GROUP COUNSELING FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

A Practical Guide

Third Edition

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WALCH EDUCATION

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Part 1
Building the Foundation of
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Section 1
Research and Theory Supporting Group Counseling for School Counselors

Linda Webb and Elizabeth Villares

Research Supporting Effective Groups with Children and Adolescents

Group counseling in schools is a unique experience in which students can express ideas and feelings, gain insight about themselves and others, and learn and practice new behaviors that can help them be more successful academically and socially.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA 2002) supports group work as an efficient and effective approach to meeting the needs of students that should be included as an integral part of a comprehensive school counseling program aimed at meeting the academic, social-emotional, and career needs of students.

The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP 2001) identifies group work as one of eight common core areas essential for counselors. Groups allow counselors to help more students. Without a solid group-counseling program, school counselors quickly become overwhelmed with individual counseling needs. School counselors are interested in providing the most effective and efficient services to help students. Therefore, groups are a must for schools.

There are many other compelling reasons for school counselors to provide a solid group-counseling program, including a strong research base—it works. Several extensive reviews of research have shown group counseling with children and adolescents to be an effective intervention. Prout and Prout (1998) reviewed 17 school-based studies of group counseling and found a strong positive impact for students on a wide range of measures. Hoag and Burlingame (1997) reviewed 56 outcome studies and also found group counseling to have a strong positive impact on children and adolescents. Borders and Drury (1992) reviewed 30 years of research on the effectiveness of school counselor interventions on achievement, behavior, and attitudes. Group counseling was found to have a positive effect in all three areas. Two other large reviews, one reviewing 150 studies and the other reviewing 33 studies, found that group counseling with children and adolescents was effective and equal to, or better than, individual counseling (Weisz, Weiss, Han, Granger, and Morton 1995; Prout and DeMartino 1986). In addition, Shechtman (2002) reviewed group work in schools,

and found overall consensus regarding the effectiveness of group counseling in schools.

A recent series of studies evaluating the effectiveness of the Student Success Skills (SSS) intervention adds to this body of group counseling research (Brigman and Campbell 2003; Brigman, Webb, and Campbell 2007; Campbell and Brigman 2005; Webb, Brigman, and Campbell 2005). In each SSS study, students were introduced to academic, social, and self-management skills through classroom lessons. These lessons were followed by eight small-group sessions in which students continued to practice and apply these skills to real-life situations, while learning to monitor progress toward academic and social goals. Students who participated in the SSS groups consistently outperformed comparison students on standardized measures of math, reading, and behavior. The SSS research contributes to the group work literature, providing evidence of the effectiveness of school counselors in facilitating group experiences that improve academic and social outcomes for students.

A strong research base becomes particularly important in light of the need for school counselors to establish themselves as essential contributors to improved academic and social outcomes for students (Green and Keys 2001; House and Hayes 2002; Issacs 2003; Lapan 2001; Myrick 2003; Paisley and Hayes 2003). Guidelines established by the National Panel for Evidence Based School Counseling (Carey, Dimmitt, Hatch, Lapan, Lee, and Whiston 2005) at the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research, along with guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Education (2003), can help educators and practicing school counselors evaluate the quality of research being used to support a particular program's effectiveness.

Other Reasons for Group Work

In addition to the research base, there are other compelling reasons to include group work as part of a balanced school-counseling program. Group work is a natural medium for learning and support. Humans are social beings who live and work in groups. Groups provide a microcosm of a student's world in which students can practice new behaviors that are more constructive and adaptive. The development of a caring, supportive group of peers can

allow students to take risks with new behaviors and ideas. Role models for positive behavior and attitudes can also be provided through group work. Modeling is one of the most effective learning tools. Groups provide multiple models. In a group, there is more access to insights, confirmation, and corrective messages than in individual counseling. There are many reasons that make sense and support group work in schools, including evidence that it works.

