

# Putting the GRO into Group Work

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## Abstract

**Creating growthful therapeutic encounters for children, young people and adults that participate in group work programs is at the very core of what constitutes effective group work. In delivering nearly 200 group work programs over the past three years, this paper reflects on the practice principles that underpin the philosophy of the work we have undertaken within the Royal Children's Hospital Mental Health Service/Travancore School - Community Group Program, and what we believe is the essence of good group work practice.**

**Keywords: Group Work, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Group Work Practice Principles**

## Introduction

Engaging in life demands participating in a complex set of social skills, negotiating your behaviour around, in response to, or in spite of others. Learning about the 'other' starts with learning about the self, and learning about the self is derived through our relationships with others (Crapuchettes 1997).

Therapeutic group work emulates life, and as such offers a tremendous opportunity for enhancing the individual's experience of intra and inter-personal experiences. However, no particular models, theoretical framework or group work manual is the ultimate authority on how to run a good group. As Douglas (1976 p.1) notes,

the purity of the theoretical approach/es, while perhaps providing welcome guidelines through the maze of complexities which comprises group interaction, probably achieves success at the cost of limiting perception.

This paper concerns itself with what we believe “makes for successful group work” (Doel & Sawdon 2001p 437). It reflects our confidence in the value of group work as a therapeutic intervention and identifies what we consider to be some important practice principles underpinning effective group work. Our intention is to offer some inspiration and encouragement to those who are currently, or may in the future, run groups.

### **A Little Background**

The Community Group Program (CGP), is a joint Mental Health and Education initiative. Over the past three years we have provided (and evaluated) nearly 200 groups (Community Group Program 1999, 2000, 2001) for children and young people and their families within Western and North Western Metropolitan Melbourne. The venues for the groups we run are predominantly schools and community health centres.

Group work programs operate across a school term, with some running for as little as one and a half-hours per week while others may be a whole day, culminating with a three-day camp. One program extends to four days per week per school term (Operation Newstart 2001). Apart from utilising traditional behavioural and insight orientated therapeutic frameworks, we make use of a range of alternative mediums to engage group participants. These include such things as art, music, adventure-based counselling activities, bike riding and drama.

### **Growthful Relational Opportunities (GRO)**

We operate from an assumption that group work can offer children and adolescents a powerful therapeutic arena in which they can explore and experiment with a range of different situations that

mirror the delicate and often difficult dynamics that operate within families and other intimate relationships (Hamori & Hodi 1996). As one's image of self is more often than not derived from the reflection we see in the eyes of others, group work therapy can offer a very creative, intensive and personally exciting way of enhancing and strengthening one's sense of self. Enabling children and young people to have Growthful Relational Opportunities (GRO), is what we believe group work is all about. .

The intensity of the group work experience can offer an opportunity to tolerate and sometimes transcend the political intimacy that group dynamics can bring to bear, as well as potentially offer a chance for some level of relational reparation. The security, or 'holding' we strive to create for these participants (James 1984) begins with ourselves as facilitators, the supervision provided for staff, the faith and regard we have for each other as a team, and the support the two respective systems provide for this innovative program.

Whatever the purpose, style, or format of a group, our intention is to link children, young people and families into a process that enhances their self-esteem, while creating a space for them to constructively and safely manage and express their thoughts and emotions. Devising programs that meet kids 'where they are at', allows for an experience of being 'held' and 'heard' (James 1984; Winnicott 1971). These are the types of relational experiences that encourage growth tendencies. Irrespective of the type or format of the group on offer, we believe that encompassing certain key principles promotes growth.

## **Principles of GROwth enhancing practices in Group Work**

### **Creating Safety**

First and foremost growth occurs when safety occurs. This requires emotional, physical, social and spiritual safety that allows the self to be seen, respected and celebrated. Undertaking prior assessment sessions that are up-front, honest and transparent gives participants an opportunity to find out what the group is about, what is expected of them, and most importantly, a chance to check you out (Sklare, Keener & Mas 1990). Giving children and young people ‘a choice’ to attend, places them in a position of strength, and naturally enough, has a positive impact on their motivation levels.

In addition, assessment sessions can provide the cornerstone from which the emotional field of the group is created. It is this emotional field that operates as the culture of the group and one which effectively regulates “to varying degrees, the attitudes and behaviour of the group members toward one another” (Kerr 1984 p.4). Just as parents or the primary carer/s act as the anchor that securely or insecurely holds the ship in the storm, so too do the facilitators of the group. All group members’ contributing to the creation of ‘collective group rules’ in the first session goes some way towards placing the responsibility for ‘safety in the group with the group’. However, ensuring these rules are usefully adhered to, ultimately rests with the facilitator.

