

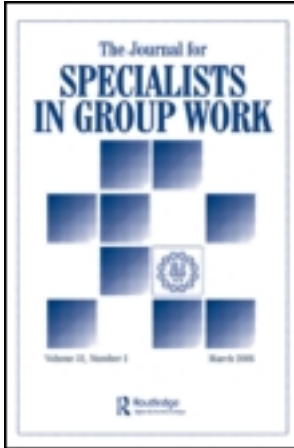
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### Using the Solving Problems Together Psychoeducational Group Counseling Model as an Intervention for Negative Peer Pressure

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## Using the Solving Problems Together Psychoeducational Group Counseling Model as an Intervention for Negative Peer Pressure

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*Problem-focused interventions are considered to be one of the most effective group counseling strategies with adolescents. This article describes a problem-focused group counseling model, Solving Problems Together (SPT), that focuses on working with students who struggle with negative peer pressure. Adapted from the teaching philosophy of problem-based learning, SPT provides students with the opportunity to work toward positive solutions for overcoming peer pressure, while simultaneously helping them to increase their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.*

**Keywords:** *adolescents; group counseling; high school; middle school; peer pressure; problem-based learning; solving problems together*

Peer relationships play an important role in the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of children (Crick, Murray-Close, Marks, & Mohajeri-Nelson, 2009; Criss, Shaw, Moilanen, Hitchings, & Ingoldsby, 2009). During middle childhood and adolescence, peer influence becomes an important factor in shaping children's behavior as the time spent with peers increases. Healthy peer relationships assist children in the development of social skills, social-cognitive

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abilities, and moral reasoning skills (Cowie, 2004; Criss, Pettis, Bates, Dodge, & Lapp, 2002; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). However, negative peer relationships or peer rejection may put children at risk for psychosocial maladjustments and behavioral disturbances (Crick et al., 2009; Deater-Deckard, 2001; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Kraatz-Keiley, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 2000; Marshal & Chassin, 2000; Simons-Morton, Hartos, & Haynie, 2001).

Peer pressure research has shown that conformity to negative behaviors increases sharply between third and ninth grades (Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). During this period, children who associate with noncompliant peer groups are more likely to adopt risky behaviors. Negative peer pressure has been associated with student involvement in substance abuse (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, & Arnett, 2003; Rumpold et al., 2006; Vervaeke, van Deursen, & Korf, 2008), smoking (DeVries, Engels, Kremers, Wetzels, & Mudde, 2003; Kobus, 2003; Poulsen et al., 2002), and unprotected sexual activity (Crockett, Raffaelli, & Shen, 2006; Majumdar, 2003). Because peer interaction is an important factor in social development of an individual, it is important for a child to be able to maintain friendships and proximity with peers as well as be able to ignore negative demands by peers. Thus, teaching social and refusal skills to students susceptible to negative peer pressure as well as encouraging students to develop positive peer pressure in a group setting have been identified as important components of intervention and prevention strategies targeting peer influenced negative behaviors (Ausems, Mesters, van Breukelen, & DeVries, 2002; Bazargan & West, 2006; Schulenberg & Maggs, 2001). The use of role models and accessible support systems have also been found to be promising interventions in reducing risky behavior associated with negative peer pressure (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002; Lohman & Billings, 2008).

The main purpose of this article is to describe a psychoeducational small group counseling model that teaches students social and refusal skills as well as helps them to identify a strong support system in order to reduce compliance with negative peer pressure. The Solving Problems Together psychoeducational group counseling model (SPT) is designed to help students discover positive strategies for responding to negative peer pressure. In SPT groups, students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge but are active problem solvers. As they work through a problem, group members develop knowledge, strategies, and communication skills for effective problem solving. These skills and strategies are effective not only in dealing with the problem at hand, but also in serving as tools for life-long success (Mennin, Gordan, Major, & Osman, 2003; Wood, 2003).

## **SOLVING PROBLEMS TOGETHER**

According to the American School Counselor Association (2006), small group counseling services are an essential component of a comprehensive school counseling program. The training standards for the Association for Specialists in Group Work also suggests that psychoeducational groups, in particular, are designed to target students who may be at risk for the development of personal or interpersonal problems (ASGW, 2000). In addition to being efficient in addressing developmental concerns of students, group counseling provides students with an opportunity to share personal experiences and provide support to each other (Schmidt, 2004). Students begin to understand that they are not the only ones with the particular problem and begin to connect with each other (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). In a school setting, problem-focused interventions are one of the most effective group counseling interventions for children (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007).

