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ABSTRACT

In order to provide a direct service to parents and to mobilize a cooperative effort between school and home, a series of group counseling sessions were planned. The project was designed to permit flexibility in group composition, goals attempted, discussion contents, meeting times, and physical arrangements. The initial lack of formal direction stimulated various staff members to promote parent groups with programs divergent in nature. The following groups were started from this frame of reference and have been carried through to termination: (1) a group of junior and senior high school students, teachers, and school personnel; (2) a group for parents of elementary children whose problems were primarily academic but with a wide variety of severity; and (3) a series of discussion groups sponsored in cooperation with the local mental health center. It is hoped that a more formal research policy used in conjunction with periodic follow-up and review will provide sounder direction.
(Author/BW)

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PRACTICAL GROUP COUNSELING FOR PARENTS:
AN APPLICATION FOR THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Rationale

What's being done for children who are having problems learning in school or adjusting in school? A simple question, indeed, and there are a thousand answers. Those who are defensive can talk about individualized instruction, expectancies of only what the child can accomplish, special materials, teachers and principals who understand, magnificent curriculum programs which have been undeveloped, and special education for emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded. Educational consultants are the vogue as are speech therapists, hearing clinicians, special classes for visually impaired or hearing impaired children, social workers, psychologists, specific learning disabilities consultants, and school counselors.

Sounds like an impressive list doesn't it, but are they filling the needs? The answer to that seems obvious when you consider the number of children in school who are still having problems, the drop-out percentages, and the number of behavioral problems that presently exist within our regular classrooms.

The services heretofore mentioned do serve a purpose and they are useful. They help a lot of children, but how effective are they? In many cases they are pseudo answers. They are cop-outs and in many cases, where they don't apply very well, the child is tolerated and allowed to continue in the same fashion as before.

So what does this all mean? Does it mean the principals, teachers, psychologists, social workers, and all the rest are unreliable? Does it mean that they can serve no function? Certainly not. The problem that I have been outlining is a very simple one with, I think, a relatively simple answer. Schools and parents do not communicate honestly; each is afraid of the other.

The parents are fearful of the school because education has become the measure of their child's success. Social mores dictate that parents do not tamper with their child in his educational environment, therefore parents leave this to teachers who are trained and know their subject material. In short, parents are at the mercy of the school for the education of their children.

The schools are afraid of parents and for good reason. Parents are part of the public which the school must satisfy. Am I as a teacher going to tell the parents I can't teach their child? Is the teacher or the principal going to sit down with the parents and tell them what they should be doing? Psychologists and social workers are hired for such purposes and are supposed to relieve the pressure on teachers and principals. But how about the parent conference with a mother and father sitting across the table or next to you realizing that they are there for one reason: their child has a problem? They're scared, frustrated, sometimes irritated, and quite defensive. It is not easy to admit that their child has a problem, especially when you feel so alone with no one else to identify with. Why is it me? Why did this happen to my child?

Under these circumstances, the results are sometimes gratifying, sometimes devastating. What can I do? What should I do? How do I handle this? Such are the questions that parents are asking themselves. So, what is the next step - classroom recommendations and recommendations for the parents? A physician sees the child. We check for glasses. We change the assignments. We change the expectancies. Sometimes these work, sometimes they do not. Irregardless, the parents and the schools still have not talked. They have not understood. They don't comprehend the problems that the other faces because they represent two different worlds and the child lives in both.

The proposal being made here has to do with a total involvement on the part of parents, teachers, school administrators and service personnel. Techniques used have hinged basically upon a group of parents whose children are all basically the same age. This facilitates discussion because the general behavioral problems faced by each parent are quite similar to the problems of other parents and involve many of the same social and emotional variables. The type of problem seems to have little effect upon the group effectiveness with the possible exception of the very withdrawn child not fitting into the discussions of the total group. The

diametrical difference between the behavior of these children and the majority of the children involved makes group identification difficult for such parents.

What is found is that groups of parents and teachers discussing problems of the children involved tend to serve a variety of purposes. First, and above all, it is a functional approach. It brings together all those persons who are most important in bringing about any type of significant change in the child. The groups are therapeutic in that teachers and parents both begin to understand each other.

Teachers begin to understand the child in relation to his parents, and parents begin to understand the child in relation to school expectancies and the problems that the teachers are facing. It has been found that teachers and parents begin to fully discuss the problems involved and the difficulties they are encountering in a realistic way as opposed to the superficial inexact manner in which traditional teacher-parent conferences deal with a child's school career.

