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## Application of a fifth grade group with behavioral adjustment difficulties

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## Application of a fifth grade group with behavioral adjustment difficulties

### Abstract

There is a population of students that a school counselor works with based on behavioral issues in the classroom setting. Most often, these students come with labels such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Emotional Disturbance Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, etc. Also, some students may exhibit self-injurious behavior, aggression, withdrawal or avoidance of social situations and not carry a label. Ultimately, the following group is aimed at helping students that struggle with disruptive behavior in the school setting whether or not he or she carries a label.

APPLICATION OF A FIFTH GRADE GROUP WITH BEHAVIORAL ADJUSTMENT  
DIFFICULTIES

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
and Postsecondary Education  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Arts in Education

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by

Lindsey B. Wahl Vandrovec

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## Abstract

There is a population of students that a school counselor works with based on behavioral issues in the classroom setting. Most often, these students come with labels such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Emotional Disturbance Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, etc. Also, some students may exhibit self-injurious behavior, aggression, withdrawal or avoidance of social situations and not carry a label. Ultimately, the following group is aimed at helping students that struggle with disruptive behavior in the school setting whether or not he or she carries a label.

## Introduction

Disruptive behavior has probably always occurred in school settings. The form of disruptive behavior begs to be re-labeled as socialization patterns, discipline patterns and technology changes. The needs of students are constantly changing, and future school counselors need to step forward and help to address the unmet needs. Throughout education and training to become a teacher, future teachers and counselors can become acutely aware of students labeled with behavioral problems, such as “emotionally disturbed.” Classes spend time targeting how to handle students that act out, but little training is spent learning how to help these students or find out the cause of the troubling and disruptive behaviors. Understandably, the classroom teacher and school counselor are in place to help students learn and grow, but under stringent and strict standards to meet academic expectations it becomes increasingly difficult for teachers and counselors to truly help students. Often, a teachers’ only recourse is to send a continuously disruptive student to the administration or school counselor. Then, a school counselor’s only recourse as seen by faculty is to put a quick fix in place. Ultimately, the following group is aimed at helping students that struggle with disruptive behavior in the school setting whether or not he or she carries a label.

## Work Environment

### *Setting*

The setting this group is planned for is the Center Point-Urbana Community School District (CPU). The community is closely connected with the second largest city in Iowa, Cedar Rapids. The group is specifically targeted for the CPU Middle School. The communities of Center Point and Urbana are growing as many young families are moving outside of the city limits of Cedar Rapids. The communities are not particularly urban or rural, but both fit the

standard Midwest definition of largely conservative values. The majority of the student population is Caucasian. There is currently one elementary school, one middle school, one high school and a small alternative high school. Each grade has approximately 100 students. Overall, the school district reflects a middle class population with some falling below this line and other members exceeding this standard.

### *Professional Role*

The middle school counselor in the CPU district serves approximately 385 students. The counselor is specifically in place to serve and support students in reaching academic goals. This is done through working with teachers and administrators to put in place preventative and responsive programs. Psychoeducational programming is developed and delivered by the school counselor. Also, direct work with individual and small groups in a therapeutic environment is part of the job description. Coordination and implementation of standardized testing and explanations of the use of these test results is a task for the middle school counselor with support from administration. Generally speaking, the school counselor does house the student records in an administrative capacity, but at this level graduation requirements are not a task of major concern.

### *Client Population*

A student can be labeled with emotional disturbance if he or she exhibits one or more characteristics for an extended period of time. The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY, 2004) found that an unexplainable inability to learn, not being able to maintain relationships, inappropriate types of behavior, a persistent mood of unhappiness, and the development of fear with personal and school problems are all characteristics that students can exhibit when suffering from emotional disturbance. One or more of these factors inhibit the

ability of any child being able to learn and grow in an educational environment and can often be distracting to teachers and peers. Officially, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does not include students that are defined as being socially maladjusted into the category as having an emotional disturbance. Merrell and Walker (2004) wrote that the exclusionary clause is embedded in IDEA so that services do not have to be provided and financed for socially maladjusted students. Therefore, the client population that this group is intended for is difficult to describe and define because federal education acts do not necessarily recognize that all students whose behavior limits his or her educational experiences deserve services. In sum, one of the best ways to serve this particular student population is through best judgment based on observation and teacher reports of student behavior. This group may include students that are labeled with behavior disorders or may be seen due to teacher and administrative referrals. The easiest way to define this client population is to understand that this group will be for students that struggle with coping with his or her environment over extended periods of time (National Dissemination, 2004).

