

# Group Counseling For Mothers: Four Strategies

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During the last two centuries women have been markedly affected by the advancing technological and urbanized way of life. In the past women obtained a greater amount of prestige and self-esteem in the role of mother of a usually large family. Today the average size of families is smaller and home-making chores have been vastly eased by modern technology. Women generally are no longer socially isolated. A new version of the dilemma begins, however, for most young mothers. Due to these changes and to the added impetus of the women's movement, women are expressing uncertainty as to their role expectations and are searching for new ways to express themselves as individuals (Myrdal & Klein, 1970). Many women experience identity crises soon after their youngest child enters school. Symptoms of depression often accompany these identity crises.

Schools could provide a means for helping women, at this and other junctures, develop new lifestyles. Frustrated and depressed mothers tend to make scapegoats out of their children emotionally as well as physically (Sage, 1975). Schools could provide more help by focusing more attention on the needs of the family. Counseling children and even counseling parents on only children-related topics does not seem adequate. Schools could provide more help by focusing more attention on the needs of the *family*. To have any permanent impact on this situation counselors may find working with the parents on self-growth as well as children-oriented concerns necessary.

The purpose of this article is to present a specific plan for helping women learn more about themselves and to apply this knowledge in seeking a meaningful place in today's world. A school-based program will be presented and described and a discussion of the counselor's role analyzed. A rationale explaining the need for the program and a brief description of each group included in the program is presented. The description of the various groups focuses on the practical and provides specific techniques and activities for each group. The article concludes with a discussion of the feasibility of such a program in the schools.

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## **Placement of Participants**

Many of the groups could be done on a developmental continuum with the counselor meeting privately with each person to decide the appropriate placement. During the private counseling session such relevant information as the woman's marital status, previous life experience, and specific needs would be explored. This information, combined with available programs, and the person's life goals are used to determine appropriate placement. Each woman's needs are different and not everyone would feel it necessary to go through all the available experiences.

## **Woman's Awareness Workshop**

Each woman should begin her initial group experience with one like the "Woman's Awareness Workshop." Based very much on the same premise as "consciousness raising groups," the "Woman's Awareness Workshop" encourages women to re-examine their personal experiences and then listen and relate to the personal experiences of others. It is hoped that this group will develop an appreciation and a feeling of cohesiveness among women and also to show them that they are responsible, in part, for their own insecurities and private neuroses. The fact that the society in which they were raised must bear much of the responsibility for women's self-image usually will be discussed as well. The women in these groups try to understand their past in terms of the societal expectations for their sex. They begin to redefine themselves by examining their inner sources of personal identity (rather than as daughter, wife and mother) and to decide on their goals on the basis of this identity not on the basis of the roles they have adopted.

Because this would serve as an initial group experience, which we recommend for each woman, we will describe it in more depth than the other aspects of the program. Members of the workshop are drawn from almost any source although the emphasis, simply because it is more practical, could be placed on mothers of children attending the school. Letters are sent home with each child briefly describing the goals of the workshop along with a registration sheet. Mothers who express interest could be placed into eight-week, two-hour groups of between ten and fourteen women. At the onset of the program it would be advisable to limit the number of groups to no more than two weekly.

At the initial meeting the counselor introduces herself, clarifies her own role, and settles organizational duties. The counselor has each participant state who they are, why they are here, and if they are glad they are female (and why or why not). Answering the question, "Who am I?" is emphasized. Participants sit in a circle, and each woman speaks in turn. A "three minute timer" is used at each meeting so that each participant will have six minutes to answer questions without interruption. The presence of the timer at first is

usually threatening but after the first meeting women usually speak for longer than six minutes and do so freely. There should be a maximum of nine minutes so that each woman is assured of her turn.

The last part of the session is devoted to analyzing (reaching beyond) personal or group-wide experiences to look at the position of women in society today. Mothers should come to better understand their own children and the traumas they may be experiencing, and much discussion might focus on social change.

