allow school counselors to maximize helping time with their constituents. Along with maximizing time, "children can unlearn inappropriate behaviors and learn new ways of relating more easily through interaction and feedback in a safe practice with their peers" (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996, p. 382). Also, research has

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indicated that group counseling is more effective than individual counseling in the schools, especially for academic performance (Prout & DeMartino, 1986; Wilson, 1986). Psychoeducational groups also offer an effective means to address personal and social needs.

The developmental needs of elementary school students have expanded and are becoming more diverse. Personal and social needs, although highly heterogeneous, form a large part of self-concept and provide the initial developmental path for adolescents. Most of the concerns of young children are interpersonal in nature (Ehly & Dustin, 1991). Often, the most prevalent and most important developmental process for elementary school students is the movement from an egocentric self to the ability to possess an outward focus on others.

Developmental theory stresses this shift from egocentrism to understanding others. The most prominent cognitive developmental theorist, Piaget, suggested that children at the elementary school age move through preoperational and concrete operational stages. Through both stages, children begin to move beyond egocentrism and beyond their difficulties in understanding how another person sees, feels, or thinks (Bukatko & Daehler, 1994). Freud and Erikson also proposed a similar developmental stage in which children focus emotional energy toward social achievements in search of competent relationships. Adler indicated that people's development is influenced significantly by the groups around them (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996). In groups, children learn through the observation and imitation of behaviors modeled by others (Bukatko & Daehler, 1994). Yet, not all children abandon egocentrism, and students leave elementary school with varied abilities to understand others. When egocentrism extends to adulthood, it is often conceptualized as narcissistic personality. Helping professionals routinely relate many problems of adolescents to this inability to understand and cooperate with other peers, teachers, and parents. The psychoeducational group format directly works to prevent future interpersonal problems and uses the group medium to teach empathy.

Interacting with peers requires a number of skills. Children who have knowledge about emotions that accompany situations are better liked by their peers (Denham, McKinley, Couchouel, & Holt, 1990). Children also begin to appreciate the relation between thinking and feeling. An expanded emotional understanding, added to the focus on social interaction, combine to create a capacity for empathy. Empathy development groups can teach the skills of empathy by enhancing children's understanding of their own feelings and those of others (Feshbach, 1983). As children benefit from more effective and satisfying peer relationships, positive effects extend to others. Parents tend to rate empathic children as easier to get along with, and teachers rate them as

more independent (Strayer, 1985). As Eisenberg and Lennon (1987) wrote, "It is important to appreciate how human interaction depends on an ability to empathize, to feel oneself as another, to evaluate where an individual stands emotionally during an on-going interaction" (p. 202). The purpose of this article is to promote and present a useful group counseling model to teach students the skills of empathy.

A MODEL FOR EMPATHY DEVELOPMENT GROUPS IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A psychoeducational group based on empathy development allows a school counselor to facilitate the skills children need to accomplish the developmental tasks of social interaction. As Hoffman (1998) indicated, "Children are active participants in selecting and organizing different sources of information, as well as in sharing consensual knowledge of affective scripts in inferences about emotional experiences" (p. 97). The group format provides a structured and safe environment for children to try these behaviors out and refine their skills. As empathy development groups foster personal and social development, school counselors also can target aggressive behavior. The group can be *growth-centered*—by providing the foundation for social skills—or *problem-centered*—promoting prosocial behavior in students who have repeated conflicts with peers, parents, or teachers.

Growth-Centered Format and Considerations

Kindergarten to Grade 3. Developmental psychology indicates there are two distinct areas associated with empathy. Empathy occurs in both the affective and cognitive realms. In the affective realm, empathy occurs in emotional reactions and the ability to recognize and discriminate emotions. This affective realm is the preliminary part of the curriculum and activities for psychoeducational groups for younger children. Empathy development groups can start as early as kindergarten with emotional responsiveness by identifying emotions related to nonverbal expression (e.g., smile = happy, frown = sad). For example, school counselors can distribute magazines and play scavenger hunts to find someone who is happy, angry, or surprised. Then children can share their reasons for choosing pictures and how they made the link to particular emotions.

Children can progress to experience and be aware of their own emotions (Feshbach, 1983). Counselors can display large photographs or

pictures to stimulate feelings in students. Discussion can center on how each photograph makes them feel. Rudimentary talk about how their stomach feels or what shapes their mouth makes (using a mirror) are valuable learning experiences.