Theoretical Basis for Group Counseling with Children and Adolescents

Positive Psychology rests on the premise of identifying and nurturing an individual's strengths and virtues (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Group counseling provides an excellent vehicle to encourage members to identify and discuss specific goals, and explore how their strengths can help them obtain successful outcomes. Specific strengths, such as courage, optimism, hope, perseverance, empathy, and goal setting, are linked to reduced mental illness (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), improved well-being, and increases in academic and behavioral performance (Webb, Brigman, and Campbell 2005). The authors view individuals as active participants and capable decision-makers, who are influenced and affected by their social settings. The following theories presented in this chapter—Social Learning Theory, Cognitive Behavioral Theory, and Reality and Solution-Focused Therapy—were chosen for their effective application to small group counseling, as well as their strength-based strategies and techniques. These theories combine with the Positive Psychology perspective to form a theoretical basis for the small-group-counseling plans found in Part 2.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura 1977, 1993) emphasizes the principle of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in his or her ability to successfully learn a new skill or complete a task. Evidence suggests, "the person with higher self-efficacy for a particular task will exert more energy, persist longer at the task, and acquire more knowledge and skills related to the task compared with someone with lower baseline self-efficacy" (Harris, Thoresen, and Lopez 2007, 4). In the group sessions that follow, individuals are encouraged to believe in their abilities, visualize their successes, and learn from past challenges and/or successes. Children and adolescents benefit from watching peers and adults master similar experiences. Identifying times when an individual has overcome challenges opens the door for new solutions and problem solving. Skills introduced to a group, followed by demonstrations, practice, and coaching, give a group member the opportunity to learn through personalized and shared experiences with peers. Using a tell-show-do-coach approach encourages members to work together, acquire new skills and knowledge, identify sources of support (parents, teachers, and peers), and resources (school and community).

Helping students become effective and efficient learners and social problem solvers is one of the main goals of the small-group interventions in this manual. Students who build skills in the areas of academic and social competence, which includes cognitive, social, and self-management skills, experience higher levels of self-efficacy, confidence, and effort and success. The result of these connections is pervasive and leads to improved performance both in and out of the classroom. This holistic approach teaches students that behaviors outside the classroom and in nonacademic areas also have a direct impact on their performance. Students who develop these skills come to school mentally and emotionally prepared to deal with the academic rigors of their education, and begin to experience learning with a newfound joy and healthy optimism.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy examines the thoughts that influence an individual's behaviors and emotions. When children and adolescents think of themselves as capable of success, they are more likely to take positive risks and choose behaviors that will ensure a successful outcome. Group counseling allows students to engage in communication with peers to identify distorted or unrealistic thoughts, and practice reframing skills to improve positive, healthy self-talk that reflects belief in their ability. The language of healthy, optimistic self-talk enables students to view challenges as a way to improve their skills, rather than associate their success or failure with a lack of ability. Part of healthy optimism is learning not to doubt your ability, but changing your strategies if what you are doing is not working (Seligman 1995). This type of cognitive reframing allows students to examine their behaviors through a lens that builds their self-efficacy and healthy optimism.

Group counseling gives students the opportunity to experience success and try new strategies when what they have been doing has not worked. When faced with a difficult task, students are encouraged to focus their energy on finding a more effective strategy instead of repeating ineffective strategies and automatic negative self-talk messages that cause them to doubt themselves. By using cognitive reframing techniques, setbacks are viewed as temporary that can be overcome with a different strategy. Processing these events in a group teaches students to stay optimistic and differentiate between their ability and strategy.

Reality/control theory, founded by William Glasser (1969), emphasizes the connection between thinking and behavior. The theory states that individuals engage in behaviors to gain a sense of control in order to fulfill their "psychological needs of belonging, power or achievement, fun or enjoyment, and freedom or independence as well as one physiological need of survival or self-preservation" (Wubbolding 2000, 1). At the core of this theory is the central belief that our responses or behaviors are chosen, and therefore can be replaced with a better choice. For example,

a student experiencing academic difficulty in the classroom may choose to engage in attention-seeking behavior to attract more one-on-one time from the teacher. While the amount of attention the student receives increases, the student's need to achieve remains unfulfilled. Students who learn to replace attention-seeking behaviors with appropriate, responsible action (asking questions, completing homework and classroom assignments) feel more empowered and satisfied. Even the smallest improvement leads to a more positive self-image and gained confidence in their ability to continuously improve despite temporary setbacks.