Teachers also become less suspicious and more realistic. They tend to be honest with the parents. They tend to become more understanding and more accepting of the child's behavior.

Probably most important of all, the expectancies for the child, both at home and at school, become more realistic. Teachers and parents begin to work together. They begin to talk and begin to communicate their ideas and the inconsistencies in discipline and attitudes begin to dissipate.

With appropriate leadership during discussion, nearly any type of problem can be effectively dealt with through the parent-teacher group setting; however, it is not designed to deal with crisis or after-the-fact therapy. It is designed to be used with children who have been identified with other teachers as potential problems, academically, socially, or emotionally. It is a precrisis step. By this I mean it deals with children who are having problems which are at present signi-

ficant with the potential of becoming serious. It is designed to deal with the feelings of parents, with the needs of parents, and to give them the support they need in dealing with their children. Finally, it is designed to help supply the parents with tools and understanding necessary for effective behavior management and motivation.

In working with groups of parents and teachers, it needs to be noted that a tremendous amount of work has been done with parent groups in the past. Most of it has been affiliated with a specific kind of problem. The parent groups involved with hearing problems, vision deficiencies, mental retardation, and learning disabilities, are after the fact and do not deal specifically with prevention. They are usually geared to a dispersal of information to parents as opposed to a situation in which the parents can freely discuss the problems they are having and to develop effective techniques of handling those problems. Above all, they do not aid parents in screening the variety of management techniques available as effectively as does the method being considered here and they do not help the parents to develop specific kinds of behavior and motivational techniques which are peculiarly adapted to their own situation.

- ii. If parent groups seem to be a technique which would be useful, consideration should be given some important factors relating to the psychologist's involvement. Each of the factors, when they are present, have important implications regarding time involvement or compromise.
 - A. If the group leader expects parents (mother and father) to be present he should be prepared to meet at night.
 - B. Teachers and principals may not have the same motives as outlined by the group leader.
 - C. The group leader must at all times be prepared to deal objectively with criticisms of the school and teachers.
 - D. Parents will display a wide variety of group dynamics.
 - E. Problems will not, in all probability, be solved by the short series of meetings; rather, the groundwork can be laid for such solutions.
 - F. A pre-involvement should be undertaken for teachers and students who take part in the sessions.
 - G. The group leader needs to be familiar with the problems of each child involved.

III. Problems and considerations to be considered when establishing a parent group:

The psychologist who decides to undertake group counseling with parents will find he has a great many problems with which to deal. The project will present a number of predictable situations and many which will be surprising. The effectiveness then of such groups will depend upon the flexibility and organization of the group leader. The most critical aspects may well be his ability to perceive motives and to guide discussions on the basis of those perceptions.

- A. Teachers and school administration may view the project as risky and must be convinced of its practicality.
- B. Arrangements are critical and should be planned with the care given to a good dinner party where guests are kept involved at all times.
 1. The location and physical facilities should be convenient (preferably within the school) and should utilize the most pleasant atmosphere (perhaps the library).
 2. The group of children involved should never surpass ten in number (with entire group present). A minimum number of six should be considered.
 3. Establish an arbitrary time for the meeting - and then stick to it.
 4. Frequency and duration of sessions seems to be critical. A series of four to six sessions of approximately 1½ hours in duration seems to work well.
- C. The choice of participants can be a problem unless coordinated with the basic purpose outlined for the group.
 1. Avoid severe emotional problems if possible.
 2. Parents of withdrawn children should be dealt with separately because the problems are diametrically opposed to those of most children considered.
 3. Select participants on the basis of age proximity so that the parents will be considering similar or the same social problems.
 4. If only general discussion is planned and general mental health is the motive, an open invitation may be used.
 5. Allow the school to make the choice of participants when possible. Their involvement and support will be much greater if the teachers play a part in selection.
- D. Attendance is always and should be a concern. It may be necessary in some school situations to demand or strongly encourage attendance in the interest of the child's well being.
 1. Emphasize the cooperative aspects of dealing with the child's problem.
 2. A letter two weeks in advance followed by a phone call two or three days in advance greatly enhances initial attendance. Continued weekly phone contacts help insure continued attendance.
 3. Parents should be aware that their child is having some difficulty before this group contact or animosity will be greater.