As awareness of one's own emotion develops, later emphasis on recognizing and discriminating between emotions becomes essential. As Strayer and Schroeder (1989) wrote, "In order to respond to others' emotions, we must first attend to and differentiate them" (p. 90). Group members provide the context to learn and try out the beginning skills of emotional empathy. Psychoeducational groups in the early grades help establish emotional vocabulary and awareness of affective experiences. Through the primary grades and emotional understanding, children begin to use language and representational symbols (cognitive abilities) to express emotion (Dwivedi, 1993a).

Grades 3 to 6. Building on the vocabulary learned in the earlier grades, third graders begin to make stronger connections to their own emotional experiences. In the later years of elementary school, students can be prompted to examine their own emotional meaning of real experiences (e.g., at recess, earning an *A*, or making a friend). Day-to-day activity in the classroom is the best stimulus for emotional experience. Board or card games during group can provide emotional stimulus. Even more useful, team-building experiences, in which cooperative activities are essential, stimulate awareness and sharing of emotional experience.

The ability to take the perspective of others or role taking form the cognitive skills needed for empathy (Shapiro, 1997). This cognitive shift is well documented as the first evidence of movement from egocentric thinking. Even though it does occur as part of development, it, too, is mastered in various degrees. This perspective-taking shift requires skill practice for accurate and effective understanding of others. The group format allows children to practice and get feedback directly from peers. Through team building, games, or other school experiences, students can use group as a place to learn to observe cues and ask peers about emotional experiences. As children seek to connect with others, empathy provides the foundation and skills necessary to develop competent social interaction.

In addition, school counselors can use the students and their own creativity to facilitate the group. Training students in drama is one of the more effective and fun ways for students to examine emotions and perspectives of others. Using scripts that demonstrate context around emotional experiences provides valuable learning. Movies, stories, and television can even be material for discussion of actor perspectives.

Regardless of the activity, the procedure of discussing and processing the activities provides the curriculum for teaching empathy.

Problem-Centered Format and Considerations

Although skill development is the overt goal of empathy development groups, indirect consequences of such groups are changes in attitudes and behavior. The idea that empathy or sympathy are major determinants of prosocial or altruistic behavior is quite deeply rooted in contemporary developmental and social psychology (Feshbach, 1983). Eisenberg and Lennon (1987) found some positive correlations between empathy and both prosocial behavior and cooperative/socially competent behavior. Although there is a lack of consensus on how altruism develops from age 6 to 16, most theorists believe that empathy, a vicarious emotional response to the feelings of others, must occur before altruism (Bukatko & Daehler, 1994). Although school counselors foster personal/social development in groups by teaching the skills of empathy, students can be targeted for prosocial behavior and less interpersonal conflict.

Students who are involved in interpersonal conflict can meet in small groups for activities similar to those used in growth-centered groups. In the smaller format, interaction with others can be closely monitored. With these remedial groups, school counselors may have to begin to establish and facilitate the use of emotional vocabulary and appropriate expression. These students can learn in a small-group setting how their behavior affects others.

Sample Group Activities

Many books speak to activities and topics that are appropriate for an empathy development group (Davies, 1999; Feshbach, 1983; Halverson, 1996; Morganett, 1994; Rhoades & McCabe, 1992). The best activities incorporate emotional self-awareness and interaction among peers. Activities also should progress from simple emotional vocabulary or recognition of emotion to the more complex skills of cognitive perspective taking. What follows are three activities that Feshbach (1983) presented to facilitate the skills of recognition and discrimination of emotion, emotional responsiveness, and perspective or role taking.

Magazine collage. Divide group members into two teams. Explain that each group will work on a collage composed of pictures that convey an emotion they have chosen (e.g., happy, angry, sad). Allow them to work in teams to create a collage of pictures related to the theme emo-

tion. Encourage teams to discuss social and facial cues in the pictures or how they recognize the emotion. When completed, the group meets as a whole, and each team tries to guess the other team's theme emotion. The discussion should center on what aspects of the pictures helped the children to determine the theme emotion of the other group.

How would you feel? For this activity, a list of 10 to 12 events that would elicit emotions is needed. For example, "Your friend broke his leg," "School is canceled for the day," or "You find a dollar." In group, read one of the statements. Ask how group members would feel (the emotional response) if the situation happened to him or her. Allow all group members to share. If group members all respond in the same way, ask them to consider other emotions (e.g., if your friend broke his leg, then he would not have to do chores). Later, ask the group to target one member and guess how they think that person may feel in response to the event. Emphasize the other person's feelings. Allow for different opinions and verify the emotion with the target child selected.