Ensuring you work well with co-facilitators adds weight to the emotional strength you bring to a group. This not only offers an ideal opportunity to model some of the wonderful relational wisdoms (about how to engage with and relate well to others) that you are imparting within sessions, but also allows you to operate as a tag team when needed. Developing rhythm between facilitators is a

marvelous thing to experience and provides a capacity to complement each other's styles and reinforce the strength of the anchor holding the group together.

A facilitation team that does not work well can be inhibiting but not necessarily disastrous. For example, a facilitation team that can tolerate and transcend its own relational conflict, by osmosis, offers the group a powerful and healthy experience. Conflict is a necessary part of life and managed skilfully models the ability to recognise and work with difference rather than respond with fear, and feel driven to annihilate it (Douglas 1976). We would contend that it is within the arena of supervision that these conflicts can best be 'held' whilst the goal of ensuring the safe passage of your group participants is achieved.

### **Commitment to Supervision**

Be it within an individual or group context, supervision is just that – 'super-vision'. It is the chance to enlarge your field of vision regarding your work through the eyes of a more knowledgeable professional. Just as the facilitator provides a holding space for clients to grow, so too supervision is intended to create a place in which you broaden your knowledge base and extend your skills (Kahn 1979). Regular supervision can create a habit of mindfulness that should over time, extend beyond the supervision session to create a constant state of therapeutic curiosity about your own responses and that of others.

Group supervision for those who run groups offers fascinating opportunities to explore the parallels between how the group process operates when you move from the role of the facilitator to that of a participant within a group. Reflecting on what makes you feel safe and heard, and what encourages your growth is a direct experiential insight and reminder of what you may or may not be bringing to your clients.

## Use of Self and Others

As group work facilitator we put much store by observing and analysing the dynamics of the group, but unless we are vigilant, we may put much less store on observing and analysing ourselves. How we experience the participants in our groups, and how we find ourselves in turn responding to that experience gives us rich information about not only the participant/s, but ourselves. Within that dynamic, discerning what belongs to us, to them, and the connection formed between others and ourselves (and in group work that means many 'others') is an ongoing process.

This almost equates to assuming a constant but confident position of 'not knowing' but 'seeking to find out' and is a hard developmental task for a group facilitator. This does not mean leaving certain behaviour unchallenged or denied, or not trusting ourselves to respond, but calls for an alertness to our own internal dialogue. Remaining curious as to why we chose to make a certain comment in relation to a certain event, or what might lie behind a certain participant's behaviours can lead us to new and liberating ways of perceiving ourselves and others.

*It was week one for a group of eight primary school aged children who exhibited poor impulse control and had trouble making friends. One boy in particular had immense difficulty settling down within the group and his obnoxious behaviour soon alienated him from his peers and the facilitators. One facilitator in particular experienced a very strong reaction towards this boy and post group discussed either his expulsion from the group or bringing stringent measures to bear within the group to ensure his behaviour was managed. Within Supervision we unpacked the layers of meaning constructed around the dynamics created by and between this boy and others. Revisiting the information gathered from the referral and during the assessment, it wasn't hard to move to a space where we could*

*appreciate the litany of losses this boy had already experienced in his short life, and how the imminent arrival of a half-sibling would soon usher in one more.*

*The facilitator herself had been in the leadership team of a number of groups similar to this one, but as a co-facilitator. This was the first time she considered herself, as did the other two co-facilitators, the most experienced and thus lead facilitator. At some levels, both this facilitator and the young boy were competing for the title of 'most anxious one here', and connecting with what may be one way of understanding their behaviour opened up new possibilities for connecting. Moving the analysis beyond this boy to herself, led to her attending to her own anxiety, and unblocked her capacity to see this little boy's anxiety. Their relationship altered significantly (for the better), as did his behaviour in subsequent groups. Rather than seeking to expel this boy the group facilitators developed some creative strategies that promoted his inclusion within the group.*

Understanding ourselves as a therapeutic filter through which all manner of diverse intra-psychic material will be processed is fundamental to good group work. It is our capacity to not just react to what is happening, but digesting its meaning and delivering it back to the group in a palatable and nutritious form is what offers them an experience of difference. All groups will test limits. It is 'how' we respond that will either repeat past injustices or affirms that there can be different ways of relating to others.