Modeling, skill-building, goal-setting and progress-monitoring, self-evaluation, formulating and implementing action plans, and weekly goal-reporting techniques teach children and adolescents not only new strategies, but also to assume responsibility for their behavior and learn to take responsible steps to change undesirable behaviors. For example, students who make the choice to establish weekly goals must make decisions on steps necessary to achieve their goals. When these steps lead to goal achievement, no additional strategies are required. However, when strategies lead to negative consequences or lack of improvement, students learn not to doubt their ability but simply to choose a new strategy. Reporting their successes and setbacks in a group allows for other students to recognize the strengths in the individual, share new strategies, and provide encouragement in learning not to make excuses and taking responsibility for actions.

Solution Focused Therapy (De Shazer 1991) is future oriented and encourages students to select, apply, and evaluate strategies in order to meet desired goals. Students are asked to support their thoughts about a specific problem with evidence and look for times when the problem did not exist. Having students picture what their lives would look, feel, and sound like when their problem does not exist opens the door to new possibilities. When students can imagine a change to their current problem and visualize success, they are more likely to stay committed to resolving the problem.

Goals are rarely achieved in one step. Instead, successful goal achievement requires patience, persistence, and multiple strategies. When sharing strategies in a group, students learn from one another how to avoid mistakes, brainstorm solutions, and encourage one another to meet desired goals. Applying skills to academic, social/personal, and career areas leads to increase performance and healthy attitudes. Students who experience success view future opportunities with an optimistic perspective. They learn to use the language of success and look for even the smallest improvements.

While other theories are represented in the group plans that follow in Part 2, these four theories briefly described above provide a conceptual foundation and a consistent framework. We have consistently found that students respond well to these approaches.

Rationale for Administrators and Teachers

As counselors plan their school-counseling programs, they will want to be prepared to help teachers and administrators understand the importance of group work. A brief overview of the research supporting the effectiveness of group work in schools can be shared at a faculty or grade level meeting along with theoretical principles that lend themselves to effective group work.

At first, school counselors can plan to work with students whose teachers understand the important contributions counselors can make in improving academic and social outcomes for students. These teachers are more likely to consistently support group attendance and to follow up with skills or strategies learned in group. Perhaps most important, is sharing evidence of improved outcomes for students who have participated in group sessions with other teachers and administrators. This combination of educating teachers and administrators, working with teachers who believe in what you do, and sharing improved outcomes for students creates a strong case for making sure school-counselors have the time to implement balanced school-counseling programs, including sound group-counseling interventions.

Section 2
Eight Keys to a Successful Group-Counseling Program

Linda Webb

1. Tie group topics to most frequent presenting problems/mission of school.

Most school counselors offer groups on topics that represent the most frequent presenting problems or needs of children and adolescents. Group topics in schools also reflect the mission of the school: to help students learn the academic and social skills needed for success in living, working, and learning. The most common types of groups offered by experienced school counselors include groups that focus on:

- social skills
- learning skills
- self-control/anger management
- divorce
- loss
- school adjustment/transition

The first three of these topics are in line with a comprehensive review of research by Masten and Coatsworth (1998). They reviewed twenty-five years of research on developing competence and on successful and resilient children and adolescents, and found three groups of skills that separated successful students from those who were not: cognitive/learning, social, and self-regulation skills.

Another extensive review of research, covering fifty years, by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994), focused on what helps students learn. They found similar skill areas, especially cognitive/learning skills and social skills, to be the most associated with school success. Group counseling involving these three skill areas are a must for any comprehensive school-counseling program.

Shechtman (2002) reports that approximately 92% of groups conducted with children in schools fall into two categories of group work. The first category includes guidance/psychoeducational group work, such as developing social skills, learning skills, and self-management skills. The second category includes group counseling for interpersonal problem solving, such as divorce, loss, or school adjustment. These topics represent areas of high need in most schools. This combination of group work is an effective way for school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, and related professionals to help students develop the skills and attitudes needed to be successful in school.