One strategy for teaching social and refusal skills is the use of the psychoeducational, problem-focused group counseling model, Solving Problems Together (SPT). This model encourages students to work together to uncover solutions to problems by critically analyzing information that is presented in a problem scenario, acquiring new knowledge, and then applying that knowledge to the real world. During an SPT group, students are presented with a problem statement that reflects their current issue (e.g., peer pressure). The students first identify the facts in the problem or what they know, develop open-ended questions related to the fact, hypothesize possible answers to those questions, develop key learning issues, and determine resources. Next, students seek out resources to research the learning issues independently and then return to the group to discuss their findings. Students formulate solutions to the problem based on their research and discussions. Finally, students practice and apply the skills that they discovered through their investigations (Hall, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Hall, Rushing, & Owens, 2009).

## **APPLICATION OF SPT WITH PEER PRESSURE**

This application of the SPT psychoeducational group counseling model focuses on helping group members discover appropriate strategies for responding to negative peer pressure. Teachers, administrators, and parents may be able to refer students for this group, but many students may be able to self-refer. The group is

designed for six to eight students in grades 6–9. Each session should be approximately 45–50 minutes in length, with a minimum of 8 sessions.

## Screening

Because screening is essential to the success of any group, the counselor should meet with all potential group members for approximately 45 minutes to discuss the purpose of the group and to gain some additional insight into the students' struggles. Questions and directives such as, "Tell me about a time that someone pressured you into doing something that you didn't want to do," "How do you feel when someone asks you to do something that you don't want to do," and "What have you done in the past when someone else wanted you to do something that you didn't want to do," can guide the screening the interview. The potential group members can also complete a short pretest that contains questions related to peer pressure during this time (see Appendix A). This will help provide a guide for the counselor to determine the current knowledge base of the group members before group sessions begin. Students who demonstrate struggles with responding positively to negative peer pressure can be chosen as group members, while students who demonstrate responding appropriately to negative peer pressure may not necessarily need to be in the group. The counselor may also choose to exclude some students, even though they demonstrate struggles with negative peer pressure. For example, if a student struggles with significantly more negative peer pressure or more dangerous peer pressure than other potential group members, then the counselor may choose to see him/her individually. Students within the same peer group may also need to be excluded, seen in different groups, or seen individually to reduce the chance of a group forming within the group. Students with excessive absenteeism or extreme behavior difficulties may also be better seen individually.

## Developing the Problem Statement

After screening potential group members, the counselor can develop a problem statement that reflects the behaviors and thoughts that group members previously described. For example, the problem statement may read as follows:

Mary has been dealing with peer pressure. Her friends and boyfriend keep pushing her to do things she is not sure she wants to do. Mary is thinking of giving in to their peer pressure.

Designing the problem statement is a critical factor in the success of the SPT model. The key to writing an effective problem statement is to include points that the counselor would like the group to focus on. For example, in the above statement, the group will likely focus on strategies for responding to peer pressure from friends and boyfriends/girlfriends. Another example of a problem statement that would be appropriate to use with a group dealing with negative peer pressure is

John has been getting into more and more trouble lately. He doesn't enjoy being in trouble, but he wants to fit in with his friends. At times, John would like to stand up to their peer pressure, but he doesn't want to lose his friends.

In this statement, the group will likely focus on strategies for resisting negative peer pressure while maintaining positive friendships. The group could also explore characteristics of healthy relationships and determine when unhealthy friendships may need to end. Writing a problem statement that is concise and describes the group members allows them to relate to the problem scenario.

### **Session 1**

The purpose of the first session is to begin building rapport with and among group members by discussing a common problem that group members face and asking for their help with finding solutions. Group cohesiveness begins to form as students focus on the goal of determining solutions for the problem statement. During the first session, the group leader discusses the fact that all of the students were chosen for the group based on their struggles with peer pressure. She then asks them if they would be willing to help her develop a plan to help other students who also struggle with the same issue. Once the group members agree to this, students discuss rules for the group and write them on a poster. Group rules regarding confidentiality should be included as well as any other rules that group member's desire. This activity fosters trust within the group through discussions of each member's expectations and responsibilities to the group. The group leader then presents the problem scenario and asks if the scenario is similar to their struggles. The group members discuss the scenario and make a list of the facts given in the problem scenario. For example, using the above problem statement, facts may include the following: (a) Mary has been dealing with peer pressure, (b) Mary's friends keep pushing her to do things that she may not want to do, (c) Mary's boyfriend is also pushing her to do things, and (d) Mary is thinking about giving in to their pressure. The group leader records

the facts onto a large sheet of bulletin board paper so that all group members can clearly see the facts of the scenario. While recording the facts, the counselor facilitates a group discussion about the differences between facts and assumptions. This helps group members to focus on factual information related to the situation rather than their assumptions regarding the situation. For example, students may assume that Mary's boyfriend is pushing her to have sex, which is an assumption not a fact. Therefore, the counselor ensures that only the facts are recorded and not assumptions. Finally, the counselor highlights the point that when students are faced with any problem, it is crucial for them to focus on what they know and not on what they assume. At the end of this session, the group members summarize the session by describing what they have learned about solving problems.