### **Attunement to Process**

Complementing and consolidating the 'use of self and others' is 'attunement to process'. There is a delicate balance between leading a group and being led by the group. Both are necessary ingredients for good group work. The skill is in discerning when you need to 'take over' the helm, and when you

need to sit back and let the participants steer. Some groups are much more task/content focussed and require attending to certain specific material each session. Other group work is more psychodynamic and allows processes occurring within the group to take prominence over content. Irrespective of the model or therapeutic approach, the group will develop its own unique language and communication style. Learning to hear what the group is telling you requires listening beyond that which is spoken.

*Week four into a group for children who had been exposed to and/or experienced family violence, the facilitation team decided to introduce an activity that specifically explored the impact family violence had had upon the participants. A few minutes into the activity a girl asked if she could go the toilet. Seconds later another hand shot up and another, until every child in the group was being accompanied to the toilets. The first reaction of the facilitation team was to think that the children were simply mucking about with them. This however was quite out of character for this particular group and it quickly dawned on the team that this activity, whilst of great interest to them as therapists, was incredibly anxiety producing for the children, and a topic that they were not yet overtly ready to explore.*

*The trip to the toilets gave the team time to reflect on what had just occurred and they were in agreement that if they persisted with this activity they might risk re-traumatising some if not all of the children. When the children returned the team shared with the children their thoughts that maybe this activity might have felt too painful. The children responded in agreement and the group moved on to a new, more lighthearted activity. The group did not return to this activity again, however the leadership team noted a depth of connectedness between the children that for them, seemed as though the children had indeed shared the commonality of their own individual stories that day without uttering a single word.*

Recognising resistance within a group is one thing. Using resistance as a catalyst for change is another. If we are too quick to respond to overt behaviours, and fail to see the underlying communication we

may well jeopardise future opportunities to use the relationship. Our capacity to be attuned to the processes occurring within a group can be hampered by our performance anxiety, our need to be ‘in control’, or our obsession with getting through all the content during each session.

### **Holding the Individual ‘in mind’ within the Group**

Building on the previous two principles is the notion of neither forsaking the individual needs over that of the group’s nor allowing the group’s needs to oppress those of the individual. Learning what Taffel (1999) calls ‘peer smarts’ requires developing the ability to form intimate social connections with others as well as learning when to walk away when those connections are inviting you into harm’s way. The art of retaining one’s own individuality whilst in a group starts with being honoured for your own individuality by those whom you deem to be important in your life. Whilst not being the parents, kin, or friends of the participants we work with, within the intimacy of a group we take on an important representational role. Salter Ainsworth (1991 p.36) suggests:

“there is a dearth of systemic investigation of children’s relationships with parent surrogates to whom they become attached, and who may play an important role in their lives, especially in the case of children who find in them the security they could not attain with their own parents”.

We should never underestimate the impact we can have on children’s and young people’s lives (Forte, Barrett & Campbell 1996). We occupy a privileged position in relation to our clients, often possessing very personal information about their backgrounds. We usually enter their lives at times when they are vulnerable, and within the group setting can be part of what is often a very intense emotional experience. Wanting to feel connected to the group, as well as wanting to feel special in the eyes of the facilitator is a normal part of group process.

Additionally, as facilitators and as adults, we are more powerful than the participants within our group. How we use that power may mesh with or stand apart from how other adults have used power in

relation to that individual within a group context. How the individual is regarded within a group setting (be that a sibling group, peer group, foster care home, classroom or any other setting where they are one of many), shapes their sense of self in relation to others. Furthermore, how you respond to an individual is keenly observed by other group members and again contributes to their internal working map of how the world operates.

Identifying something unique in each of the participants can assist with keeping the individual 'in mind' within the group. If this proves difficult, reflecting on what information this may tell you about the struggles of that child leads you to creating a space for thoughtfulness within your mind about that particular participant.

*All manner of strategies, humour and incentives had been utilised in an effort to entice Jay into joining the group at the worktable. He had been referred into this social skills group with a history of violence towards his siblings and peers and of running away from school. Every week without fail he would stay standing in the door way, assuming an air of indifference to the activities of the group. The fact that he continued to turn up each week led the facilitator to feel he was getting something out of attending so he (the facilitator) continued to invite Jay to join in when he felt able to. The facilitator also encouraged other members of the group to invite Jay to join in on different occasions.*

*The facilitator was taken aback at the conclusion of week six to learn from Jay's mother that she felt the group was having a huge impact on her son's confidence. According to her, his behaviour had improved dramatically and Jay talked incessantly about this facilitator to her each week after group. The facilitator checked with her that she had indeed got the right person, and she too noted her surprise that the group and the facilitator in particular seemed to have made such a huge impact on her son. The following week Jay joined in with the group activities and continued to do so in subsequent sessions. He remained somewhat quiet, but his enhanced confidence was apparent.*

There is no empirical evidence to prove that this boy's change was directly connected to this experience of an adult holding him 'in mind' within this group. However practice wisdom led us to conclude that he felt good about himself because others maintained an interest in inviting him into a connection with them. When others are mindful of our feelings and pay us positive attention we might just be tempted to bask in the warmth of their emotional glow.