The encouraging news from these research reviews is that the skills students need to succeed academically and socially—and the model for teaching them these skills—are clear. The teaching model is based on Bandura's social learning model and involves a "tell, show, do, coach" approach. The group plans in this book follow this model, and many of the plans mirror the most critical skills found in these research reviews.

2. Show how your groups make a difference.

The current educational climate, along with increased accountability demands, makes it increasingly important for school counselors to demonstrate how their work affects students' achievement and behavior outcomes. The *No Child Left Behind Act* (U.S. Department of Education 2001) requires that all students show academic gains as measured by state mandated tests. As a result of this current focus, it can become increasingly difficult for school counselors to convince administrators and teachers that students should be pulled out of valuable classroom time for participation in a counseling group. Therefore, we offer several strategies that will help school counselors set themselves up for success during the planning, implementation, and outcome phases of the intervention. Each is aimed at showing how students have improved as a result of the time they have spent with the school counselor.

3. Use the ASCA National Model as a guide.

The ASCA National Model (ASCA 2005) provides a framework for the development of a comprehensive, balanced school-counseling program. The model's delivery system recommends the use of group activities and small group counseling aimed at academic, personal/social, and career domains. The model is based on the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell and Dahir 1997) which identifies knowledge, attitudes, and skills students should have as a result of participating in school-counseling program interventions or activities. The group plans in this book reflect the national standards and are designed to meet academic and personal/social needs of students.

4. Seek leadership opportunities, and tie to the vision and mission of your school.

Seek opportunities to work on school improvement and school-wide planning teams. This is where many decisions are made and plans for school-wide improvement are structured. School-improvement teams are usually made up of teachers, administrators, parents, and members of the community. In many cases, there are also student members. Involvement allows school counselors to become involved in the identification of school-wide needs and puts them in a position to explain how interventions they are trained to deliver are related to the school's vision and mission, and are directly tied to student's needs. As school-wide plans are written, school-counselor interventions can be written into those plans. For example, if the identified need is improving standardized test scores for students in grade six, the school improvement plan might include systematic delivery of the Student Success Skills intervention at that grade level for the following year. This could be introduced by briefly sharing the research that shows when students improve learning, social, and self-management skills, and they practice those skills throughout the year, they are more likely to learn what is being taught and are more successful academically. This kind of involvement is an opportunity for the school counselor to present as a team player, and as part of the larger educational community targeting student success. Student Success Skills plans are included for each level (elementary, middle school, and high school) in Part 2.

5. Plan to use programs that have research-supported evidence of effectiveness.

As mentioned in Section 1, school counselors need to identify and become trained in implementing research-based programs with proven evidence of effectiveness. Several resources now exist to help identify research-based programs. One particularly helpful resource is the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research (CSCOR) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. CSCOR's web site (www.umass.edu/schoolcounseling/) contains critical reviews of the research in the field of school counseling, including reviews of structured group plans, and aims to help school counselors identify programs that have been shown to positively affect student academic and social outcomes. The U.S. Department of Education (2003) also has guidelines for evaluating the research used to support program effectiveness. Not all research is the same, and as school counselors, we want to have some confidence that what we are doing has been shown to be effective.

6. Plan to show how students are different as a result of your intervention.

It is no longer enough for school counselors to talk about how many students they saw, how many groups they ran, or how many hours they spent delivering direct services to students. Today's counselors are being strongly encouraged to plan ahead of time how they will show how students have improved as a result of the counselor intervention. This also makes it much easier to pull students from class to attend group-counseling sessions. Existing data such as grades, test scores, attendance, discipline records, drop-out rates, and work completion can be examined pre- and post-intervention to show results. Other sources of data such as surveys, teacher observation, and student self-reports can also be helpful. Counselors can share outcomes with key stakeholders and school-improvement teams.