## Session 2

Session 2 focuses on helping group members form good questions that will lead to good solutions to the problem. This session further develops trust and cohesiveness among group members as they focus on a central task. At the beginning of the second session, the group leader invites group members to each share a negative peer pressure experience that they have been presented with in the past. This introductory activity helps to build trust and a sense of commonality between group members. After a brief discussion of these experiences, the counselor asks one of the group members to summarize what the group accomplished during the first session. The counselor explains to group members that during the problem-solving process, students should identify the facts regarding the situation and asks themselves quality questions related to each of the facts that they identify. These questions should begin with the words "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," or "how." Accordingly, the counselor refers the group members back to their problem statement and asks them to provide quality questions for each of the facts that they identified in session 1. For example, if students identified "Mary has been dealing with peer pressure" as a fact, then some possible questions could be "What is peer pressure?" or "Why is Mary dealing with peer pressure?" The students continue listing approximately two to three questions per fact, on the bulletin board paper, until all the facts are addressed. The counselor emphasizes the point that asking good questions can sometimes lead the students to good solutions. The group members discuss the importance of questions when finding solutions. Finally, group members summarize the session by identifying what they learned about the problem-solving process during this session.



### Sessions 3 and 4

Sessions three and four focus on developing hypotheses for each of the questions identified in session two. The purpose of this activity is to help group members identify more personally with the problem statement by examining their own experiences with negative peer pressure. By this point in the group, group cohesiveness has begun to form because students have been working together to help solve someone else's problem (Mary). The topic thus far has been relatively safe for students to explore and discuss. However, during this session, the focus begins to shift to their personal experiences. These sessions will deepen the focus of the group and will further strengthen group cohesiveness as members learn more about each other's experiences. The counselor begins these two sessions by inviting each member to share what they have learned in the group so far about problem-solving. Once the round is complete, the counselor asks students to look at each of the questions that they developed during the previous session. She then asks group members to discuss possible answers for each of these questions and record their responses on the bulletin board paper. During this time, the counselor heavily focuses on students' experiences with their own negative peer pressure situations, their reactions to them, and their resulting emotions. For example, students may hypothesize that Mary's friends are pushing her to exclude another girl in the class, spread rumors about a girl in the class, or vandalize property. The counselor follows-up by asking group members if their friends have ever pressured them to do similar things. Group members share and discuss their experiences with negative peer pressure from friends.

By allowing two sessions to discuss hypotheses, students are able to reflect on their personal experiences with negative peer pressure and how their situations are similar to those in the problem statement. At the end of both sessions 3 and 4, the group members are invited to summarize the session by describing what they valued most from the group session.

### Session 5

Prior to this session, the counselor identifies several resources that students could use to find solutions to the problem statement. For example, the counselor could provide copies of books or print-outs from Internet sources that relate to the problem statement (see Appendix B). These resources should be placed on the table before group begins. The purpose of this session is to help the group members understand that they are not alone when they have a problem; they just need to ask for and look for help.

The counselor begins the fifth session by asking students to recall the problem-solving steps that they have undergone so far and why each of the steps are important to consider when faced with a problem. Once the round is complete, the counselor asks group members to review the bulletin board paper and see if they can narrow down the list of questions to two or three key questions that need to be answered in order to find solutions for the problem statement. For example, using the problem statement of Mary, students may narrow down their list of questions to the following: (1) why do teens use peer pressure? (2) why do teens give in to peer pressure? and (3) how can you resist peer pressure and still keep your friends? The counselor then asks group members to identify resources for finding possible solutions to these questions. Students identify various people (i.e., school counselor, principal, teacher, youth leader, coaches, parents, etc.), the Internet, and books. At the end of the session, the counselor asks the group members to discover the answers to the first two questions by interviewing at least one person and reading at least one item (book or Internet article) before the next group meeting.

### **Session 6**

Sessions 6 and 7 focus on examining solutions that students located in their resources. When students return to group for the sixth session, the counselor asks them to describe the resources that they each used to answer the first two key questions. Once resources are discussed, each group member describes the answers they found while the counselor writes them on the bulletin board paper. The counselor processes with the group what they have learned regarding the use of peer pressure and the reasons that many of them have conceded to the pressure in the past. The counselor then asks students to consider the third key question, "How can you resist peer pressure and still keep your friends?" Students discuss possible options, but many may feel uncomfortable with resisting peer pressure because of the potential threat of losing friendships. Therefore, the counselor asks the group members to use at least two of their resources, with one being a person and one being reading material, to try to find some possible answers for the final key question (how can you resist peer pressure and still keep your friends?). The counselor again provides books and Internet print-outs for group members to explore.

