Practical Considerations

The size and duration of a group depend on the age of the members. As a general rule, younger children should be in smaller groups with shorter sessions. Take into account the fact that the attention span of children ages 4 to 6 is quite different from that of children who are 10 or 12. Another consideration in forming a group is the severity of the children's problems. For example, a group of acting-out 12-year-olds might have to be as small as a group of preschoolers. It might also be important to find out whether a child in your group is currently taking any medications or experiencing other health issues. A child who has been diagnosed with ADHD might be taking medications that have behavioral side effects. This could provide a context for understanding some of the behaviors and symptoms you observe in the group. You must also consider your own tolerance for dealing with children who may be challenging for you. As is the case with adult clients, children can evoke your own countertransference. If you are aware of this, there is less chance that your feelings and reactions will interfere with your ability to work with children.

The Setting Consider the meeting place in terms of its effectiveness for the work you want to do with your young clients. Will they be able to roam around freely and not have to be continually asked to talk softly so as not to disturb others in an adjacent room? Will the site for group meetings provide privacy and freedom from interruptions? Is there anything in the room that could easily be damaged by the children or that is obviously unsafe for them? Will the furniture in the room comfortably accommodate active children?

Communicate Your Expectations Be able to tell the children or adolescents in their language about the purpose of your group, what you expect of them, and what they can expect from you. Make sure that they understand the basic, non-negotiable ground rules, and attempt to involve them in establishing and reinforcing the rules that will govern their group.

Children and adolescents often test their limits as a way to ensure that you will keep them safe. This testing is typically a phase and will likely decrease as safety is established in the group. However, it can be expected to arise from time to time. Be intentionally patient within each session to avoid becoming more of a disciplinarian than a counselor.

Preparation Prepare adequately for each session, yet be flexible enough to adjust your format and topics for a given session to respond to spontaneous situations. Avoid insisting on "covering your agenda" no matter what; be creative, but not careless. Remember the broad goals of your group and use incidents in the group as teachable moments to help the members work on new skills. Be open to processing the interactions occurring within the group in the here and now as the power of peers' influence is very effective.

Involve Parents For some groups written parental permission may not be a legal requirement, but we think it is a good policy to secure the written consent of

parents or guardians of any person under 18 who wishes to participate in group counseling as a school-related program. Doing so also tends to enhance the working relationship and gain the cooperation of legal guardians. Include some questions on the consent form to help you assess their perspective regarding how their child is currently functioning. Even if you have a meeting with the parents or guardians, ask them to sign a form; this reinforces their commitment to cooperate with their child's treatment. You can include group policy, meeting times and dates, and confidentiality policies on this form. As well, you can solicit suggestions on ways to contact them to follow up on the progress of the group or other important information.

Parents (or legal guardians) and counselors are partners with a common goal, which is helping the child or adolescent. As with the young people, explain to their parents your expectations and purposes in such a way that they can understand and not become suspicious. Approach them with an attitude of "How can you help me in my work with your child or adolescent, and how can we work as a team for a common purpose?" Doing so reduces the chances of encountering defensiveness on the part of parents. Spend an evening presenting your program in a group meeting of parents, or send them a letter briefly describing your groups. Providing parents with an outline of the goals of the groups and the topics, even sample activities, helps them to understand what is happening in the group without asking the group leader to break confidentiality. If you have the staff resources, organize a parent group at the same time that their children are participating in their own counseling group. As their children develop new or additional skills, the parents and families are able to benefit from similar opportunities.

Steen, Bauman, and Smith (2007) suggest that school counselors give presentations to parents, teachers, and administrators about the therapeutic factors involved in small group work as a way to increase their understanding of how groups work and the value of small groups in the overall mission of the academic program. Getting input from parents and teachers about their concerns can be an important step in gaining needed support for doing groups in the school.

