

One approach to counseling the children of divorced or separated parents includes the children in peer-group counseling sessions. The authors offer guidelines and techniques for elementary school counselors in establishing such a group-counseling program.

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Group Counseling Children of Divorce in the Elementary Schools: Understanding Process and Technique

The mushrooming divorce rate in the United States has introduced new problems and challenges to present-day school counseling services. School personnel have long been aware of the symptoms exhibited by the children of divorce: shock, depression, anger, shame, fear, insecurity. School personnel have also witnessed concrete behavioral manifestations of these symptoms: poor concentration, outbursts, fighting, withdrawal, and inferior schoolwork.

The role of school personnel in dealing with the problems and feelings exhibited by the children of divorce has included individual counseling, group counseling, and, in some school systems, parent groups. This article focuses on the processes and techniques of group counseling for children of divorce in elementary school.

The efficacy of group counseling with elementary school children has been verified (Glasser, 1969; Sonstegard & Dreikurs, 1973). The basic benefit of the group is the development of individual problem-solvers capable of applying their new skills both at home and at school. Although counselors and social workers perceive a need for elementary school groups that deal specifically with divorce, they often lack a workable understanding of the process and techniques required in helping such children.

COMMUNICATION IN A CHILDREN'S GROUP

When a group is offered on the topic of divorce, children begin to feel that divorce is not shameful and

horrible. Just being able to talk about divorce divests it of some of its negative power. It is critical, however, for the counselor to understand the nature of communication in a group of children. The empathic dynamics of the group process for children differs significantly from the dynamics present in an adult group.

Group interactions are laced with a Piagetian egocentrism (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Although a child may be immersed in telling of his or her own story, other group members listen only well enough to pick up on the general theme and exhibit impatience while waiting to tell of similar experiences. Often, the exposition of personal experiences in a divorce group takes on the semblance of the telling of "war stories," with children attempting to top one another with their expositions. The children often say, "You think that's bad? Let me tell you what happened to me. . . ." The counselor should not be discouraged or disarmed by this kind of interaction. Although there is little directly expressed sympathy between group members, what does exist is not a spoken empathy; it is, rather, a felt empathy based on a communality of experience. The themes of the children's expositions are the same: the group shares the very real empathy of a common reality.

Usually each child in the group will have at least one story or event that was traumatic for them. This story will be told and retold throughout the history of the group. The child egocentrically expects this story to hold the same shock value for the group that it holds for him or her. With each telling, the story is stripped of more and more of its tragic power. In addition, telling the story gives the children the opportunity to check and recheck their own normalcy by looking to the other group members in an effort to gauge how much affect *should* be felt. The group's affective response is that the event was not that terrible, and the child becomes surrounded by peers who effectively validate that bad experiences are survivable. This peer validation for children in the early school years is a developmental essential and holds much more therapeutic impact than confirmation from an adult counselor alone.

The divorce group offers a natural blend between the therapeutic group process and the developmental-sociological phenomenon of peer-group membership. Children in the middle years seek self-discovery and self-affirmation through their peer-group interactions. At this age, children seek group memberships to satisfy definite needs as well as to affirm autonomy from adult supervision. The

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divorce group brings children together for the expressed purpose of catalyzing peer-group interaction—interaction based on the group's common bonds, needs, feelings, and life experiences. The children's developmental needs for peer validation serve to foster the therapeutic process. This need for peer validation cannot be achieved in individual counseling.

In addition, a more subtle communication process based on peer modeling becomes a part of the group process. Each group member is at a different stage of adjustment to divorce. Some children are adjusting to recent separation; others to relocation, divorce, parental dating, parental remarriage, step-families, and so forth. Yet, for each group member, there is another group member who has experienced roughly the same dimension of divorce. This experiential spread offers children the opportunity to view the divorce process concretely, as evidenced in fellow group members who model a variety of options for action and feeling.

GROUP FORMATION AND STRUCTURE

PARENTAL PERMISSION

The first step in group formation is requesting the permission of the parent(s) to include their child in the divorce group. Permission is ideally obtained through direct contact with the parent(s). Parental reaction differs and often depends on the rapport that the counselor and teachers have established with the parent(s). Parents are usually quite receptive to the group because it relieves them of some of the responsibility of dealing with the ongoing process of adjustment.

Because divorce brings life-style changes that affect almost every facet of life in the home, parents themselves are often emotionally and physically drained. This strain often results in a willingness to admit their inability to give their child all the objective support the child craves, and they view the divorce group as a welcome support system. Regardless of the parental reaction to the group, it has been our experience that almost every child affected by divorce desires group membership. Children will work hard to convince a reluctant parent to let them join the divorce group.

FAMILY INFORMATION

If a permission interview with the parent is possible and rapport is good, many basic information-gathering questions should be asked. The counselor should seek information regarding the physical and psychological changes that have occurred in the family unit. Ideally, the initial interview will establish an information network with one or both parents. This information network is essential for the facilitation of the group process. Good communication alerts the counselor to family changes that may affect the child (e.g., moving, mother taking a job, new babysitters, parental dating, a pending remarriage, moving in with grandparents). Such information places the counselor on the alert to possible reasons for changes in a child's behavior.