### **Session 7**

During the seventh session, students report their findings for the final key question and again the counselor writes all responses on

the bulletin board paper. The counselor encourages group members to practice some of their identified strategies through role play scenarios. Because the SPT model is student-centered, it is critical that these scenarios reflect the strategies that group members identified through their research, not strategies that the counselor may have identified. Depending on the strategies identified by the group members, they may role play strategies such as, telling the person how they felt, asking another friend if they can resist with them, and using a code word while calling parents. Role play activities help the group members to summarize all of the skills and strategies that they have learned. The group also discusses the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships. The group examines the possibility of ending unhealthy relationships, which may be very difficult for some group members. For their group assignment, the counselor asks students to think about which friendships in their lives needs to change and how they can make new friends. The counselor also reminds students that they will only be meeting one more time as a group.

### **Session 8**

Session 8 focuses on helping group members summarize what they have learned through the group experience and examine how they will apply their knowledge to future situations. During the final session, students discuss their current relationships and any changes that they need to make. Each group member helps the others with strategies for ending unhealthy relationships, if needed, and developing more positive relationships with others. The counselor invites the group members to design a bulletin board that promotes strategies for responding to negative peer pressure so that their work in group can begin to help others within the school who also struggle with the same issues. In order to determine which strategies should be put on the bulletin board, the counselor encourages group members to tell the group what they have learned from each other and what it has felt like to be a part of the group. For example, one group member may express that he/she learned from another group member's experience and that feeling connected to the group helped him/her to resist negative peer pressure. Designing the bulletin board serves as an excellent termination tool because it helps members to summarize the entire group experience and will educate other students throughout the school.

### **Follow-Up**

After 1 month, the counselor meets individually with each student as a follow-up to the group. During this time, she invites students to

share any struggles and successes that they have encountered regarding peer pressure. The counselor administers a posttest to each member to determine the knowledge level that students gained as a result or participating in the group (see Appendix A).

### **PRELIMINARY EVALUATION—STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THE GROUP**

Evaluation of group counseling is particularly important within the school setting given the increasing demands for accountability. Therefore, for this particular group, the counselor used the attached pre and posttests as instruments for measuring knowledge (see Appendix A). The authors implemented this application of the SPT model to a small group of six students in grades six and seven. Students were given the pretest and posttest and followed the outline described above.

On the pretest given to this group, group members were unable to accurately describe why they gave in to peer pressure, nor could they describe any strategies for overcoming or avoiding it. One student was able to write that she gave in simply because she did not want to lose her friends, but the other five simply wrote "I don't know." All of the students wrote, "I don't know," in response to the question about strategies for overcoming or avoiding negative peer pressure.

Responses on the posttest indicated that they did indeed learn specific reasons for conceding to peer pressure and strategies for overcoming or avoiding it. Most students identified at least 3 reasons why they gave in to peer pressure, and all could accurately describe at least 4 strategies to resist it. Example student responses for the first question included, "to keep friends," "to not be left out," and "to be popular." For the second question, some group member responses included "examine your friendships and possibly make new friends," "be assertive and stick up for yourself," "be an individual; be proud of who you are," "develop a code word for family," and "find a friend to resist with you." Students also indicated that they really enjoyed being able to talk with others, benefitted from the readings and interviews, and liked the problem-solving steps for future problems. The only comment regarding what they liked least was that they did not want the group to end.

### **CONCLUSION**

Students who consistently struggle with negative peer pressure often struggle to succeed academically and socially due to the lingering feelings and emotions associated with acquiescence to the pressure.

Professional school counselors can play a vital role in helping these students succeed by helping student examine current peer relationships and teaching them appropriate strategies for responding to negative peer pressure situations. Through small group counseling, the school counselor can help students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to positively reject or avoid peer pressure. According to responses from this small group, the SPT psychoeducational group counseling model can potentially empower students to identify their own strategies as well as introduce them to numerous resources available to them. Through the SPT model, students can become engaged in the discovery of knowledge and skills and trained in problem-solving techniques that can help them become lifelong learners.

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## APPENDIX A

### SPT with Peer Pressure Pretest

1. Why do teens give in to peer pressure?
2. Describe strategies for overcoming peer pressure”

### SPT with Peer Pressure Posttest

1. Why do teens give in to peer pressure?
2. Describe strategies for overcoming peer pressure”
3. Describe what you liked most about this group.
4. Describe what you liked least about this group.

## APPENDIX B

### Peer Pressure Resources for Group Members

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