- E. There will be a great deal of anxiety on the part of all participants upon their initial entry into the group situation. This will dissipate very quickly if the situation is well organized.
1. Treat the participant as a guest.
 - a. Meet them at the door with a smile and an interest in them.
 - b. Offer them a beverage and make informal introductions.
 - c. Mingle with the participants while waiting for the appointed starting time and be prompt.
 2. Interest will be of little concern as long as an interesting opening is presented which will force participation and then utilize leading questions to keep discussion going.
 - a. Initially deal with the purpose.
 - b. Deal with the function of schools.
 - c. Allow discussion to continue freely.
- F. Situations may develop or already exist involving strong feelings of group participants.
1. In general, we have found that teachers and students involved can enhance discussion and effectiveness.
 - a. Teachers can be included effectively after the second session.
 - b. Students can be included after teachers and parents have begun to understand one another.
 - c. A school representative (principal or counselor) can be a definite asset if included from the beginning.
 2. Any animosity between the school and the parents should be dealt with quickly.
 - a. Discussion of meeting purposes, teacher roles, and the school's function during the initial meeting may help to foster greater understanding and communications.
 - b. An emphasis on a cooperative plan of action will also tend to enhance positive feelings.
 3. Parent and/or teachers may be defensive or aggressive in a group situation.
 - a. Such situations should be dealt with cautiously but also in an open fashion. Encourage open statement of such feelings so that they may be dealt with honestly but avoid forcing the issue.
 - b. The effectiveness of group dynamics may well be enhanced by conducting the two initial sessions without involving participants other than the parents. Single sessions for teachers and students if they are to be involved in the sessions prior to that involvement can greatly reduce their anxiety and foster more effective interaction.
 4. Parent-teacher conflicts may exist or develop during the course of group sessions. In some cases these should be dealt with outside the group so that desired group dynamics are not impaired by unreasonable or irrational argument. Such situations can destroy and effectiveness the sessions might have had.

- G. A critical circumstance which frequently occurs involves the concept of leadership. Who is to lead the discussions and to what degree is discussion controlled?
1. A psychologist may find it advantageous to allow a good counselor to lead the general discussion.
 - a. This allows him to focus more directly on what is being said and follow up on critical statements.
 - b. In this case the motives and perceptions of both should be very compatible or dissatisfaction and conflict can arise between them in the group.
 2. If the discussion begins to stray from the specific topic being considered be certain it is irrelevant before redirecting it.
 3. When attempts are made to manipulate the leader into a commitment regarding his opinion on a particular item he can effectively terminate discussion by stating his views.
 - a. Avoid lecturing whenever possible.
 - b. Avoid moralizing at all times.
 - c. Summarize and respond when movement into another issue seems desirable or time is to be terminated.
 - d. Depending upon the situation be willing to respond to questions. This is not an intense therapy situation and it can be profitable to relate an opinion or suggestion.
- H. If the project is hurried into without adequate ground work and attitude development of school personnel effectiveness will be minimal. The leader should get his feet wet and establish his techniques slowly.
- I. Termination of the group and parent contact is crucial.
1. The original contract made with parents should be adhered to. Flexibility can be created initially by talking in terms of four to six sessions and then settled after the third session by the group as a whole.
 2. Rapport should be adequate by the end of the last session to insure continued contact so that guidance can be given the parents toward whatever ultimate goal has been established for the child.
- J. A general problem involving research design and commitment to research always exists. In this case it is doubly difficult because of the intangible nature of the method. However, some method of evaluation is needed and may include such criteria as grades, attitude, etc.

IV. The Psychologist's Role in Parent Groups

The role of the psychologist varies with the design or format utilized with each group. The specific behaviors required are related to the focus of the group and the stated goals of the project. However, there are a number of functions which encompass all types of parent groups and are of general interest.

A. He Provides Structure

1. He sets the stage initially by setting limits on focusing the attention of the group and then establishes appropriate expectations.
2. He defines problems appropriate for discussion, i.e., limits discussion of related but more involved topics (marital discord).
3. He sets limits for those participants who wish to control or dominate the sessions.
4. He keeps the discussion problem-centered.
5. The psychologist may be very directive in groups and tightly control content and direction.
6. At times is didactic providing lecturettes.
7. In open-ended or parent initiated groups the psychologist must be much more flexible.

B. He Protects Privacy

1. The psychologist must provide security for those who do not wish to speak. It is important group pressure not be allowed to dictate participant actions they may later regret.
2. He screens problems under discussion for possible referral of severe problems to other agencies.
3. He avoids intense therapy situations at all costs. This is not part of the contract with parents.
4. The psychologist is the expert in the situation and must monitor the process with due respect to ethical considerations and the goals and purposes of the group.