### *Treatment Goals*

There are a number of treatment goals that become possible when working with students that are maladjusted or have behavioral problems in a group setting. Tomori (1995) wrote about the benefits of groups for elementary students. Specifically, Tomori (1995) found that students are educated in a social setting and that group counseling becomes a microcosm of the school setting just as group counseling becomes a microcosm for adults. Socially maladjusted students often have a difficult time sustaining interpersonal relationships. The goal of the group is not to assemble all of the students with emotional disturbances into friendship groups, but does give the



students practice in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships which is a treatment goal for this particular population.

Students who struggle with behavioral issues can covertly and overtly be given the message that he or she is a bad person. For example, if a boy continuously acts out he may hear an exasperated and exhausted teacher or parent say, "Why are you so naughty?" In turn, the student internalizes this message and begins to believe that he is naughty, and fulfills the expectation that he has been repeatedly told. Therefore, another treatment goal of this group is to increase self-esteem. Put another way, the group shall strive toward changing negative, internalized messages.

The last treatment goal as pre-defined by the counselor is to help the students develop social problem-solving skills. Social problem-solving skills involves students learning how to identify and work through courses of action, alternatives, and outcomes in situations. This largely relates to cognitive processes that students with behavioral problems have had difficulty negotiating. Also, social problem-solving skills are linked to developing self-regulating behaviors that are also often insufficient when a student constantly struggles with behavioral issues (Nelson, 1996).

### Literature Review

#### *Tomori Article*

Tomori (1995) wrote about the application of the small group experience at the elementary level. This article focuses on benefits of groups, counselor leadership skills, group stages and roles. More importantly, the focus of all aspects of the group is related to working with elementary students. This literature can easily be adapted for the different levels of the CPU Middle School. The middle school is grades 5-8. Fifth grade is largely considered elementary

grade under the current middle school philosophy. These students are currently housed in the CPU Middle School due to lack of space, and are treated as an elementary grade whenever possible. When working with elementary students it is important to realize that the counselor will most likely need to take a more directive approach. Also, in the upper grades of the middle school, students with behavioral difficulties may need more direction in the early stages of the group, but a more hands off approach can come as the group enters the “working stage.” In relation to working with students that face behavioral challenges, the article affirms that school counselors need to be concerned with guiding students through the developmental stages, and these stages relate to understanding the school environment, understanding self, understanding behavior, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal and communication skills. These are not the only developmental stages that educators are concerned with. However, if we think of these stages in terms of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs it is important to resolve one level before moving to the next. Therefore, the article affirms the importance of helping students negotiate these struggles, especially when these struggles are identified as a behaviorally, disruptive problem (Tomori, 1995).

### *Black and Rosenthal Article*

Black and Rosenthal (2005) wrote about working with a group of boys that were labeled as delinquents. The group that provided this case study was together for two years. The first year of this group proved to be very primitive and did not yield many results. Specifically, the group of boys participated in more motor activities such as violence and running up and down the hall as opposed to talking, answering questions or participating in activities. However, a meaningful change in the group environment began when refreshments were introduced into the group sessions. The delinquent boys in this study were from extreme cases of neglect and violent

homes, and food provisions created a focus for the boys while also producing transference onto the group leader as a parental figure. This actual group took place in the late 1960's, and while the intention is not to replicate this extreme group of delinquent boys, it is helpful to find that modifying the group process by introducing and serving food as an intervention can bring about a change in the group environment or stages. More specifically, having a meal together in a group session may make it more realistic and possible to view a socially maladjusted student's role in his or her family of origin. Also, this may produce an opportunity for corrective emotional experiences that may be needed through family reenactment (Black & Rosenthal, 2005; Day, 2005).

