

## **Group Therapy with Adolescents: An Experiment**

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### PREMISE

Adolescents are a difficult group to handle in our civilization. The average teen-ager has reached some physical maturity and often intellectual maturity without having the emotional maturity necessary to cope with the problems of living in our complex society. In this he represents the result of the lack of emotional maturity in our population as a whole. However, adolescents have a special problem in that they are no longer children but not yet adults, and thus find themselves in a "caught in the middle" position in a civilization which is even more prejudiced against adolescents than it is against children.

If we further see adolescence as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, we can understand how the adolescent tries to be more and more like what he thinks an adult is (viz., adolescent tendency to hero identification), while hesitating through his feelings of inferiority to give up childhood privileges, such as dependency on his parents, the right to rebel against them and to manipulate them. He is an individual sitting straddlewise on two chairs, hesitating to move over to the adult position because the childhood position has in many ways been comfortable. He seeks information as to what should be his goals in life and at the same time prepares himself to struggle against accepting these goals should they not be to his liking. In his attempt to adjust to the new demands of life he brings along his style of life acquired as a child. The result of the meeting between his previous pattern and his new situation has far reaching implications for the future development of his personality.

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## PURPOSE

Our problem was: How can we most help the largest number of adolescents with the means at our disposal in the Community Child Guidance Centers? We had already been well satisfied with the group therapy technique in our treatment of adults and children. We further felt that it would be easier for many adolescents to be helped through a group, for one other important reason. So many of these adolescents had bad relationships with all adults and would almost automatically take a stand against any adult who tried to help them. In a group, however, the patient is in a more secure position, since he is not exposed alone to an adult therapist, and can take refuge in the feeling of group identification. We use the group approach for various reasons:

- (1) It is convenient and less expensive;
- (2) It is more easily accepted and less threatening;
- (3) It offers better chances to work out social relationships, and meets less individual resistance.
- (4) It permits reality testing in social relationships and provides the opportunity to feel accepted by peers and by an adult.
- (5) The ego defenses are more easily broken in the protection of the group; this permits acceptance of the therapist;
- (6) It offers opportunities to compare oneself with others; to understand and accept oneself;
- (7) It fosters the development of social interest and a willingness to accept group ideals over and above parental and gang ideals.

## PROCEDURE

Nineteen adolescent boys from two high schools attended the group. Without the help and cooperation of the principal, the psychologists, and adjustment teachers in the schools, this project would have been impossible.\* They selected the boys and arranged for their participation in group therapy. They made the original contact with parents, tried to show them that a procedure like this might help their boys. The parents were then seen by the social worker of the Centers; the therapist saw them once to discuss with them how to treat the adolescent.

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\* We want to express our thanks to Mr. Gregg, Mrs. Nell, Mrs. Antes and Miss McCue.

Each boy attended from two to thirteen sessions. The meetings were held in a YMCA, which was chosen because it was neutral ground. A small charge was made to the parents of each boy to help defray the expenses of the meetings.

The therapist's job was to provide a stable reference figure for these adolescents as well as to be a group leader. He thus had to know each adolescent and relate to him personally and translate this relation to the whole group. He also had to integrate each into the group as a whole and be a spark plug to keep these adolescents from getting bored.

The therapist started with a short introductory talk to each new boy, and introduced him to the group. He explained that this was not a classroom; that they were assembled to see if they could help each other. Since most of the adolescents denied that they needed help, the therapist asked them to wait and see. A permissive atmosphere was established to the extent that the therapist did not impose restrictions such as the adolescent was accustomed to in his relations with parents and teachers. However, the therapist took a firm stand when the good of the group was involved. At times the behavior of one or more members of the group was quite disturbing. In these cases an interpretation of the behavior was offered and the subject, through participation in the group discussion, became integrated again.

An atmosphere of informality prevailed as much as possible. The therapist furthermore had to be a showman. He had to impress these adolescents with his knowledge and induce them to feel that they had something to learn from him. He also had to be a friendly "guy" to whom they could talk without fear. The therapist achieved this by the careful use and timing of interpretations that would strike home to the adolescents, and also by showing interest and respect for the boys. The therapist tried to give the boys ego support in regard to their abilities. It was often pointed out that all of them were capable but had not yet learned to use their capabilities in a way to help themselves the most.

Interesting topics were necessary. The therapist was always on the alert to change a topic which had become dull, to encourage the expression of feeling, to interpret where the group could benefit, to draw the others in as often as possible to give their own interpretations, to make comparisons between the boys without pointing anyone out as being inferior to the next, and to prod them with questions. A casual approach as to why the adolescent was in the group usually brought a whole list of reasons and complaints and then the others would join in

with their own reasons, and by comparing complaints and feelings the boys began to develop a more realistic idea of their problems.