7. Plan your time (annually, monthly, weekly).

Annual plans are critical for looking at the big picture and should reflect the developmental needs of students as outlined in the ASCA National Model (ASCA 2005) and needs assessments conducted at the school. Consider including an overview of the following in your annual plan, and share it with faculty, staff, and parents:

a. plans for classroom guidance (helps teachers to plan also)

b. structured groups that are planned for the year

c. planned transition support (beginning of year, end of year, new students, etc.)

d. a structured schedule for consultative interventions such as child study, workshops, and parent conferences

e. a structured schedule for seeing individual students

f. school counseling-related activities you will plan to coordinate

g. a structured schedule for planning and evaluation

A brief outline of your annual plan can even be included in a school counseling brochure made available to all stakeholders. However, annual plans are only effective when they drive monthly overviews and are used as a guide to drive weekly and daily activities. Keep them visible for teachers and administrators. When others in the school know what you are doing and how students are improving as a result of what you are doing, you become an important member of the school community.

8. Be optimistic.

The development of a balanced, comprehensive school-counseling program is a process. Some counselors get discouraged along the way with the assignment of other types of activities not related to their program. However, we encourage you to stay optimistic. Network with other school counselors and share successes. Encourage others and be encouraged by small improvements. If you only ran two groups this year, then facilitating four groups next year is heading you in the right direction. If what you are doing isn't getting you the results you had planned for, choose a new strategy based on what is working for others. Imagine yourself being successful in planning and implementing a comprehensive school-counseling program, including much needed group work. If you can't imagine it, it will probably never happen. Get involved in the fabric of your school, plan, and be willing to take small steps to move you closer to your vision. Show how you make a difference and stay optimistic!

Section 3
Getting Started and Strategies for Building Success

Elizabeth Villares

Getting Started: Ten Steps to Insure Success

Successful, experienced school counselors develop plans for communicating and educating the school population about the purpose and types of groups they offer. They follow ethical guidelines to insure informed consent and confidentiality, and plan ahead to show that their groups make a difference in student performance. In the last five years, more interest and pressure has mounted for school counselors to demonstrate that students are different because of their interventions. Group counseling is one of the most powerful interventions school counselors have, if research-based plans are chosen and followed. For this reason, today's school counselor is careful to choose group plans that are grounded in solid theory and research. By following the ten steps below, school counselors greatly increase their chances of having successful groups.

1. Inform students.

Begin the school year by sharing your plans for group counseling with students. During the first two or three weeks of school, make it a point to visit classrooms, hand out flyers, and invite students to sign up for a variety of group-counseling sessions. Varying the topics and types of groups will increase participation and help address a wide range of needs. Leave sign-up forms and flyers in locations where students are most likely to see them: classrooms, the administration building, the nurse's office, the library, and the cafeteria. Keep a basket or box in a central location for students to turn in their forms, and give students the opportunity to sign up or request group participation through the school's web site or by e-mail.

2. Inform teachers and parents.

Teachers and parents are reliable sources for referring students for group counseling. Around the end of September, send referral forms to teachers and let parents know about the groups through PTA presentations, newsletters, and open house events. Sample forms are included later in Section 5.

3. Offer groups throughout the year and keep a waiting list.

With the current nation average ratio of 500+ students per school counselor, you will likely have more students referred than you can include in your first cycle of groups. It is good practice to keep a list of students requesting services, inform teachers and parents when groups are filled, and explain that you will be inviting additional students to participate when new groups form. Having several cycles of groups running during the school year leads to increased participation. Many experienced counselors offer the first series of groups in October, a second cycle in January, and a final cycle in March. Without a group-counseling program schedule throughout the year, counselors set themselves up to be overwhelmed with individual counseling. School counselors find they can impact more students and be more efficient by offering a year-round group program.

4. Conduct pre-group interviews or screening.

The Association for Specialists in Group Work, the American School Counselor Association, and the American Counseling Association require pre-group screening. This is an opportunity for school counselors to inform students of the nature of the group and the time commitment, and for the counselor and student to determine if the group is a good fit (see Pre-Group Screening Outline on page 19). When the counselor and student agree on group inclusion, a parent information letter describing the group and requesting permission for participation should be given to the student to take home, have signed, and returned (see Section 5 for examples). With older students, some counselors prefer to send the letter home and request parents contact the counselor if they have questions or concerns about the group, or desire their child to be excluded from the group. Counselors should adhere to their own school and district policies on informing parents about group participation.