



# Children and Group Therapy

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## Gaining Strength in Numbers

**S**am has had a very bad day at school. He is so upset by this bad day - a cruel drawing of him was passed around his entire class - that he leaves the group he has been sitting with and retreats into a large plastic tent set up on the other side of the room. "Sam, please come back. Talk to us," pleads Brian, another member of the group. Other children chime in, "Yeah, Sam. We're your friends." When Sam doesn't emerge from the tent, Brian and another child go over and peek inside. Sam is sitting down with his head on his knees. After a nod from the group's leader, Brian, the four other kids and the therapist join Sam inside the tent to continue talking about how school was that day. Sam eventually looks up and gives a shy smile.

Brian and the other four kids in this peer support group know what it is like to have a bad day at school. They are especially sympathetic because they all struggle with painful social situations. The group environment in which they discuss these situations both shores up their sense of self and heightens

their awareness of what others are experiencing. The group setting can offer a kind of sanctuary where a child learns that others, like him, can be vulnerable. In this context, with acceptance and support, there is the opportunity for hurt feelings to heal.

The value of group therapy, or group support, has been established since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when several tuberculosis patients were asked to gather to exchange information and experiences with each other. These patients were seen to improve faster and heal more completely than their counterparts who dealt with treatment alone. For many people, "group therapy" brings to mind adults participating in supportive discussion in the format of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Until fairly recently, group therapy did focus primarily on the needs of adults, but today therapy groups address a wide spectrum of issues for both adults and children.

With children, group therapy is very well defined, with very specific goals. The group experience benefits children and adolescents

in many ways that are not always addressed in individual therapy. In a therapy group, children and adolescents can experiment with trying to relate to people differently in a safe environment, with a trained professional to assist as needed. Additionally, group therapy allows children and adolescents to learn from the experiences of others. Many children and adolescents may be anxious about participating in group therapy because they don't want others (in addition to the therapist) to know about their problems. Therefore, group members are taught about "confidentiality," which preserves the privacy of the information shared in the group and helps the group to be recognized and experienced as a "safe place."

**EXPRESSIVE THERAPY**, or therapy that explores social issues through creative expression, can be particularly effective in groups. Expressive therapy allows participants to work through feelings, scenarios or issues by using a buffer activity. To decide on an activity and therapeutic focus, the therapist might ask

members of the group to talk about events of the past week. Often a common or predominant emotion will emerge as one group member's feelings prompt others to recognize it in themselves. The therapist guides a creative activity for each group, giving general instructions ("draw something that means anger to you" or "imitate the movements of your partner like he is a mirror") and prompting discussion.

**T**he displacement that happens with expressive therapy is often helpful for children, who many times are more inhibited than adults in discussing vulnerable feelings. Children are naturally expressive and often feel more comfortable confronting problems indirectly through expressive therapy. Sometimes children are not directly aware of certain feelings or cannot articulate them directly but may be able to grapple with emotions very effectively within the safe distance of expressive therapy's directed activities.

For example, a child might share with the group that he felt left out in school when he had to sit alone at lunch. Others might then be reminded of times they also felt left out. Using this shared experience, the therapist guides the group through an art exercise, perhaps asking the group to draw a picture of loneliness. Afterwards, each child has a chance to explain his drawing to the group. The group discussions emphasize mutual support and trust.

**ART THERAPY** uses the expressive activity (drawing, playing, etc.) to work on various issues by making them tangible. In doing so, the therapy helps children see their feelings more clearly while, at the same time, giving them a feeling of control. Art therapy exercises can help both the therapist and individual group members realize the seriousness or extent of their feelings. A common exercise for teens involves having each group member draw a picture representing his life 10 years in the future. A skilled therapist who knows group members well can interpret a given piece of art in the context of behavior patterns over time.

**Play therapy** involves having group members use specific toys or objects in a play activity with a therapeutic goal. For example,

younger children might be guided through a play session using sticks to build houses, arranging the houses as a town. In this way, the group is learning cooperation and sharing.

**Movement therapy** can be thought of as play therapy that is enlarged to include the whole body. In groups, movement therapy often involves playing a game with a low level of competition. Movement therapy takes advantage of the natural energy in children, helping them find a focus. Movement therapy can also help determine if another kind of therapy might be appropriate for a child. For example, movement therapists note that kids who have attention deficit disorder or hyperactivity sometimes seem to have a blurred sense of boundaries. Though it may be tempting for teachers or well-meaning relatives to think, "This child has blurred boundaries; therefore he has attention deficit disorder," a skilled and experienced therapist would never suggest a diagnosis based on one factor alone. Like all good expressive therapists, a movement therapist views a single aspect of a child's behavior in the context of a much bigger picture over a period of time.

Children learn through movement therapy that their body is their own tool for expression. Awareness of the body builds self-awareness in general, and a child who feels in control of his body feels more in control of his behavior and feelings. Kids who might be struggling with appropriate social skills, eye contact, boundaries, will be helped by the structure of a group setting.

**Group therapy** groups offer children, adolescents and adults a supportive environment to work on self-esteem while practicing appropriate behavior with peers. A social skills therapy group typically works through trouble spots for its members with role playing or practicing social situations. Real life social scenarios where something felt wrong can be worked over with an alternate ending. For instance, an adult who is upset that he said nothing to defend himself after being harshly and unfairly criticized can practice sticking up for himself, actually creating a script, as his groupmates take turns role-playing with him, making suggestions and sharing similar experiences. Using the same techniques of role-playing and discussion, a child who needs to control his bullying behavior can practice appropriate ways to express or manage his

feelings. In both cases, group therapy can be quite empowering to a person who is struggling with his own behavior patterns.

**Social skills therapy groups** are an ideal setting for anyone who needs to feel more secure socially. The groups for children tend to be very structured, with "rules" (e.g., no talking out of turn) that emphasize mutual respect. The therapist can keep group members focused on mutual respect by using any breach of the rules as a chance to talk (in a nonpunitive way) about what was wrong and about how the child can make it right. Some groups may reinforce the concept of respect with a behavioral "point sheet" in which all group members, at the end of every session, grade themselves and the other children, giving each a rating for following directions and interacting appropriately with peers.

Children respond very individually to different therapies, and what works for one may not help another. While some individuals may respond better to art- or role-play, others may prefer a quieter environment. Some children who are dealing with attention deficit disorder might do really well with movement therapy, while others with the same diagnosis may find that doing art therapy or the traditional "talk" therapy helps focus their feelings. However, once a child's specific needs are determined, all of these groups and their methods of therapy used offer a natural medium for individuals to work through their problems.

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