C. He Functions as a Facilitator

1. He facilitates discussion with the goal of improving communication.
2. He clarifies ambiguities in stated positions.
3. He stimulates discussion, challenges stereotyped responses.
4. He functions as a resource person who can provide alternatives.
5. The psychologist may cite sources for more reading or guidance.
6. He brings covert hostilities (parent-teacher) into the open to be aired and dealt with.
7. He attempts to the best of his ability to interpret school policy and/or define school pressures impinging on the child.

D. He Provides Leadership

1. He insists on definition of goals and interprets the purposes for the group.
2. He always provides direction to the extent required for meaningful discussions.
3. He summarizes the sessions activity and conclusions.
4. He adheres to predetermined time limits.
5. He terminates the group when necessary.

- V. Motives for undertaking group counseling determine the particular goals developed in any given situation:

The motivation for the groups involved in this project was very simply the enhancement of communications between parents and the school so that cooperation and common goals could be developed by all persons involved. Variations of that basic concept have been utilized with goal importance changing as groups varied. However at no time has the fundamental motive or purpose been a therapeutic situation as would be the case for a group involving emotionally maladjusted persons. Most of the parents who have been involved display fundamentally sound emotional and social characteristics. However, their children, for one reason or another, are having academic or behavioral problems. The parents then feel a need for help in motivation, establishing expectancies, developing structure, and managing behavior.

- A. Some goals need to be established which will provide guidelines for the group in general.
1. The group should enhance public relations by assisting those who receive least outside help generally, the parents.
 2. The group should provide a service to all parents of school children. Often only those in trouble benefit from special services.
 3. The group should mobilize cooperation of all adults who are working with the child and maximize potential for 24-hour effect on problem cases.
 4. The group should give parents opportunity for viewing problem in perspective and discover that others have the problem also.
 5. The group should provide a forum to air grievances and hostility toward education or the school. This is generally communicated to the child anyway, often with detrimental effects.
 6. The group should give parents an opportunity to ventilate feelings, thus contributing to greater ease in their personal adjustment.
 7. The group should attempt to bring parents and children together as an aid in communication and attempt to work out a spirit of cooperation.
 8. The group should establish a new and more viable role for school psychologists in the school and community.
 9. The group should be a didactic tool to explain and provide rationale for school and educational practices.
 10. When utilizing school personnel the group's function is as a feed-back mechanism to these personnel regarding parent opinions.
 11. The group should demonstrate to children the extent of our interest in them.
- B. Goals need to be established for individual cases based upon the needs of those involved.
1. The group should help parents understand the child's problem.
 2. The group should help parents identify with other parents and realize they are not alone in the difficulties they face.
 3. The group should help parents and teachers gain insight into particular problems and help them develop coordinated efforts to minimize anxiety-producing situations.
 4. The group should help parents comprehend the impact of behavior management techniques.
 5. The group should help parents replace guilt and/or frustration with positive action.

6. Negative attitudes of both parents and teachers toward the child should be diminished as a result of group sessions.
7. The group should help teachers become more tolerant of and patient with the child.
8. The group should help teachers replace skepticism with optimism.
9. The group should help children become aware of positive concern and efforts to remedy conditions by both parents and teachers.

VI. Direction For The Future

- (1) A strong commitment to research and evaluation must be emphasized with a programmatic design constructed.
- (2) Pre-school parent groups will begin this spring so that we might have influence on the child's environment prior to age five.
- (3) Primary emphasis in future groups will be at the lower elementary levels. This thrust insures an early intervention and should maximize potential for success.
- (4) Efforts are being made to stimulate more parent initiated groups particularly through PTA organizations.
- (5) Afternoon groups for mothers will be provided in one community where 70% of the fathers are salesmen and are absent from the home in the evenings.
- (6) An attempt to gain experience with the Adlerian approach is under way and may form the basis for a new format for some groups.
- (7) Groups for parents of children with the most severe behavior problems may be long term requiring more sessions.
- (8) A concerted effort is being made to offer our services to the parochial schools.
- (9) Parent groups designed specifically for distinct problem categories (withdrawn child) are being considered.
- (10) Sessions beginning with short lecturettes are going to be planned in order to direct discussion and insure that all parents begin with a similar background of information.
- (11) Efforts are being made to extend our services to a variety of community agencies. Church groups and service organizations have expressed interest.

- VII. Any discussion of effectiveness is certainly going to be dependent upon the particular situation being evaluated and can only be done in terms of goal attainment. The isolation of variables into a measurable categorization becomes a significant problem in this instance and is perhaps the weakest point in the project.

However, some data is available which would indicate that the group method, regardless of format, is at least as effective as individual counseling techniques. Additional advantages seem to involve improved attitudes of children toward parents and teachers. Changes of general parental and teacher understanding and cooperation were also evident.