

GROUP COUNSELING: TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS TO STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.

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This paper examines literature that supports the use of group counseling techniques in the school setting to teach social skills to children and adolescents with special needs. From the review of this literature it was found that group counseling is a very effective way of addressing a variety of social skills problems that can be displayed by very differing populations within the school setting. The implications of this research for the school counselor are included, as well as some cautions to consider before applying group counseling to students in the schools.

Children with special needs experience difficulty in a wide variety of areas, all of which can influence their ability to learn and to use social skills. Some of these deficits can include; hyperactivity, distractibility, impulsivity, anxiety, emotional lability, low self-esteem, aggressive behaviors, difficulty recognizing the emotions of others, and other socially unacceptable behaviors. Emotional difficulties and interpersonal difficulties affect others' perceptions of them, as well as the child's own self-perception.

Often, the difficulties they have, and the expectations of themselves and others, act as a spiral and increase the likelihood that a child will experience social failures. Amerikaner and Summerlin (2001) drew attention to this "spiral of continuing social/academic failure" (p. 340), and offered group counseling as one method of effectively addressing this issue. Authors will explore how group counseling can be

effective in teaching social skills to children, in a school setting. They will also discuss the implications the research has for counselors working in the schools, as well as some cautions and considerations to take when using group counseling methods with children.

With the increased emphasis on results, and the use of research based interventions, school counselors must find effective ways to help students who are experiencing social problems. Counselors' ability to meet the needs of larger numbers of students is significantly enhanced by the use of group counseling techniques (Cook & Weldon, 2006). Johnson and Johnson (2005) claim that group counseling is one way that has been shown by research to be effective in school settings, and needs to be implemented more often. They state that "One of the major sets of skills that are necessary for all school counselors is the use of group processes in a variety of

situations" (p. 400). They hail group counseling skills, for school counselors, as "critical to developing comprehensive programs" (p. 400).

The benefits of using groups are numerous. Livneh, Wilson, and Pullo (2004) emphasized some of the benefits of using groups to help children with special needs. According to them, groups give individuals the opportunity to learn from one another, and a chance to generate solutions together. Groups also provide a safe place for emotional release. In a group setting, children can learn that others face similar problems, and this can help to lessen anxiety or fears that they may have, especially in social situations. Groups are also a great place to practice social building skills in an environment that approximates genuine social settings, and a place where children can develop a social network.

Johnson and Johnson (2004) also explain why group counseling is a great way to work with children with disabilities. In the group setting, children can learn to cope with their disabilities and with the limitations that come from it. Since work with children with disabilities often entails the teaching of new skills, Milsom (2007) feel that groups are the most effective place for these children to practice and rehearse what they are learning. Bringing these children out of an environment that is stigmatizing of them, into one that is more accepting is a great way for children with disabilities to feel safe to practice social skills.

Since the push in schools is to integrate students with disabilities into the general education environment it becomes necessary to help them adjust socially. Court and

Givon (2003) note that, "adolescence is a critical time in the social world" (p. 50). They remind us that the earlier we can intervene with these children and teach the necessary social skills, the more likely it is that they will become adjusted and socially competent young adults and adults. They also remind us that the converse is true: that social isolation will deepen over time. Mehaffey and Sandberg (1992) support this claim. They state that "social competence is considered to be an indicator of positive adult adjustment" (p. 61), and that "social skills deficits may indicate future problems" (p. 61). Considering these statements, it becomes imperative to provide the most effective method for remediating these deficits

Court and Givon (2003) single out group counseling as the most effective way to teach children with disabilities needed social skills. The study they conducted showed significant results in the attainment of social skills with groups of young women and young men. Stewart and McKay (1995) propose group counseling as an effective method for teaching socially acceptable behaviors to children who display aggression and violence.

Group work has also been shown to be effective in teaching social skills to elementary aged children. Social skills training programs have further documented effectiveness in developing a wide range of interpersonal skills in children and adolescents (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997). Mehaffey and Sandberg (1992) provide a basis for understanding why these children need intervention, stating that, "children who seem to need a great deal of support are referred because they lack

the skills to connect successfully with their peers" (p. 61). They advocate for a group approach "to help them gain needed skills" (p. 61). They suggest that the group approach is effective because it is structured to provide positive interactions, which children need. The group setting is also an encouraging environment for associations and friendships. These benefits are added to the list of reasons why groups are effective tools for change.

Implications

The implications this review has for school counselors are numerous. First and foremost is the necessity for school counselors to be trained in group counseling techniques. The literature reviewed has shown how effective group counseling can be with students who need social skills remediation. School counselors should utilize social skills groups as one method of addressing this need for their students and schools. The theme of early intervention was prevalent in the literature. The sooner social skills could be remediated, the better the prognosis for the student.

Another implication is posited by Stewart and McKay (1995). They observed that group counseling provides school counselors with a way to meet the needs of more students than they could accommodate in individual counseling. They note the rising trend in aggressive behaviors of school aged children, and of the increased need for social skills training. School counselors might find it difficult to address the needs of so many students individually. By using groups, school counselors can help a larger population of students.

Further implications drawn from the literature take the form of some cautions. Group practice with children and adolescents is different in many respects from group work with adults. Stewart and McKay (1995) assert that groups with children need to be structured homogeneously for gender. They argue that "girls and boys in the same group tend not to self-disclose easily and find it difficult to share trust, and become cohesive" (p. 13). Stewart and McKay (1995) also believe that groups for elementary aged children should be kept small, and recommend a group size of four to six children.

Children are often averse to the idea of being singled out for groups, especially special needs children who already feel stigmatized by their peers. Mehaffey and Sandberg (1992) offer an excellent suggestion to help alleviate this problem. They recommend the inclusion of socially accepted children into a group. Including socially accepted children into the group elevates the status of the group in the school. Another benefit of this is that children with social skills deficits can learn appropriate behaviors from the other children. On top of this, children with a wide variety of strengths and weaknesses should be included. They also recommended advertizing the group as an activity group to help reduce the negative image that a "social skills" group could bring.

Another important caution suggested by Mehaffey and Sandberg (1992) is that children with severe or significantly disturbing behaviors should not be included in a group. They suggest individual coaching for these children, and gradual integration into a group setting.

Livneh, Wilson, and Pullo (2004) offer a lengthy list of considerations to make when counseling younger people. They contend that goals for groups with children will be different from the goals of groups with adults. The goals for a group of children should be narrow and should focus on solving present problems and issues. Of foremost importance is that the counselor considers the developmental level of the children in the group. This may include factors such as psychosocial and cognitive functioning, self-esteem, self-identity, insight, maturity, and the level of a child's independence. Livneh, Wilson, and Pullo (2004) state that counselors will need a more active style to counteract the resistant as well as passive attitudes that many adolescents may have. They claim that children do not react well to prolonged silence and caution against it. They also insist that self-disclosure is a powerful tool to use with children and that it can be used more judiciously with this population than it should be used with adults. They warn against the use of interpretations with children. They urge caution when using role playing and psychodrama exercises. Self-image and group cohesion are critical elements when asking children to engage in such experiments. Their last considerations are that groups be conducted without the presence of family members or unnecessary adults, and that the counselor be always mindful of the typical concerns of the children at any given developmental level.

Group counseling has been shown to be an effective method for addressing social skills deficits in children. Group counseling can be implemented effectively in a school setting, and can be used to

help numerous children with similar needs simultaneously. School counselors should consider the implications of these findings as well as the cautions that have been presented. With this in mind, school counselors should consider implementing group practices with a wide variety of special needs students.

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