

AUSTIN O'KEEFE,  
*Supervisor of Guidance,  
Antigonish County Municipal School  
Board, Nova Scotia.*

## GROUP COUNSELLING IS NEEDED IN OUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

In general it is the function of the elementary school guidance program to identify and implement innovations, functions, and procedures that facilitate learning and development. The school should be helping children develop positive attitudes toward themselves and toward life. It should be fostering development of communication with their peers and with significant adults in their lives. Schools should be encouraging development of the competence to cope with frustrations and conflicts that will hit them as they grow up and try to survive in our culture.

In our elementary school children are acquiring attitudes and ways of reacting to stress that will stay with them as they grow to adulthood. We are now making them what they will be as adults. The child who is withdrawn during the ages 6 to 10 tends to become the adult who withdraws when confronted with stress. The aggressive child will become the competitive adult. The child who is uncomfortable with his peers will become the adult who lacks social skills (Kagan & Moss, 1962, p. 226). Once a child's pattern of reacting reaches a plateau, or once he goes through certain stages of development, there is little possibility for any significant change. We may be able to help a person live with his problems, but we won't be able to change his basic way of reacting too much. Any change has to come before the characteristic stabilizes (Bloom, 1964).

It seems obvious that the elementary school is "where it's at." That is where the action has to be if we are to do more for young people than we have been doing. There are one million children in Canada suffering from emotional and learning disorders (CELDIC Report, 1970). The *Celdic Report* is highly critical, and rightly so, of the effectiveness of existing programs and the level of liaison and cooperation between agencies and schools involved with children. It is a sad commentary on our work in the public schools to realize that so many children are not receiving the kind of treatment they need, and that so many are not being identified until it is relatively late to do much for them. If a problem remains untreated until an individual is an adult or an older child the prognosis is not too encouraging. Our mental health clinics and similar agencies have all they can do in many cases to help an individual learn to live with his problems, let alone effect a "cure." The time to solve emotional problems is before they begin. This is why the elementary school must become the front line in the battle for mental health.

What can we do in the elementary school to help children learn to cope? At least part of the answer lies in adequate counselling services. Although there is a difference of opinion among the "experts" on how much and how well a young child can verbalize his own feelings and attitudes, there seems no doubt that group procedures hold much promise for this age level.

This does not discount the necessity of working on an individual basis with some children; but our functioning with the society in which we find ourselves is done as a member of a group. Most of what we learn we learn in groups.

"Man is a rational being who achieves self-realization through meaningful interaction with fellow human beings. . . . All children require acceptance, a sense of belonging, and a supportive nurturant environment in which a firm sense of trust can develop . . . none of us can be a person by himself, it requires relationship, and relationship is a two-way street (Grams, 1966 pp. 20, and 101)." Since we are primarily social beings, most problems faced by children are primarily social and interpersonal. Members of the group come to understand their own behavior by observation of and identification with the behavior of others (Dreikurs & Sonstegard, 1968). The group can become a value-forming element. It provides the opportunity to explore problems, opinions, feelings, assumptions, and convictions in an attempt to modify attitudes and the perceptual field (Muro & Dinkmeyer, 1970). According to Muro and Dinkmeyer, group counselling:

1. teaches each member to deal with each other as an equal—provides a safe psychological climate.
2. assists the child to master developmental tasks confronting the normal healthy personality.
3. helps the child realize he is not alone in his problems and helps him with solutions.
4. helps the child develop self-understanding.
5. provides the child with immediate feedback.
6. provides the child with a rehearsal area for newly acquired or modified behaviors (1970).

The main advantage of the group approach is the feeling of belonging the child gets from participating in the group and the opportunity to test himself in a real-life situation. The group provides a proving ground for what has been learned. If a child learns something in an individual interview—if the need is established for some change—he still has to take that learning out into a group of his peers and try it out. The immediate feed-back of the group experience reinforces what he has learned right here and now. It must be a great source of consolation to a young child to learn from group participation that he is not unique—not an odd-ball in his hang-ups. He finds other children have the same difficulties, fears, frustrations. The support he gets from the group will be much more effective in modifying behavior than any support he might get from the counsellor alone.