#### *Nelson Article*

Nelson (1996) wrote precisely about an empirical study connected to group counseling with students that exhibit behavioral adjustment problems. Social problem-solving skills and self-regulation were both the goals and interventions discussed in the study. Overall, the article was largely concerned with outlining the specific method, limitations and results in the study of working in a group with this student population. Related to the group planned for CPU Middle School, it is important to note that the results of the study were limited but not inconclusive. Specifically stated, the study did find that there was an improvement in behavior adjustment in most cases, but that these positive changes could not be linked to improvement in academic performance (Nelson, 1996).

The most valuable piece that can be taken away from the research comes from Nelson (1996) as he detailed the treatment plan used to create change for the students in need of behavioral adjustment. Briefly, the steps utilized were: Step One is being largely psychoeducational in practice. The learning that takes place is establishing with students the

benefits of improving social and problem-solving skills. Step Two is the identification of a specific social problem and goal-setting for improvement. Alternative solutions are established in this step. Helping students commit to achieving the goals are also significant parts of step two. Step three involves building upon the skills learned in step two. Finally, the students learn about using teachers and other resources in reaching established goals (Nelson, 1996).

### Group Logistics

#### *Group Composition*

Inevitably, in a classroom of twenty or more students there is bound to be one or two students that the classroom teacher views as disruptive. In this group the real target audience is for fifth grade students as this is the beginning of transition years for students in the CPU Middle School. Composition of the group is for fifth grade students of either gender that have had continuous problems related to classroom disruptions which may be due to behavioral issues. As previously stated, the group will not be exclusive to those students that have been labeled as having an emotional disturbance.

#### *Size*

The group will be limited to five students. It would be great to have the capability to extend services to eight students in this group. However, when contending with socially maladjusted fifth graders it may be too difficult and prove to be less helpful to all of the members of the group. More explicitly stated, while one of the treatment goals is to provide an experimental social environment it may be counterproductive when dealing with members that are in the beginning stages of learning how to interact with others. Letting the group grow too large may translate into the group becoming uncontrollable.

*Open or Closed*

A group of students that have a past history of social difficulties often suffer from an inability to sustain meaningful interpersonal relationships (National Dissemination, 2004). One of the treatment goals of this particular group is to work on these interpersonal interactions and relationships. The environment envisioned for this group is one that is safe for students to support each other and also experiment with the new behaviors that are being cognitively worked through. Therefore, the life of this group is to remain closed to the joining of new members once the group is underway.

*Duration*

Nine weeks is the projected time interval for this group to take place. It is helpful to think in terms of a school system being on quarters and handing out report cards every nine weeks. Preferably, this group would be conducted during the second quarter of the school year which is the second half of the fall semester. Nine weeks provides ample time to get through the previously mentioned steps. Also, by conducting this group in the second quarter there is enough time left in the school year to do a second group with these students if needed, and also to do a follow-up with the students.

*Length and Frequency*

During the nine week group interval, I would hold the group meetings once a week. Conducting groups in a school can create increased problems should students be pulled out of the classroom too often. For example, when coordinating schedules it is important to avoid students having to miss recess, math, music, etc. too many times during a given week. Also, in keeping good relations with classroom teachers it is important to not place the burden of adding work to the teachers' load in having to help students get caught up in any particular areas that they may

repeatedly miss due to meeting with the counselor. Teachers are often very understanding and grateful for the role the school counselor fills, but at the same time when a group is being conducted, it is important to take into consideration how best to schedule the sessions to make things as easy as possible for everyone involved.

### *Screening and Orientation*

The members for this group will most likely already have made contact with the school counselor. While the school counselor is not to be viewed as a disciplinarian the counselor is often sought to get to the deeper level of why a student is having difficulty in the classroom setting. Consequently, the counselor can ask teachers for student referrals for this group and can make decisions for the group based on previously gained knowledge. It is still important to assess whether or not a student is going to be an effective member of the group in terms of having the capability and commitment to learn from others and in return to help other members of the group. Pre-group interviews should still take place so that the counselor can individually discuss the importance of confidentiality and what confidentiality means. Also, for a group of students that struggle with social interactions, it would be helpful to have a list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors to discuss. The student can also be asked to define these behaviors and demonstrate what the acceptable behaviors look like.