Strategies in the Group

Self-Disclosure Consider the purposes and goals of your group in deciding how much to encourage self-disclosure, especially in matters relating to family life or personal trauma. Some personal topics may be beyond the scope of the group's purpose and more appropriate for individual therapy. Use judgment as to the appropriateness of letting a child go into detail about personal matters in a group. Anticipate some personal material they may disclose and how you might address this. For example, in a group in an elementary school, you may not want to let a child go into detail about an apparent physical abuse situation. If this occurs, encourage the child to express how he or she was affected by the incident. After the session ends, follow the procedures outlined by your school or agency to report suspected child abuse.

Emphasize Confidentiality It is more difficult to maintain confidentiality in a school setting than in private practice. In school settings children and adolescents spend much time together outside of the group, where confidentiality leaks are more possible. As with adults, it is helpful to teach students how to talk about the group experience in a way that does not betray confidentiality. Help students understand that the information they share within a group belongs to them but that the information they hear or learn in a group belongs to the group. The counselor needs to communicate the importance of confidentiality by using language that is developmentally tailored for the age level. It is helpful to teach and to practice with the children how to talk about the group in appropriate ways and to give specific guidelines on what to say if someone probes them for information. Parental and teacher support can be solicited by encouraging parents to ask questions about their child's participation in the group. Remind parents, families, and teachers to avoid probing for specifics about other children, which could result in their child breaching confidentiality.

Special attention should be paid to orienting children to their responsibilities to one another. In group work with adults it is relatively simple to have a discussion about honoring the personal nature of the material that other group members reveal. Both adults and adolescents can clearly understand the ramifications associated with failing to honor the confidentiality of their peers. However, children need this clearly explained, and this matter deserves discussion in the group. A leader working with children might ask, "How would you feel if you found out a group member had told someone in class or on the playground something you said or did?" or "What if someone in this group shared with the teacher something another student said or did in this group?" Children need to know that the group counselor may talk with parents and teachers, and they have a right to know what kind of information will and will not be shared with adults. Children are more thoughtful than they are typically given credit for and are capable of understanding feelings and being sensitive to others.

Maintain Neutrality Avoid siding with children or adolescents against their parents or a particular institution. Young people may like and admire you for your patience and understanding and complain about missing these traits in parents or teachers. It is enough to acknowledge that their experience with you as their group leader is different from other adults.

Use Appropriate Exercises and Techniques During the beginning stage of the group it is appropriate to use interactive exercises that do not require deeply personal self-disclosure. As children and adolescents become more acquainted with the group process, the activities or exercises can become more challenging. Explain the purpose of the activity in a general way without diminishing its impact. Young people should not be pressured into participating in certain activities if they are uncomfortable doing so. Although their unwillingness to take part in exercises often stems from a lack of understanding, children or adolescents will sometimes be reluctant to participate because they may wonder about the purpose of such exercises or they may worry about being embarrassed and appearing silly.

Through patience and by observing others in the group it is possible that reluctant members will eventually decide to participate more fully.

An excellent resource with appropriate exercises and activities for group work with children and adolescents is Foss, Green, Wolfe-Stiltner, and DeLucia-Waack (2008). For group activities for various types of multicultural groups and diversity-related groups, see Salazar (2009). Bauman and Steen's (2009) six-session DVD for a counseling group with a diverse group of fifth-grade students helps students achieve increased self-understanding and appreciate cultural diversity, demonstrates choosing activities appropriate for the developmental level of children, and shows how to process exercises in a group. Bauman and Steen (2012) also have a DVD for a diverse group with eighth-grade students titled *Celebrating Diversity: Leading Multicultural Groups for Middle School Students*.

Listen and Remain Open A skillful group counselor will listen to behavior as well as words. Leaders can provide children and adolescents with some reflective communication to help group members find words for their experiences. The use of creative arts activities—especially music, dance, movement, art, drama, play, and humor—are valuable ways to facilitate communication in groups (Gladding, 2016; Veach & Gladding, 2007).