Children who qualify for group counselling are learning at ineffective levels, do not respond favorably to measures the teacher takes in effecting new classroom climates. Children who are severely disturbed should receive counselling in addition to the group effort. Children whose tolerance for exposure to the impulsiveness of other children is insufficient and grossly immature children will not fit into group counselling (Faust, 1968).

The composition of the group will depend upon the identification of the members with each other and with the counsellor, and upon the maturity of the group. The size of the group will depend upon the maturity of the students, the level of adjustment they present, and the topic to be discussed. A small group of four to six seems appropriate for elementary school children

(Combs, Cohn, Gibian, & Sniffen, 1963). Faust suggests two to five although he agrees the actual size depends upon age, type of problem, counselling objectives, structure of the group approach, time available, and personality of the counsellor (Faust, 1968). In the selection of groups Gazda (1970) feels that three or four children would be the optimum size for a group of 5 to 7 year olds. The group should be balanced in the sense that no more than one aggressive child should be included, and he should be offset by the inclusion of one who is neither aggressive nor passive. The selection should also take into account the need for the group to include appropriate models since children learn much of their behavior through imitation.

Ohlsen (1968) emphasizes several points that are important to consider when working with younger children. Young children need more structure and more carefully defined limits than would be appropriate for adolescents. They should be treated in smaller groups and for shorter periods of time. Girls and boys might be separated because girls at this age level tend to dominate the discussion and to threaten the boys with discussion of questions relative to sex. Role playing, puppets, and other play material may be helpful.

Although a great many elementary school children are capable of verbalizing more than some of us realize, the natural mode of expression of children is play. Play puts the child at ease and gives him the opportunity to act out feelings that may not be consciously recognized by him. He can act out ideas he may be afraid to admit he possesses. "A strictly cognitive approach tends not to be effective in changing the behavior of pupils. What is needed is another ingredient: emotion (Kaczowski 1968, p. 88)." In group play activities the child is given the opportunity to let his emotions influence what he does and says.

The counsellor must appear to the group as someone who is open, trustworthy, sympathetic, non-threatening. He has to be all this and yet maintain some controls—especially because of the lack of maturity of elementary school children. "In groups of immature members, when increased maturity is a goal, the leader must help the group set limits and structure which will allow the members to take maximum self-responsibility within those limits (MacLennan & Felsenfeld, 1968, p. 23)." Although this statement was made with reference to work with adolescents, the basic premise that immature students need controls and structure is valid for elementary students.

Groups can be used to work on a number of areas like orientation, study skills, vocational and educational planning; but the most important one is the area of self-understanding and the understanding of others. "Understanding of self is essential to any realistic planning of educational, vocational, or personal goals . . . people want to understand themselves and others at their levels of maturity in situations where they can accept and respect themselves and others in a mutually helpful and skillfully guided process (Bennett, 1963, p. 227)." A person cannot function as a useful member of society until he has first learned to live with himself. Understanding of self must be a primary goal of our work with elementary children. All behavior adjustment problems could be boiled down to either withdrawal or acting out resulting from a feeling of lack of personal worth and a lack of love. What better way to learn about themselves and their interactions with others than within a group of their peers set up for that purpose?

What can we do with elementary school children in groups? Since young children are not as fluent or as verbal as older children, we need some sort of catalyst to prompt discussion and interaction within the group, and the expression of feeling on the part of group members. The literature abounds with suggestions for the use of play media. Moustakas (1970) points out that play media give children a way to explore feelings, attitudes, and temporary tensions and conflicts that cannot be expressed easily otherwise. Some suggested media that appear effective and useable with groups of young children are role-playing (socio-drama), puppets, "guess who" games, open ended stories, clay, and sandboxes. In the same way that play can be effective with individual counselling, it appears appropriate for use with groups.

One particular 'gimmick' that the author of this article has found especially effective as a play method with elementary school children is a game developed at the University of Maine. This has been used with considerable success in several Maine schools, and although no statistical evidence is available at the moment to substantiate its effectiveness with Nova Scotia children, it does seem to be a useful tool.

The game is played with a number of cards of different colors and a board marked off to correspond to the colors on the cards. Each card tells the child to do something. Some samples of the questions are reproduced here to indicate in some detail the make-up of the game.