Having good information facilitates the counselor's awareness of dynamics operating during the group sessions. Because both the child and the parent relate experiences from a phenomenological perspective, having information from both parties helps the counselor achieve a more objective perspective on the child's problems. In addition, it helps the counselor sort fantasy from reality during the group sessions; it is not uncommon for children to engage in fantasy about their home situation or about an absent parent. Children frequently report to the group what they wish rather than what is. If the counselor is aware that a defense mechanism is operating, the group can be directed to deal with the defense. The counselor can introduce the topic of wishing: wanting family life to be different. The counselor would have the information necessary to separate fantasy from reality, which could lead to a future exploration of the child's needs and subsequent training in ways of asking parents to meet realistic needs.

REQUIREMENT FOR GROUP MEMBERSHIP

There should be only one basic requirement for group membership: that the child's parents are separated or divorced. We agree with Sonstegard and Dreikurs (1973) that group membership should be open to all children and that group membership should be open to all children and that group membership should not involve intensive psychological screening. In addition, membership should not be contingent on the presence of obvious symptoms in the child's behavior. Children do not need to be acting out or withdrawing to qualify for the group. The divorce group serves a preventive as well as a remedial function. The child need not have obvious or immediately evident adjustment problems to qualify for group help.

Testing and facing parental fallibility are two prevalent issues that often go undetected as symptoms of adjustment. Early in the process of adjusting to divorce and separation, children are often more demanding. These demands may be quite subtle and are usually displayed in the form of a test. The test, which is most often camouflaged in the form of a request, is designed to provide an answer to the question, *Do you still love me?* The child is testing the degree of love and commitment of parents and significant others. They test to see if they too will be deserted. Divorce offers children a real challenge to their basic sense of security and trust. It furnishes them with a rending example of the dissolution of love. Children learn, to their dismay, that love need not be permanent. Therefore, they often test significant others to see if they are still loved. Ironically, the testing can at times be so demanding that children may force those they love into angry behavior, which in turn confirms the children's worst fears.

Divorce also forces children to view their parents in a painfully realistic light. Children must prematurely abandon their idealized views of their parents and face the discomfort of parental fallibility. Children may react to this discovery with disappointment and cynicism, which is expressed in defiance or disobedience. Thus, because divorce and separation activate adjustment reactions that may be subtly manifested, counselors should not limit group partici-

pation to children displaying severe adjustment reactions. In addition, group members should be allowed to draft new members from among their classmates. This will usually happen when a transfer student qualifies for the group or when a classmate's parents separate. Incidentally, the children's referral system usually acts with greater speed and accuracy than the school's referral system.

TIME

The length of the session is very important. Sessions for grade-school children are ideally 20 to 30 minutes. Younger primary groups (grades 1 and 2) may meet for 15 to 20 minutes. Because sessions will be structured for the consideration of one objective, 20 to 30 minutes allows enough time for involvement without overtaxing attention spans.

TECHNIQUE

Piaget's theory on the development of understanding in the child forms the theoretical foundation for the techniques employed in the children's groups. The counselor structures group interaction for Piaget's Concrete Operational Stage, during which understanding and insight are achieved through the interaction of the conceptual and the concrete. The counselor strives to anchor ideas to concrete stimuli. This helps the children to "see" the point and makes sessions more cognitively valuable to the children.

The marriage of the conceptual and the concrete is achieved through the use of various techniques. Some of the most valuable techniques are drawings, brainstorming, role playing, role rehearsal, story books, slide tapes, movies, and puppets.

The use of these techniques requires both planning and flexibility on the part of the counselor. Planning involves structuring the session's initial stimulus by introducing a discussion topic through the use of a technique. For example, a discussion on money problems may be stimulated by the counselor's brief presentation of a puppet play on the topic. This initial stimulation period should be brief and to the point. Its purpose is to generate discussion, not to provide a lecture. As discussion develops, the counselor actively, empathetically, and briefly reflects the children's feelings.

Flexible use of technique evolves spontaneously from the group discussion when the counselor seeks to help the children explore an idea or theme that has been generated during the session. The counselor employs a particular technique to make the theme concrete. For example, a child may express deep feelings about a family situation; the counselor may hand the child the appropriate puppets and tell the child to recreate the situation. Flexible use of technique serves to clarify feelings and further stimulates group interaction. The following discussion of several group techniques for making the abstract concrete may serve to further illustrate their use within the group.

DRAWINGS

Early in the group sessions, the counselor may desire to stimulate a discussion on the topic of family life. This concept may be introduced by having the chil-

dren draw pictures of their families, with a separate picture of the absent parent. The children can then share situations with the aid of a concrete representation of their family situation. For a counselor skilled in the interpretation of projective drawings, the children's drawings are a gold mine of information. This activity may require several sessions to complete. This technique may be repeated when the group members deal with individual fantasies about how they would like it to be at home.

