

# Children's Discussion Groups: A Positive Force in Behavioral Change

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Family Education Association (FEA) Children's Discussion Groups for children between the ages of 5 and 7 years have been ongoing in the Chicago area for 5 years. The unique purpose of the groups has been to explore the children's goals of behavior and to utilize the children's abilities to counsel one another through the guidance of an Adlerian counselor and an assistant.

Since the children are primarily normal, health, functioning youngsters who often operate on one of the four goals of misbehavior—undue attention, struggle for power, retaliation and revenge, and complete inadequacy (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964)—goal disclosure and alternative behavior repertoires are presented to the children at the level of their own understanding.

Because the lifestyle of a child is basically formulated by the age of 6 (Dreikurs, 1957), the basic premises for the children's groups are twofold: to redirect goals of misbehavior and social interaction in the home, school, and community and to assess how the individual child finds his place within his family constellation in terms of the child's own lifestyle (Borden, 1973). Thus, the use of activities and the discussions involved make the group unique in effecting positive behavioral changes.

A subjective, 5-year, follow-up study was conducted on the first year children's discussion groups to assess if there has been any long-range improvement due to the youngster's participation in the Adlerian children's groups. An individual letter and questionnaire containing the same information, but appropriately written for the adult and child recipients, were mailed to each parent and to each child, with separate envelopes for returning the information. The following are examples of the letter and questionnaire that each child and parent received.

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## Letter to Child

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

It has been 5 years since you were in the Children's Discussion Group with me. We talked about such things as family, friends, school, or any problems that you had wanted to discuss in the group. We also did such things as acting out what we wanted to be when we grew up, acting out an animal we wanted to be, and did drawings of pictures, etc.

You are probably wondering why I'm writing to you. It is because I'm hoping that you will be able to help me. I would like to know whether or not you feel the Children's Group has helped you in your relationships with your family, friends, at school, or in your general attitude toward life.

Therefore, I would sincerely appreciate your taking a few minutes of your busy time to answer the questionnaire I've enclosed and mailing it back to me in the enclosed envelope by \_\_\_\_\_. Your parents will also be receiving a letter and questionnaire to fill out.

Although all the answers from all the children may be used in a study, your individual answers will be kept a secret.

Looking forward to hearing from you, and thank you very much for your cooperation.

Appreciatively yours,  
Counselor

## Questionnaire to Child

*Please check the answer that best describes you. Comment if you wish.*

1. Do you feel that you work well within your family?

- Often  
 Sometimes  
 Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Are you content or satisfied with your friends?

- Often  
 Sometimes  
 Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Do you feel that you are doing as well as you possibly can at school?

*School work:*

- Often  
 Sometimes  
 Seldom

*Behavior:*

- Often  
 Sometimes  
 Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Is your attitude toward life a happy, outgoing one?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you feel that you are concerned about and are willing to help others?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you use yourself in a way that is useful or useless?

*Useful?*

*Useless?*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you feel that you have an understanding of the behavior of yourself and others?

*Self:*

*Others:*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Is your attitude toward life generally a cooperative one?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. How do you feel about the following?

a. Do you want a lot of attention?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

b. Do you want to win?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

c. Do you feel like hurting others?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

d. Do you feel discouraged?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. In what way do you feel that being in the Children's Group has helped you in your everyday life and in growing up, such as with your family, friends, in school, etc.?

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

### Letter to Parents

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

It was 5 years ago that \_\_\_\_\_ participated in the weekly Children's Discussion group for children between the ages of 5 and 7 under the auspices of the Family Education Association (FEA). The purpose of the group was to explore and redirect goals of behavior and social interaction, as well as to assess how your child found his/her place within the family constellation in terms of his/her emerging lifestyle, at the level of his/her own understanding.

Since it has now been 5 years and your child has expanded his environmental and societal involvements, I am most interested in inquiring about possible long-term results from their participation in the group. This would, of course, be just one of the factors contributing to their continual maturation.

Therefore, I would sincerely appreciate your taking a few minutes of your time to fill out the enclosed questionnaire and returning it to me in the enclosed envelope by \_\_\_\_\_. Your child will also be receiving a letter and questionnaire to fill out. Although the collective responses may be used in a study, individual confidentiality will be guaranteed.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Looking forward to your responses.

Appreciatively yours,  
Counselor

## Questionnaire to Parents

Please check the appropriate answer. Comment if you wish.

1. Do you feel that your child is a functioning family member?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Does your child seem satisfied with his/her friends?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Is your child's school performance at his/her optimal level?

*Academically:*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

*Behaviorally:*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Is your child's attitude toward life a positive, encouraged one?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Has your child developed social interest toward the welfare of others?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Does your child use his/her creativity in a direction that is:

*Positive?*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

*Negative?*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Does your child have an understanding of the behavior of:

*Self?*

*Others?*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Is your child's attitude toward life generally a cooperative one?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Do you see any of the four goals of misbehavior—attention getting, power, revenge, complete discouragement—occurring?

*Attention getting:*

*Revenge:*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

*Power:*

*Complete discouragement:*

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. In what way do you feel that your child's participation in the Children's Discussion Group has had an effect on his/her development and maturation (i.e., personal relationships, school, friends, etc.)?

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

## Results

Although the results are not statistically analyzed since a control group was not established 5 years ago and due to the nature of the questioning, significant subjective results are nevertheless apparent. Of the 18 mailings sent to the parents and of the 18 mailings sent to the children, 14 responses were received from the children, who are all now between the ages of 10 and 12, and 14 responses were received from the parents, although not all responses were from the related parent and child.