Referential communication. This game attempts to have group members assume the perspective of another through communication. Have group members sit in a large circle facing out. Each member should have crayons and a large piece of paper. Each member is instructed to listen to the commands to help them draw a picture. Encourage group members to talk about shapes, colors, and specific directions. Begin the activity by offering the first two commands. For example, "Make a green triangle in the middle of your paper." Then proceed to allow group members to make a command one at a time as other members construct the picture. Group members may not look at each other's picture until the activity is completed. When the activity is over, have group members compare the pictures. Discuss why the pictures are different. Also, discuss the directions given by group members and how easy or difficult it was to understand the perspective of other group members.

Practical Considerations

Various sources provide important recommendations for conducting group work with children (Dwivedi, 1993b; Thompson & Rudolph, 1996). Although a large group (10-12 students) may be appropriate for growth-centered empathy development groups, the small group (4-6 students) will be more useful to remediate prosocial behaviors. An important consideration for this group is the diversity of participants. Along with racial and ethnic variables, selection from different school classes can prevent previous established friendships from combining in

the group. Although some research has shown differences in empathy according to gender, most of those results can be attributed to measurement and socialization (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1987). The learning across gender will be an important part of empathy development heading into adolescence. The group is probably most appropriately separated by grade level, although a mix within one year also can be useful to advanced and developmentally delayed children. It is also helpful to have a heterogeneous mix of social competence to foster learning.

With affect a major portion of the curriculum, group formation requires confidentiality and screening considerations. Guidance and psychoeducational groups may require fewer group considerations in the desire to reach all students, although all students remain vulnerable during these affective experiences. Although growth-centered groups may be open, problem-centered groups require closed membership and fixed duration (usually 8-10 sessions). Often, the school counselor will need to intervene and remediate the problem-focused group to appropriately pace the affective experience of the students. Although biweekly group meetings may be more useful due to repetition and intensity, weekly meetings are more practical in the school setting. Group membership also should be kept at an even number due to partner activities.

As with any school counseling intervention or guidance activity, parental permission is necessary, dependent on school policies. Termination of empathy groups should lead toward later skill building of friendship or social skill groups. Students should leave empowered with the emotional vocabulary and awareness to develop more fulfilling friendships.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The egocentric shift in children can be the door to successful navigation of adolescence. These years tend to distinguish students who have achieved empathic skills. Although most research has shown that empathic responses are displayed more in the late elementary and middle-school years, it would be negligent to wait for remedial needs to appear. This is analogous to postponing reading lessons until only full cognitive capabilities exist. Just as first graders start with simplified books to move later to advanced reading, they also must begin to learn the skills of empathy and social competence to develop full and satisfying relationships later.

Many elementary schools around the country have started to incorporate emotional intelligence into the normal curriculum. Empathy

development groups provide school counselors a forum to address personal and social development needs and provide students a place to work with peers on real interpersonal problems. By fostering peer feedback in real-life situations, students are more engaged as participants in the curriculum. Group counseling offers elementary school students an opportunity to try out new behaviors in a supportive environment in which peer modeling and feedback are continuous. Research has shown that children respond more empathetically to similar people (Bryant, 1982; Feshbach & Roe, 1968). In today's multicultural society, students are tested to learn, understand, and cooperate with others who appear different. School counselors can use the skills needed for empathy as precursors or facilitators of social and multicultural understanding. Unlike most academic curricula founded on limited perspectives, the curriculum for empathy development emphasizes the real-life differences in culture and values. Empathy development groups follow from constructivist thought, allowing children to become their own experts on understanding themselves and others. Not only does group counseling provide a more interesting and compelling activity for children, but, in this sense, it is also empowering.

It is important to consider the need for empathy development groups in the context of other needs of elementary school students. Often a positive self-concept is helpful for empathy and the shift from egocentrism because students may be preoccupied with self-inadequacies (Barnett, 1987). Empathy development groups are not a panacea. But they do provide an efficient format that addresses the requirements set by the American School Counselor Association's national standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and by developmental theory and that allows for multiple perspectives in an empowering way.

There is very little empirical evidence supporting school counseling outcomes, and most of the research concerns remediation (Sexton, Whiston, Bleuer, & Walz, 1997). Proactive and developmental counseling research is difficult because methodology must be longitudinal and "successful" development has multiple meanings. In addition, personal, social, or emotion-laden topics lose meaning when quantified into numbers. Even so, although empathy development outcomes are difficult to research, they are not excluded from investigation. As theory continues to evolve, outcome research also must evolve to ensure the effectiveness of methods for empathy development.

From the beginning of elementary school, the major developmental task that children struggle to master is social interaction. They do so during incredible periods of personal and biological change. As individuals learn to adjust to their dynamic self and the world around them, peers play a primary role for reflection. School counselors need to build

on developmental growth and teach students the skills of empathy to help promote prosocial behavior.

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