#### YELLOW CARD (USE FIRST)

1. Select the nicest guy in the group and tell him why he is.
2. Pick another group member and tell him how he shows off and why.
3. Pick a member of the group and tell him what you like most about him and why.
4. Tell about school when you think it is worst.
5. Tell the group how you could act more grown up.
6. Go round the group and tell each member why you like him.
7. Finish this sentence. Happiness is \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Tell about school when you feel it is best.

#### RED CARDS (USE SECOND)

1. Tell a member of the group what he does on the playground and why.
2. Tell the way you are when others like you best.
3. Tell the group how you would change if you could.
4. Help one member of the group to be less shy.
5. What group member is a cop-out? Tell him why he is.
6. Tell how you act tough.
7. Tell the group about your favorite brother or sister.
8. Tell what you can do to make more friends.

#### BLUE CARDS (USE THIRD)

1. Who works hardest in the group? Why?
2. Who gets angry the easiest? Why?
3. Who is the easiest in the group to talk to? Why?
4. Tell how you feel when you get angry.
5. Who would you like to have as a friend in the group?
6. Pick out someone who talks too much in this group.
7. Tell why boys and girls get lonely.
8. Tell the group how you've been faking it so far in this game.

### WHITE CARDS (TO BE USED WHEN SOMEONE LANDS ON A TAPE. ALL MEMBERS DO WHAT THE CARD SAYS)

1. Make a plan for doing better.
2. Say something about you that is hard to say.
3. Tell each member of the group how he has helped you.
4. Tell a quiet member of the group what he can do to be noticed more.
5. Tell how you'll be different because you have been in the group.
6. Tell the group how you have changed, if at all, since you have been here.
7. This week do something nice for someone you don't like.

### RULES FOR THE GROUP GAME

1. Start with the yellow cards. Stack them so the positive ones are on top.
2. Each student gets some kind of marker. To start the game the child picks up a card and reads it. He then does what the card says.
3. When the student has finished doing what the card says, all members judge his performance in terms of how well he did the task, how sincere, with either a WHOA or a GO cards. He moves on the board according to the number of GO's as opposed to WHOA's. For example if six were playing, four GO's and two WHOA's would mean he would move two spaces. Four WHOA's and two GO's would mean that he would lose two spaces. No-one would go back beyond the starting point.
4. After the group has judged the speaker, time should be provided for free interaction. Why did Joe say go? Why did John say he liked Jim best?
5. The OUT-OF-BOUNDS Card is used by the children to keep focus on the game. If a child is not paying attention or is disruptive, any member of the group can use the OUT-OF-BOUNDS card. If the group decides he is really out-of-bounds he loses one turn.
6. The child moves from yellow to red to blue. If he lands on red he takes a red card; if he lands on blue a blue card, etc.
7. When he lands on a space that has a tape on it (or any other marker) he takes a white card. At this time everyone, including the counsellor, follows the instructions on the card. Most of these cards should have the children make a commitment to some kind of small change if possible. At the next session these plans should be discussed to see if the child is following what he said.
8. New cards could be added for specific behaviors the counsellor would like to work on, or any ones felt to be irrelevant could be dropped.
9. All players should have different markers so they easily recognize their place (Muro, 1970).

The board itself could be adapted from any round or rectangular board of the type many children's games employ to keep track of movement based on dice throws. The actual form could be adapted by the individual using it. In the game as it was originally set up, the board has 36 spaces—the first 12 yellow, the next 12 red, and the final 12 blue. The 12th space in each color is marked with a piece of tape to indicate use of the white cards. The WHOA and GO are front and back of one card.

Some of the questions may sound a bit threatening to young children, but "children are not breakable generally (Nelson, 1969)." In actual practice the children take this for what it is—a game. With few exceptions they don't seem to mind doing what the cards tell them. Most children who have been involved with use of the Game ask for a continuation of it—they look

forward to the next session. The "play" aspect of the Game is particularly helpful in getting the shy child to speak up, and in getting the overly aggressive one toned down. Children like to belong to groups where they are generally open and spontaneous.

The Game is helpful in several ways. It facilitates discussion in small groups of elementary school children—discussion that is more than merely superficial. With the Game, discussion gets away from hockey scores and other non-threatening topics much more quickly than with straightforward discussion techniques. Ordinarily children will verbalize but they will adroitly avoid threatening topics. The cards force them to look at themselves and the group.