### **Recognising the Importance of Play**

The capacity to play is critical in understanding and working with children, young people and adults alike. Play provides children with an important transitional space through which they can explore the fit between their internal and external world, as well as developing their capacity for reflection, abstract thinking and creative problem solving (McMahon 1992). It is the space in which the sense of self emerges and as we develop in life, ushers in what Armstrong (1981 cited in Meares 1993) calls our 'introspective consciousness'. That is our ability to know that we exist as an autonomous self. Young people, as do adults, often crave the permission to be invited into 'legitimate play'. This might be in the guise of outdoor adventure based activities, music therapy, art, word games, humourous interchanges or drama.

Children and young people who have been severely traumatised may however, be stuck in repetitious play that re-lives rather than relieves the trauma. The onus is then on the facilitators to be sensitive to the need to create a safe play space which has boundaries, assists in successful sensory integration, and which seeks to enable these children to process their experience.

Transitional spaces for fantasy and creative thinking can only develop if there is a person who imposes him or herself between outer and inner reality, helping the child to develop alternative

realities besides the horrible realities of the trauma (Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000 p.915).

Play within the group context takes on an additional depth. The play space is occupied by others who may challenge or amplify the exciting possibilities that the imaginary world brings with it. It is also a chance to play at relationships. Our solitary flights into fantasy do not necessitate taking on the world-view of others. Group play offers clients a chance to sift through and experiment with the imagination of the other. For some, it may also be a chance to learn about what play is, how others play, and how to connect with others through play.

*Stephanie was a mother attending our group for children who had lived with family violence. Her major goal was to retrieve the 'close relationship' she had enjoyed with her son prior to a three year relationship she had had with a man who had been violent. As part of the program's emphasis on building bridges of connection between the children's and mother's group, we ensured that each week we played at least one of the games we played with the children, in the mother's group. During our follow-up feedback session with Stephanie at the conclusion of the program, we asked what she felt had been the most useful part of the program. Stephanie fed-back that each week her son would excitedly ask her what games they had played during her session, and the two of them would make sure that at least once that week they would play the games they had learnt at group with the rest of the family. Stephanie felt that their playing together had created an opportunity for them to start talking again.*

The healthiness of play rests within its explorative, creative and restorative properties. It can be a safe place within which to 'test the waters' and a joyful way of connecting with ourselves and with others. Unfortunately, we can sometimes become so caught up in the seriousness of our 'therapeutic work' that we leave no time for play.

## **Surrendering Your Territory**

Learning to surrender one's territory, to trust that your co-facilitator has ideas, energy and skills that will enrich your learning requires faith and a capacity to reflect on what might be achieved if you can allow each other turns in leading the dance. Any foray into group work models that use co-facilitation requires an acknowledgment of the strengths and limitations of collaboration. Not all collaborations work well, but those that do usually rest on a mutual regard for the other and the establishment of common goals. Transcending any internal systemic issues that may lead to an implosion is usually achieved through harnessing our energies towards keeping in-step with, rather than stepping over one another.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly an article of this scope can not hope to cover every element important to good group work, but can illustrate those that we consider as fundamental. What has become increasingly apparent in our experience, is the closely interwoven nature of the principles that guide our work.

Understanding 'self' as group work facilitators is fundamental to how we work and is the core ingredient of what we offer to any groups we facilitate. Understanding 'other' is imperative to our role as clinicians who have been entrusted with the psychological care of our clients. Preparedness to reflect on 'what we do' and 'why we do' leads to a robust and growth enhancing approach to group work that has the potential to offer clients transformative experiences. A commitment to learning and seeking support through supervision, as well as working collaboratively with others, contributes to building our own secure base as professionals. This mirrors the process we endeavor to create within the emotional field of a group's relational dynamics. This is further complemented through the use of

play and attunement to process as we work towards creating a safe environment, which in turn is conducive to each participant's learning and reflection.

The challenge for the group work facilitator is to sit with the rich and varied dynamics that accompanies working with groups, to respond to the immense opportunities that this then provides us in understanding what constitutes 'growthful' encounters and to integrate our learning with our practice. Group work offers us intense therapeutic, and often emotional relational experiences with our clients. This privilege demands that we look to ourselves as much as to our clients for opportunities to affirm, challenge and extend who we are and what we can yet become.

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