A note of interest is that in every case where both related child and parent sent in their questionnaires, the child's response was received either before the parent's response or at the same time. The question arises as to whether the children's spontaneity in returning the questionnaires was due to the meaningfulness of the group experience or to the excitement of receiving their own mail to answer, or both. However, of the responses received, consistency in positive replies in areas that were troublesome to them when in the group would indicate that the group did effect positive changes in their emerging lifestyles.

Since it would lead one to be suspicious of results if all were positive, there were a few negative responses, which, if viewed in light of their presenting lifestyles and basic problems 5 years ago, are still consistent. They were the ones, both parents and children, who were originally the most resistant in the group. Those children and parents who wrote favorably are those who were and still are well-versed in using the Adlerian philosophy themselves. There is a direct correlation.

Within that 5-year span of time, one cannot discount maturation, parental, peer and societal influences, to name a few of the factors, which would directly bear witness to changes, in addition to the influence of the Children's Discussion group.

Although the group consisted primarily of discussion, the discussions revolved around activities planned for the purpose of eliciting productive behavior. The purpose of this paper is not to delineate the activities, but examples are nevertheless relevant in understanding the group's effectiveness. First and foremost, there is an overall atmosphere of Adlerian child-guidance principles, such as natural and logical consequences, mutual respect, age-appropriate responsibilities, encouragement, and the use of a democratic process, to name a few.

Some of the activities used are assessment techniques. Examples are: "ways we keep ourselves from growing up," "an animal we would most like to be like," "what I want to be when I grow up," "wishes," etc. They are then correlated to the children's individual behavior through role-playing, picture drawing, and discussion.

A great deal of focus throughout the year is on self, family, and friends. Holidays are incorporated to discuss various psychological ploys such as "masques" people wear at times to mask real intentions from the intentions of their private logic at Halloween. Social interest is focused around Valentine's Day, even though this is a reoccurring theme throughout the year. St. Patrick's Day might promote discussions about the difference between stories used for positive versus negative reasons.

Group dynamics is an ongoing process during the year, at which time discussions revolve around who is a leader, a follower, a saboteur, a non-participant, cooperative, etc.

The following examples from the questionnaires show what respondents felt was significant as a result of involvement in the group, as well as comments, in abbreviated form, from notes taken on how the child functioned in the group at the time of participation.

Sam, who was 7 years old when he was in the group, was initially oppositional, belligerent, and, needless to say, the goal of power was generally his mode of operation. Life had to be on his terms. As the year progressed, he voted himself as the person who had "made most progress." However, he still managed as a group member to have life on his terms, although now his behavior was acceptable more often than not. By the end of the year, Sam was a functioning group member, waiting his turn, interpreting goals to others, and deciding "that he could have more fun that way."

As a verification to the above, his parents wrote 5 years later that "he developed a sense of responsibility and commitment to community. He is able to handle those situations dealing with power and revenge with more ease. He has compassion for others—good insights into them. He generally feels good about himself." Sam stated, "Well, I really don't argue as much as I feel, and it really taught me I can't have things my own way sometimes."

The overall pattern with Beth, when in second grade, was her perfectionistic tendencies as manifested in her denial or reluctance to discuss her drawings or to act out situations in the group for fear of not doing well enough. Discouragement was evident here. At the end of the group, she reported that she had "learned not to be so shy," and was not so much a perfectionist. Beth wrote in the questionnaire that "I learned that nobody was perfect and people don't look to judge you all the time. I also learn (sic) that when you cooperate with people you can get things done faster and without a lot of fighting." Her parents wrote, "It has made her more aware of herself and more sensitive to other human beings. Has helped to develop her spirit of cooperation—has made her aware of certain acting out behavior of which a lot has been extinguished."

Another child's perfectionistic tendencies were exposed through his avoidance of the social role. Since he fancied himself at the age of 6 to be quite an intellectual, having to be right, he removed himself from involved group or peer interaction, although making sure he was understood intellectually. During the course of the group, he reported that he was "no longer first done in work or best in class" and that he had more friends. His mother wrote, "he will try anything with expectations of success, but is not crushed by failure . . . his relationships in group situations have continued to

improve since his participation in the group, and this was its greatest strength for Tommy." She also wrote, "he disliked it greatly and has never admitted to its value." The child verified the mother's statement by stating, "I don't think it has helped me much, if at all. I might be wrong since it was 5 or 6 years ago." However, he answered the questionnaire in great detail.

A child doesn't have to like being in the group for change to take place. For Tommy, who had to be superior, to admit that he was helped would undermine his facade. However, he covers it with, "I might be wrong." As for friends today, which was a problem area for him when in the group, he writes, "I make friends easily. I only have a few friends, but they are really good friends. I am very picky."

For another child, who used many attention-getting mechanisms, the value of the group for him and his parents was within the sibling relationship. Being firstborn, there were problems with his acceptance of his younger sister, manifested by crying, acting out behavior, and a general uncooperativeness such as deciding when he would or would not be a participant in the group. Five years later, his mother wrote, "It certainly helped to verbalize and materialize some feelings of jealousy of sister and inadequacy (helplessness) . . . started him on the road to a more positive self-concept." Peter said, "It helped me to be a brother. Helped me be a good friend to others . . . It was worthwhile to go there."

These four examples are representative of those received. They indicate that, after 5 years, the months spent in the Children's Discussion Groups had significant bearing on the youngsters' continued positive development within their developing lifestyles, as verified by the consistency in thought and language with that used in the Children's Discussion Groups. Therefore, the study gives validity to the Children's Discussion Groups utilizing Adlerian methods of psychology and with children counseling children as a viable positive force in effecting behavioral change.

### References

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