At the conclusion of each session the facilitator passes out mimeographed material concerning the topic for the following week. The women are instructed to read and give careful thought and consideration for at least ten minutes daily to the questions and excerpts handed out weekly. The following questions concerning childhood training, for example, could be used for one session:

- Discuss the attitude of your brothers, sisters and parents toward girls.
- What were your earliest recollections of being trained to behave like a girl?
- What was your mother's role in your family when you were a child? Do you think she was happy when she was your age? What were her expectations of you?

A lot of analyzing and abstracting during this session would revolve around each person's feelings toward mother. Much empathy, understanding and acceptance of one's mother, noting the many similarities between each, would normally take place. Always refer to the present and to the relationship between the women and their daughters compared to the relationships they had with their mothers.

Emphasis at each session is placed on maintaining a non-threatening atmosphere in which each woman may answer, without interruption, as she desires. No women should feel obligated to answer every question and there should be no cross-examination. Feelings, not reasons for certain actions, should be stressed. Women should begin to develop an awareness of how their upbringing and society, is in some way responsible for who and what they are now. Topics for discussion might include childhood training, adolescence, developing one's potential, sexuality, aging and appearance, and a concluding session that brings together the participant's feelings. It would be hoped that this group experience would serve as an impetus for women to continue their search for identity through joining other groups.

## **Parent Training Group**

One effective approach for assisting mothers is group consultation. This approach is extremely beneficial to parents, because it helps them to see that many share the same problems, fears and feelings of inadequacy as they do. An Adlerian parent training group (Carlson, 1969; Carlson & Jarman, 1975; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976) is an excellent example of this approach. Adlerian groups are made up of normal parents who meet together to help each other with the everyday problems which arise in raising normal children. The groups use the theories of Alfred Adler (1930) as a guideline to understanding and modifying behavior. Consisting of eight to fifteen parents (fathers are encouraged to participate) the groups meet for approximately six to eight weeks for one and a half hour sessions. Although a C-group (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973) format is used, homework tasks are essential and a text, such as *Raising a Responsible Child* (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1973), *Children: The Challenge* (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1963) or *The Practical Parent* (Corsini & Painter, 1975) can be used for reference. The C-group approach helps parents to clarify their thinking about specific children and about the relationships between parents' beliefs and attitudes and the ensuing child beliefs and attitudes. It is an approach that is concerned with helping parents make commitments to doing something about specific problems they may be having with their children.

Parenting groups based on the Adlerian model are especially appealing because much stress is placed upon allowing children to be independent and responsible and emphasizes establishing a democratic climate at home. By stressing children's need for independence this philosophy helps to shatter some of the pressures western society places on mothers to do everything for their children and to always be there for them. Adler advocates that parents avoid doing things for their children that their children can do for themselves. Much of the group's discussion time is spent emphasizing how the "good" mother is damaging herself and her children by continuously sacrificing her needs for those of her children. Adlerian groups could serve as a vehicle to release both parent and child from a situation in which mothers live vicariously through their children and suffocate their offspring with "Momism." Parents also learn the importance of encouragement, logical consequences, and various communication skills to help them better understand their children, their spouses, and themselves.

## **Women in Transition**

The "Women in Transition" group helps women by lending them support, to make new goals and realize them. This is a six-week course designed for women who feel they might want to return to school or work but who lack the confidence to do so. It is limited to no more than twelve participants, with sessions lasting for approximately one and a half hours. The counselor makes

use of assertive training techniques, behaviour rehearsal, value clarification, and other structured exercises to help develop a cohesive, nonthreatening atmosphere in which women can begin to think more positively about themselves and their future goals. Discussion centers on each participant's image of her ideal woman. By use of individual contracting, each woman works out ways of becoming more like her ideal. Contracting forces participants to clearly state her goals and the methods she plans to use to achieve them. Women are requested to list ten positive statements about themselves and give three examples of actual situations in which they actively chose to look at what was happening more positively. Encouragement and positive validation of group members are used throughout the sessions.