The family constellations and early recollections were interpreted and discussed. Outside of this the therapist followed the policy of not interrupting as long as there was constructive interaction between the boys.

Following are notes on two sessions, one showing how a session may go easily and smoothly and the other showing several problems which may arise.

### *Session No. 2*

Present: J, B, A, G, and Q (G and Q are new).

J, B, and A sat together and enjoyed the fact that the two new boys didn't know what was going to happen. The therapist warmed up the group by stressing informality and then began to ask each boy how he got along.

J— (Had been in trouble with school authorities for stealing; was behind in school work; is an only child.) He said he had been doing his home work; decided it would be easier to do it.

B— (Youngest in family. Gets away with things all the time; stubborn and rebellious with teachers; poor in school.) B reported that he had had no trouble with teachers this week, but had resented some classes and cut them.

A— (Middle child with brutal father; his parents do not care how he does in school. He cuts classes and misses work.) A states that he had not cut class this week because he had been warned in school; that he had managed to avoid his father during the week so that he was not so upset.

The therapist mentioned that he understood why they like to cut class. He then turned to the newcomers who were sitting off on the side.

G— (A well dressed, good-looking, quiet boy who becomes resentful easily and uses passive methods of rebellion, feels that the teachers are down on him.) He said he had been sick and can't keep up with the work. According to his history he is his mother's favorite and puts her into his service. The therapist pointed out how he uses his illness as an excuse and is angry at his teachers when they don't fall for his tricks. The other boys enjoyed this. G thought about it.

Q— (A charmer, the only boy in his family; he twists both parents around his finger; demands his own way.) He interrupts the other boys and talks about himself; he doesn't like school and wants to quit and is angry at his parents because they "don't treat him right." He demands that his father give him a car and wants to enlist the therapist on his side. The father told him he could have a car if it was o.k. with the therapist. The latter refused to become involved in the matter of a car. Q's early recollections were interpreted and showed his feeling of inadequacy and his preoccupation with the "unfairness" of others. Q was only temporarily taken aback by the interpretation. He soon returned to the question of a car. The therapist interpreted his anti-social "I'll show 'em" attitude. The other boys were amused except B, who had not been the center of attention for a while and seemed to resent it.

#### *Session No. 5*

A, C, B, J, Q, W, R, and H present (R and H are new).

The group was fairly noisy. J gave B a hotfoot which B took good-naturedly. R was noisy until he found that the therapist would not pay attention to him. Then he stopped and began to listen. The therapist asked the group to discuss the newcomers. A, C, and W were able to tell them the purpose of the group. The newcomers were then asked for their earliest recollections, as this had become a form of initiation into the group.

Q took up a great deal of the discussion. The therapist asked the group why Q cannot seem to stay out of trouble. His father had bought him a new car and he wrecked it a week later. The group also wanted to know why. The significance of the question seemed to reach Q. He began to think that he might be doing something wrong. B and A pointed out to Q that he can get a lot of attention in this way. W said, "Maybe Q wants to be famous." Q had mixed feelings and felt that the group all knew something he did not know.

#### RESULTS

The boys selected for the therapy group were the most troublesome problems in their schools. All of these boys had a bad school history dating back for at least several years. They were all behavior problems at home.

The changes in the behavior of the boys who attended was gratifying and often profound. Three boys came to only two sessions each and showed no appreciable change. In a fourth case the home situation was so bad that the boy needed more help than the group could offer. Another boy had a severe emotional disturbance and did not improve. Five boys quit school for various reasons but all of them had improved in their relationships with parents and teachers. One of these boys had seemed headed for a criminal career before joining the group, but afterwards he got a job and began to help support his large family. Six boys showed definite improvement both at home and in school, making better grades and becoming more mature in their behavior. Three other boys did not better their grades but their relations with parents and teachers improved.

The criteria we used for improvement were:

1. Better grades;
2. Better relation to teachers and school psychologist;
3. Better relation to parents;
4. Better relation to other boys in the group and to the therapist.

It was interesting to watch many of these young boys change from asocial adolescents to people with interest in being constructive members of the group, preparing themselves to take their place in the community. Many of the parents were highly gratified at the change in their sons.

#### WHAT WE LEARNED

The group therapy technique is highly applicable to adolescents. It is convenient, inexpensive, and effective. The method we used can be improved by working more closely with parents and teachers. At least six sessions are required before any improvement can be expected. The greater the number of sessions, the better the chance of success.

If this technique can be moved directly into the schools, the rewards would be tremendous in terms of better behavior, improved learning, and better, all-around human beings.