### *Initial Meetings*

The first step in this process is going to include determining consensual norms. As previously stated, the members of the group will already have gone through a one-on-one discussion of acceptable behavior, but will be given the chance to talk about these in the group setting. Also, giving kids power and choice is important in this group and the students will be given the opportunity to add acceptable behaviors to the list which they may feel are important.

The whole group will be given the opportunity to discuss these new rules. Also, learning is an essential part of this group and so, during a time when students are learning about one another, the focus of the group is going to be learning what it means to “take care of oneself” and the benefits of learning how to control behaviors and the power that controlling behavior can take along with it (Nelson, 1996).

### *Ground Rules*

Too many rules can confuse students and make the rules less meaningful. Therefore, it is important to put rules in place that are broad, but it is imperative to break them down, and make them realistic and specific to students’ lives. For example, having a rule that says “Respect self and others” is very general. However, this provides an opportunity to have students define and discuss respect. It is important to demonstrate what respect looks like to give a clear picture to students what the expectations are. Therefore, in broad terms the rules laid out for this group is: Maintaining confidentiality, respect self, respect others, and support other members. Students are bound to make mistakes, and it is also important to have a discussion about how the group will discuss and learn from mistakes as another guideline for the group. Finally, in regards to the rules students should be given a handout of the rules as well as having the rules hanging in plain view during group sessions. A positive, preventative measure to provide continuity is to review the ground rules at the beginning of each session before doing a check-in activity.

### *Physical Setting*

The office of a school counselor is often not a big enough place to fit five students and a group leader. It is essential that the room that the group sessions are held is a quiet place, with few windows for other students to peek in. Ideally, the setting would be away from the main classrooms. Questions can arise when students go into a “strange” room and this poses a problem

both to confidentiality and may invoke negative feelings in a group member should he or she be teased or feel the attachment of a stigma about being in “therapy” or being in “trouble”.

### Ethical Considerations

The first two ethical considerations relevant to this population come from the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) and are identified under the heading of program development and evaluation. It is the counselor’s duty to identify the group and to develop the group in such a way that fits with the needs that the student population may lack. Also, it is important for the counselor to be explicit in choosing techniques and a leadership style for this group. For example, it would be unethical to start this group without first having a plan. Also, it would be considered unethical for the counselor to assume a leadership style in which the counselor becomes part of the group in a member role. Working with a population of fifth graders means that developmentally it is important for the counselor to take on a more structured, somewhat authoritarian role (Day, 2005).

A third ethical consideration which comes into play in all individual and group experiences is assessing whether or not the counselor is competent in the scope that he or she is working in. Without previously having some experience working with students a group focused on behavior adjustment may be out of the scope of a school counselor. Practicum and internship counselors will have the benefit of working with a supervisor to become competent in this area as well as many others. Reviewing research is another way to ensure a counselor is knowledgeable about a population, and helpful facts and considerations for group work can be yielded. This highlights the ethical importance of continuing education and research (Day, 2005).

The fourth ethical consideration is related to working with minors. It is going to be important to take into consideration working with parents in this situation. The students targeted



for this group are in fifth grade. It will be vital to inform and coordinate with parents that their student will be involved in a nine week, intensive group experience. Parents have the right to raise their child and that may or may not include the desire to have help from the school counselor. Regardless of parental views, it is still important to take these parental wishes under advisement and open the lines of communication with parents about the type of group, interventions and treatment goals (Day, 2005).

Finally, the fifth ethical consideration to take under advisement is the importance of multicultural competency. In individual counseling it is the background and culture of a singular client that is coming into play that may be different or like the background and culture of the counselor. In this group setting, it is vital to take under consideration where each of the five group members come from, the culture, including gender, religion, race and so forth and to consider how the counselors biases and pre-determined notions affect these students (Day, 2005).