BRAINSTORMING, ROLE PLAYING, AND ROLE REHEARSAL

One of the most successful combination of techniques is brainstorming in conjunction with role-playing and role rehearsal. These techniques are particularly important for the process of re-education, during which the children learn how to clarify and act on their feelings.

When a group member expresses a problem or concern, the group brainstorms regarding the possible solutions to the child's dilemma. When a possible solution is found, the children role-play and rehearse the act of asking for what they want. An example will illustrate:

Tim was unhappy about having to share his father every weekend with his father's girl friend. Tim felt that it was unfair that he could never be alone with his father. He told the group that every weekend he felt like an unwanted stranger in his dad's apartment. Tim admitted that he was jealous of the girl friend, but he felt he could be less jealous if he had some private time with his father. The children brainstormed this dilemma, and as usual came up with a long list of possible solutions.

Let us digress for a moment to point out that the first solutions to these dilemmas are usually fantasies filled with a lot of honest, and often funny, mental revenge. In this case, a few children suggested poisoning the girl friend; others suggested introducing her to a handsome young man. In these early solutions the children express what an adult would only mentally relish. This fantasy period is a bonding period. It is a group expression of total allegiance to a member accompanied by the joy of conspiracy and child-like fantasy. These fantasies help to defuse anger in a positive, harmless manner.

After the children run out of wild solutions, the counselor can direct the brainstorming to more functional solutions as follows: The group decided that Tim should make an appointment to see his father and express his desire to get some private time. Tim and the group decided that two hours per week (eating out or working on hobbies) with Dad alone would suffice for the private time. Then the group moved into heavy action. Tim chose a member to play his father, and gave the member directions on how to act like his dad. The role playing began with each member intently concentrating on the action. Not only were the children seeking to critique and revise the scene, but they were storing the information for a time when they might use it. The scene was played and replayed until Tim was comfortable with letting his father know his sorrow and his desire for private time together. The group even chose to role play and

rehearse a scene between Tim and the girl friend. In the scene, Tim told the girlfriend how bad he had been feeling about the weekend visits.

At the next session the children were dying to review the results of Tim's meetings. Their efforts were rewarded. Tim's conference with his dad was successful. His request for private time was granted, and Tim's father admitted that he was also feeling bad about their growing estrangement. Tim's father expressed surprise at Tim's ability to ask for what he wanted in such a mature manner. The interview with the girl friend was also successful. It turned out that she understood a lot about Tim's feelings because her parents divorced when she was eight.

The group's time and effort had paid off quite well. The techniques of role playing and role rehearsal had desensitized the group to the problems, clarified the issues, fostered active problem-solving, and generated excellent communication.

BOOKS, SLIDE TAPES, AND MOVIES

Storybooks, slide-tape programs, and movies are valuable tools for making concepts concrete in group counseling. The storybook method consists of reading a book about divorce and using each page or paragraph as a stimulus for generating group discussion. Two books that we highly recommend are *Two Homes to Live in: A Child's -Eye View of Divorce* by Barbara Shook, and *How Does it Feel When Your Parents Get Divorced* by Terry Berger. These stories stimulate the children's expressions of similar experiences and feelings. Movies and color-slide programs serve a similar function in generating group discussion.

PUPPETS

Puppets may be employed in conjunction with other group techniques to act out feelings and situations. Puppets may be used in the early phases of role rehearsal to act out a scene before role playing is begun. The children should be encouraged to use the puppets spontaneously to demonstrate personal experiences or wishes. Children may choose to write a short play demonstrating specific group concerns or issues. Puppets are most effectively employed in the group when the children have a definite issue or idea to express.

COUNSELOR EXPECTATIONS

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of conducting groups for children of divorce is that of setting realistic expectations. Children's divorce groups basically serve to diffuse children's feelings and offer peer-

group support in the natural school setting. Counselors who expect to use the divorce group to "save" children from the discomfort involved in divorce are quickly disillusioned. Counseling may improve attitude, school work, concentration, and general behavior; however, the children will never be happy about the divorce. Children may learn to tolerate divorce, but they will never like it.

The loss involved in the process of divorce parallels the loss involved with death. Kübler-Ross's (1969) classic description of the stages of accepting death are operative in the child's process of accepting divorce—the death of the child's family. Children often go through stages of denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and, finally, some acceptance. Unlike death, however, divorce lacks finality. Children usually maintain contact with both parents; however, homelife is never what it once was. Thus, children never really give up the fantasy of hoping that their parents will get together again. Even if both parents are happily remarried and life is rolling without major complications, the fantasy—the hope that the parents will reunite—is always alive. It is important for the counselor to realize that this is not a sign of therapeutic failure, but rather it is the child's need to remember and maintain his roots—roots that serve to validate his or her very being.

SUMMARY

This article was written to aid the elementary school counselor who desires to implement children's groups on the subject of divorce. Counselors can gain a realistic view of the counseling process and learn the nature of group process for children, the mechanics of the group formation procedure, and group techniques geared to the children's level of cognitive development. The article attempts to introduce a reality-based perspective on divorce groups so that elementary school counselors may have an advanced cognitive set for and more realistic expectations of the nature of divorce group work with elementary school children.

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