Let children and adolescents lead the way, and follow their clues. Encourage young people to express themselves in their own words. Listen to their words, but pay attention to the possible meanings of their behavior as well. For example, if a child is acting out, is she telling you "Please stop me, because I can't stop myself"? If a child is continually calling out, he might be saying "Notice me! Nobody else does." Remaining open to what children are trying to tell us about themselves is essential if we are going to help them. Be aware of preconceived labels and diagnoses that may subtly influence your interactions. The children you work with are often categorized and labeled. Be careful not to limit the ability of children to change by responding to them as if they are their labels. You may be one of only a few people with the training to advocate on their behalf. Continue to explore other factors that may be hindering them from reaching their fullest potential.

Prepare for Termination Children and adolescents are quick to form attachments with adults who display a concerned and caring attitude toward them. Well before your group ends—for example, three sessions before the end of a 12-session group and as soon as possible for shorter groups—you should let those who participate in a group know that the termination point is not far off. This notice enables the children to express their reactions, and it enables you to share your reactions with them. Avoid promising them that you will keep in contact with them, if that is not possible. If you do not deal with these issues, they may see you as running out on them and consider you as one more adult they cannot trust. Help children identify support networks outside of the group throughout the duration of the group. To provide children or adolescents with a sense of closure, choose activities that help them identify what they have learned from the group and how they have been affected by others (DeLucia-Waack, 2006a, 2006b).

Children and adolescents who will not be continuing with another cycle of group counseling could benefit from experiencing some kind of graduation. For example, a certificate of completion can provide group members with a sense of accomplishment. Offer students the opportunity to meet together again if new information, struggles, or successes arise. These meetings are often referred to as reunions, and it is reassuring for students to know that such reunions are possible. Take a moment to review the guidelines for the final stage of a group described in Chapter 9 for more information on termination.

Personal and Professional Qualifications

You need to recognize the impact that conducting a group with children or adolescents can have on you personally. For example, in working with youngsters who are abused and neglected, you might find it difficult to separate yourself from their life situations. If you are consistently preoccupied with their problems, you may discover that this is affecting your life and your relationships negatively. It is a personal matter for you to discover how much you are capable of giving, as well as how much and what you need to do to replenish yourself to stay excited and creative in your work.

Some of the *personal characteristics* that are important when working with children are patience, caring, authenticity, playfulness, a good sense of humor, the ability to tune in to and remember one's own childhood and adolescent experiences, firmness without punitiveness, flexibility, the ability to express anger without sarcasm, great concern for and interest in children, optimism that children can be active participants in their healing processes, and the other characteristics of group leaders that were described in Chapter 2.

We believe the following *professional qualifications* are especially important for those leading groups with children or adolescents:

- A thorough understanding of the developmental tasks and stages of the particular age group
- A good understanding of group process as it applies to working with children and adolescents
- Awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to work effectively with children and adolescents from culturally diverse populations
- Supervised training in working with children and adolescents in groups before leading a group alone
- Knowledge of the literature and significant research pertaining to counseling children and adolescents within a group setting
- A clear understanding of the expectations of the school or agency where the groups are conducted

It is easy to overextend yourself when working with children and adolescents whose problems are pressing and severe. Be realistic and realize that you cannot work effectively with every student or provide all the needed services. Becoming knowledgeable about resources in your community can enable you to assist clients in finding services that meet their needs. Know the boundaries of your competence and the scope of your job description. Know how to differentiate between therapy groups and groups with a developmental, preventive, or educational

focus. Groups in school settings typically focus on preventive and developmental issues, and they are linked to educational goals.

Getting Support for School Counseling Groups

The support of administrators and teachers in schools and agencies is especially important in setting up groups (Sink et al., 2012; Steen et al., 2007). If your design for a group is well organized, you will probably receive support and constructive suggestions from them. Remember that the school principal—not you—will probably be the target of criticism if your counseling group is ineffectively run or compromises the integrity of the school. If you have overlooked the need to get parental permission (where required), it is the principal who will field the calls from upset family members. The proposals described in this chapter have been carefully considered and have met with success; many of these ideas can be applied in designing your own groups.