Approximately one half of each session is spent in a C-group situation in which the women help each other with personal problems. By working with groups of women who have similar problems the counselor takes less time to help the members because spectator therapy occurs (Dinkmeyer & Muro, 1971) and, in this way, more support can be given to each.

### **Career Development Group**

A follow up to the Women in Transition group would be a "Career Development Group" to help those motivated to begin the process of choosing a new career. This group assists the participant in the identification of personal priorities, values, interests, temperament, and abilities. This six session, task oriented group would be designed to help the participants discover who they really are, where they are going, and why they are going there, and advise them about how to get there. Various values clarification exercises such as the "life line," which focuses on how to spend the remaining years of life, and "strength bombardment," which focuses on each participant's assets (Simon, Howe & Kirschenbaum, 1972), are used in addition to an exploration of the world of work through such materials as *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (Bolles, 1972), *Where Do I Go From Here With My Life?* (Crystal & Bolles, 1974), *Go Hire Yourself An Employer* (Irish, 1973), and *Vocational Exploration Groups* (Daane, 1974). A future work fantasy experience is used to allow participants to imagine what their life might be like. The aim of this group is to help participants establish their goals and priorities in life and discover ways of effectively using their assets in daily living. Discussion focuses on reasons why women feel a need to find a new career, the positive and negative changes that may occur in their lifestyle because of their new goal, and ways they might be able to adjust and adapt both themselves and their families to these changes.

By means of these groups the counselor would be providing a much needed community service which would show itself in the improved mental health of the people involved. It would seem apparent that by helping women to lead more useful and happier lives they would prove to relate more

meaningfully to their children and, therefore, would be better mothers. The eventual goal would be to produce better adjusted children and to have a healthy climate in the school as well as the home.

## **Discussion**

The counselor would always be on the alert to discover potential group leaders. Any women who seems motivated and has completed at least two group experiences could be approached to enter a leadership training group. Techniques involved in group leadership, a brief introduction to group dynamics, self-growth, and reinforcement of subject matter would be the primary training objectives of the leadership group. Role-playing, behavioral rehearsal and other simulations would also be frequently used. A requirement of this group would be the assurance that each participant would facilitate a group of their own. The counselor, it would be hoped, within six months of the time of initiating this program, would serve mainly as a consultant and would only be required to do an occasional group. While this program is initially time-consuming for the counselor, it can, for the most part, be taken over by lay people and still prove quite beneficial.

To the male counselor who asks "What about me?" "How could I set up a similar program at my school?" The response may involve a little more doing, but it is not impossible. Both "Parent Training Groups" and "Career Development Groups" could easily have a male facilitator. Possibly, there may be a female counselor at a nearby school who would trade some other service with you (i.e. she could do the "Women's Awareness Workshops" and you the "Career Development"), or an interested and empathetic teacher might be enlisted to help.

A program similar to the one described in this article has been successfully implemented at The University School of Nova University in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Although a formal research study was not undertaken, a follow-up revealed:

(1) 100% of the participants found value in the program and felt that it was a necessary part of the school program.

(2) 84% of the participants actually did take steps toward securing a job, going back to school, or "doing something with themselves."

(3) Teachers indicated on a questionnaire that 75% of the children of the parents involved in the women's program showed marked improvement in classroom behavior and achievement.

The principal also indicated his pleasure with the program and felt that this program was helping to create an ideal school/home relationship.

In conclusion, it would be expected that this program would provide a source of long-term prevention of family stress within the school community. The counselor, by assuming the role of mental health consultant (Ciavarella, 1970) would be better meeting the community's needs of today. Emotionally unhealthy parents directly affect their children by providing poor models for them to emulate. By encouraging significant adults to give up complaining, be less apathetic and more interested in personal growth, the climate of the school and community would be vastly improved. Mothers who are leading happier, more satisfying lives will tend to be more supportive of their children and more helpful to the school. They will also come to respect and support other guidance programs being offered in the school. Counselors can assume that with each parent they are directly affecting and helping, indirectly they are affecting on the average two children. The initial time devoted to his program will pay off in dividends in the years to come.

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*"It is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them."*

—Alfred Adler

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