If the Game itself seems a little far out for some counsellors to play with, the cards could be used alone as discussion prompters. The Game, however, seems to have more appeal for children than do the cards alone.

Along with the facilitation of discussion, and forcing children to look at themselves, the Game provides the counsellor with many insights into the individual group member—insights that help him know the children and that put him in a better position to help them effect necessary and desirable changes. He can spot children who need individual counselling in addition to (or instead of) group counselling.

Children need to explore what it means to be a person; they need to become more effective in social situations. They need a safe climate for healthy exploration of feelings and control of them. They have to learn how to be more responsible for their own behavior. "A major goal of group counselling in schools is to build relationships that will enable the counsellor to meet the important developmental needs of students and to help with students' identity seeking process (Mahler, 1969, p. 89)." Group procedures provide a means of counselling young children that can be more effective than individual counselling at this age level. The group Game can help provide the kinds of relationships Mahler mentions above.

It is encouraging and most satisfying for a counsellor to find a child who was labled excessively shy by her teachers take an active part in group discussion with no apparent embarrassment or anxiety; to see a child's face light up when he realizes that he is not odd or different; to experience with children the gains in self-understanding that come from the group experience.

#### REFERENCES

- Bennett, M. E. *Guidance and counseling in groups*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963.
- Bloom, B. *Stability and change in human characteristics*. New York: Wiley, 1964.
- Combs, C., Cohn, B., Gibian, E., & Sniffen, A. M. Group counseling: Applying the technique. *The School Counselor*, 1963, 11(1) 11-13.
- The Commission on Emotional and Learning Disorders in Children. *One million children—The CELDIC report*. Toronto: Leonard Crainford, 1970.
- Dreikurs, R., & Sonstegard, M. Rationale for group counseling. In D. C. Dinkmeyer (Ed.), *Guidance and counseling in the elementary school: Readings in theory and practice*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.
- Faust, V. *Counselor-consultant in the elementary school*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968.
- Gazda, G. M. Group approaches to guidance. *Focus on Guidance*, 1970, 3(2), 1-12.

- Grams, A. *Facilitating learning and individual development, toward a theory for elementary guidance*. St. Paul: Minnesota Department of Education, 1966.
- Kaczkowski, H. R. The role and function of the elementary school counselor. In D. C. Dinkmeyer (Ed.), *Guidance and counseling in the elementary school: Readings in theory and practice*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.
- Kagan, J., & Moss, H. A. *Birth to maturity*. New York: Wiley, 1962.
- MacLennan, B. W., & Felsenfeld, N. *Group counseling and psychotherapy with adolescents*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.
- Mahler, C. A. A framework for group counseling. In Gazda, G. M. (Ed.), *Theories and methods of group counseling in the schools*. Springfield, Illinois: Charles E. Thomas, 1969.
- Moustakas, C. E. *Psychotherapy with children*. New York: Ballantyne Books, 1970.
- Muro, J. J. Group game. Mimeographed notes, 1970.
- Muro, J. J., & Dinkmeyer, D. C. A rationale for group counseling in the elementary school. *The School Guidance Worker*, 1970.
- Nelson, R. C. The future of elementary school guidance: Accent on counseling. In J. J. Muro (Ed.), *Elementary school guidance—what it should be*. Orono: University of Maine, College of Education, 1969.
- Ohlsen, M. Counseling children in groups. In D. C. Dinkmeyer (Ed.), *Guidance and counseling in the elementary school: Readings in theory and practice*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.

## L'ORIENTATION PAR GROUPE DANS NOS ÉCOLES PRIMAIRES

AUSTIN O'KEEFE

C'est à l'école primaire que l'on forme les adultes de demain. C'est là, avant que leurs traits de caractère deviennent stables, qu'il nous faut aider nos jeunes à venir à bout des tensions qui tracassent notre jeunesse et à mieux se connaître—eux-mêmes ainsi que les autres membres de la société. Les techniques de groupe s'adaptent admirablement bien à l'orientation de nos plus jeunes élèves. Cet article porte notre attention aux rudiments de l'orientation par groupe et se rapporte de façon spéciale à un jeu de groupe développé à l'Université du Maine. Ce jeu est un outil utile lorsqu'il s'agit de conduire nos élèves du niveau élémentaire à examiner leurs propres attitudes ainsi leurs rapports avec les gens qui les environnent.