### Leadership Role

The school counselor's personal orientation to being a group leader ought to be taken into consideration. The ability to communicate empathy and being mindful of the details are important in taking an executive role of the group. Also, assigning meaning to the process of what is happening in this particular group is almost completely taken care of through the psychoeducational component of the group.

The degree of the counselors' involvement in the group is taken care of by the age difference. It is possible for the fifth grade group members to view the counselor as a friend or ally, but the difference in age will always lend itself to being viewed as a trusted adult, and at the very least, hopefully the group members are able to put trust in the leader. This leads into whether the counselor's style can be non-directive. To work toward the treatment goals set out,

working with fifth grade students is going to require the counselor to be almost completely directive in approach. This does not mean that the counselor cannot let the group members shift focus as the student's involvement, input and ideas are essential, but the counselor will certainly be responsible for directing or guiding the focus in a certain path.

A directive approach means that the group will have a high level of structure to it. It may not be best practice to replicate a classroom experience for the group members, but the leader may have a lesson plan, so as to be organized for planned activities. For example, the psychoeducational component may not require note-taking, but it will be important to have an idea of the important pieces of information and how to help the students internalize this information. Also, role-playing can be an effective means for the group members to really begin to experiment with new ways of behaving. Role-playing for students of this age is most often more productive when a structure accompanies the activity.

### Multicultural Techniques

Tania is a fifth grade girl. This is her first year at Gussner Elementary. Tania's family moved here from Panama during the summer before school started. Tania has met with the school counselor because she is a new student. Tania has also met with the school counselor because she is often late for school, has difficulty keeping up with the pace of the classroom and she also switches between her native language of Spanish and English which she can speak but is not as comfortable with.

Part of being multiculturally competent is making sure that the disruptive behaviors being exhibited are not cultural conflicts. In Tania's situation it is highly probable that she is being labeled as disruptive due to cultural conflicts. It is not that Tania or her parents are too lazy to get her to school on time, but time is viewed differently in Latino culture. More precisely, it is

probably more important to Tania's family to sit down together for breakfast together as opposed to watching the clock and sacrificing family time so that Tania may be exactly on time for school. This can also translate into why Tania has difficulty with the pace of the classroom. While she is not conditioned to disrespect her teacher, she may have difficulty in shifting topics quickly especially when she may be enjoying reading a story that was the previous activity. Finally, Tania is a recent immigrant and while she does have the ability to speak English, it is more comfortable to speak Spanish especially if she is feeling emotional or stressed out.

The goal of the counselor in this situation is not to assimilate Tania into the American culture, but to ensure that her transition to an American school goes as smoothly as possible. It may be helpful to include Tania into the group just so that she can begin to build some interpersonal relationships with the other students, and to also understand why she and her teacher are having difficulty understanding each other's expectations. One of the most important interventions for Tania may not take place specifically within the group session, but in the final stage when she has an opportunity to learn and put into practice how to communicate her goals and needs with her teachers and others around her.

### Skills and Techniques

One of the first skills that will be utilized with a fifth grade group working toward behavior adjustment is going to be modeling. As previously discussed, this highlights the importance of discussing acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for the group. It is important to model what the acceptable behaviors look like. Also, the group members should get involved in modeling acceptable behavior by asking them things like, "Can you show me an example of what it means to respect someone?"

Blocking is also a skill that will come in handy with members that struggle with being effective in social situations. It is going to be important to stop students from saying and doing harmful things.

Facilitating as a skill will come in under the heading of being a structured and directive group leader. Developmentally a group of fifth graders can only understand things to a certain extent. Therefore, it will be the job of the counselor to facilitate understanding, goal setting and committing to the process. With facilitating comes the importance of initiating. Average fifth graders can be expected to initiate discussion when prompted, but this skill may not always be on track with this group. Therefore, to an extent the counselor will be responsible for initiating the activities and discussion.

Finally, terminating will serve as an important skill. The students will not only be group members, but they will still interact with each other either in the classroom, on the playground or just at school in general. In the process of terminating the group, it will not be dealing with a sense of loss, but in discussing where to go on each group members' journey now that the group is done meeting regularly. Also, it will be important to instill an understanding that confidentiality does not end just because the group does.

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