One practitioner reported that she had encountered resistance from her school principal when she suggested forming a "divorce group" for children. She then renamed it the "loss group," which she thought would be more descriptive, and as a result gained support for the group. However, this new title confused the children. They reported to the office saying, "We're the *lost* group; we're here to be found." A group name should accurately describe the purpose of the group but not raise confusion or concerns for participants, parents, or the principal.

If you are interested in learning more about group counseling with children in the school setting, we recommend Ashby, Kottman, and DeGraaf (2008); DeLucia-Waack, Bridbord, Kleiner, and Nitza (2006); Falco and Bauman (2014); Foss, Green, Wolfe-Stiltner, and DeLucia-Waack (2008); Halstead, Pehrsson, and Mullen (2011); Murphy (2015); Salazar (2009); and Sink, Edwards, and Eppler (2012).

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Play Therapy in Group Work With Children and Adolescents

Play therapy is increasing in popularity in groups for children and adolescents. The University of North Texas and some others offer a degree program in play therapy, and many books are now available on this subject. Play therapy has a long history in the treatment of children. Garry Landreth (2002), the founder and former director of the Center for Play Therapy at the University of North Texas, built on the philosophy of client-centered therapy in developing his child-centered approach to play therapy. Landreth views play therapy as an interpersonal relationship between child and therapist. The therapist provides selected play materials and creates a safe place in which the child can express and explore his or her feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors through

play. Play is the natural language that children most readily speak. Play therapy allows for self-expression in a less threatening way than direct verbal communication. Play supports the development of cognitive skills, language skills, coping skills, and other developmental tasks in childhood. Group play therapy in schools can focus on exploring interpersonal issues that help or hinder academic progress. Connecting the interventions of play therapy with academic success helps to justify this approach in school settings. Group play therapy can be instrumental in helping children feel safe, in creating positive school relationships, and in providing a space for learning with few internal distractions (Sweeney, Baggerly, & Ray, 2014).

Regardless of the type of group you are leading, play-based activities can help children process the material generated in the group. Play therapy is most commonly used for children under the age of 12, but it is sometimes practiced with adolescents as well. Children respond very warmly to these activities because of their developmental appropriateness. Playing provides some psychological distance from material that might be too difficult or painful for a child to talk about. Children often leave a play therapy experience in a happy state, and they look forward to coming with great enthusiasm. In group play therapy, children tend to feel like they are coming in to play for an hour with friends.

Any existing group format can be altered to integrate some play therapy elements. There are many different theoretical orientations to play therapy, including Adlerian play therapy, psychoanalytic play therapy, child-centered play therapy, cognitive behavioral play therapy, ecosystemic play therapy, Gestalt play therapy, Jungian play therapy, and thematic play therapy, (Sweeney et al., 2014). The Adlerian approach lends itself especially well to group work with children (see Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). Sandtray therapy, which can be applied as a way of exploring developmentally appropriate treatment options for preadolescents with behavioral difficulties, has been proved to be effective with preadolescents (Flahive & Ray, 2007). Concept and methods from the various theoretical orientations can be incorporated into a variety of groups for children, as you will see in the group proposals detailed later in this chapter.

If you expect to employ group play therapy with children or adolescents, it is important to obtain formal training and supervised clinical experience from a play therapy practitioner. Many graduate programs are now offering courses in play therapy, and organizations such as the Association for Play Therapy and its chapters offer training all over the country. The Association for Play Therapy (2008) provides guidelines for registered play therapists and supervisors. Conferences, training, networking, research, and other resources are available through this organization. For more information on play therapy, see *Play Therapy: Basics and Beyond* (Kottman, 2011), *Partners in Play: An Adlerian Approach to Play Therapy* (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016), *Group Play Therapy: A Dynamic Approach* (Sweeney, Baggerly, & Ray, 2014), and *The Handbook of Jungian Play Therapy With Children and Adolescents* (Green, 2014).