

**STANDARDS**  
**FOR**  
**SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**  
**WITH GROUPS**  
**Second Edition**



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR  
SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS, INC.  
An International Professional Organization  
(IASWG, Inc.)

First edition  
Adopted October 7, 1998  
Revised October 21, 1999

Second edition Adopted  
June 12, 2005  
(Copyedited July 15, 2010  
& October 1, 2015)

Copyright 1999, 2000, 2006, 2015 by IASWG, Inc.

IASWG, Inc.  
101 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, Suite 108  
NY, NY 10011  
iaswg.org

The Standards were written by the Practice Committee,  
Paul A. Abels, Chair, 2000-2003, Charles D. Garvin, Chair, 2003-2005.

The Standards are available from the IASWG website, [www.iaswg.org](http://www.iaswg.org).  
They may be purchased in quantities from IASWG. Single copies may be  
copied or obtained from IASWG for personal use at no cost. Quantities  
may be copied under certain conditions. Contact IASWG directly or see the  
website for details.

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH  
GROUPS, INC.  
An International Professional Organization  
(IASWG)



**STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL WORK  
PRACTICE WITH GROUPS**

Second Edition

**PURPOSE**

These standards represent the perspective of the International Association for Social Work with Groups, Inc., on the value and knowledge and skill base essential for professionally sound and effective social work practices with groups and are intended to serve as a guide to social work practice with groups.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Standards focus on central distinguishing concepts of social work with groups and highlight the perspective that social group workers bring to practice. By design, the standards are general rather than specific and descriptive rather than prescriptive. They are applicable to the wide range of groups encountered by social group workers in a variety of practice settings. These groups include treatment, support, psycho-educational, task, and community-action groups. The Standards draw heavily on the Code of Ethics from the National Association of Social Work (United States), group theory from the social sciences, knowledge of individuals and the environment, the historical roots of social group work practice, current practice with groups, and practice research. Thus, they are based on practice wisdom, theories of group work practice, and empirical evidence. They emphasize the understanding and use of group processes and the ways members help one another to accomplish the purposes of the group. The role of the worker, as articulated in the standards, reflects the values of the social work profession generally as well as the unique features associated with social work with groups.

**Overview of the Standards**

Various comprehensive perspectives of social work practice provide a broad underpinning of the values and knowledge bases of social group workers' practice. Values and types of knowledge that have particular relevance for group work practice are addressed in Section I.

Sections II through V identify the required knowledge and major worker tasks and skills in each of the phases of group work practice, from planning to ending. These sections are structured around the understanding that groups change and evolve over time, thus requiring changes in the worker's tasks and responsibilities. For example, certain worker actions enable group members to start to work together in a new group; other actions enable members who have already developed relationships to engage in work to achieve the purpose of the group. Thus, as groups develop, the nature of the workers' responsibilities change.

The phases and the associated tasks described in these standards are guides for practice. They represent the wisdom that has been acquired from practice, theory, and research. However, each group is different and practitioners must apply these standards in terms of their appropriateness for each group and its particular members.

Section VI examines ethical considerations for social group work practice.

**SECTION I**

**CORE VALUES AND KNOWLEDGE**

The group worker should understand the history of group work and the evolving visions of group workers as they faced the challenges posed by each historical era. During this evolution, the following values emerged as those that were essential to the practice of group work.

**A. Core Values**

1. Respect for persons and their autonomy.

In view of the equality of persons, people are to be treated with respect and dignity. In group deliberations no one person should be more privileged in a group than another, not a worker, a group member or the

agency director. In a group this occurs when a worker helps each member to appreciate the contributions of the other members so that everyone's ideas are heard and considered. This principle is stated while recognizing that the worker, by virtue of his or her position in the agency and his or her expertise, is likely to have a great deal of influence. This requires the worker to use his or her influence prudently.

A major implication of this principle is a respect for and a high value placed on diversity in all of its dimensions such as culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities and age.

**2. The creation of a socially just society.**

The group offers an opportunity to live and practice the democratic principles of equality and autonomy and the worker should use his/her knowledge and skills to further this. The worker should be mindful of the quest for a society that is just and democratically organized one that ensures that the basic human needs of all its members are met. This value is presented to the group whenever it is appropriate and reinforced when members articulate it.

**B. Core Knowledge**

There are special areas of knowledge that enable group workers to more ably serve the group. This includes knowledge of the history and mission of our profession as it impacts group work with poor people, minorities and other disenfranchised people. Understanding when group work is the practice of choice is important. The skills needed to carry out the professional mission emerge from our values and knowledge and requires specialized education.

**1. Knowledge of individuals.**

a. The nature of individual human growth and behavior, utilizing a bio-psycho-social perspective and a "person-in-environment" view. The forces impacting the person and the group are important factors in group work assessment and intervention. This includes viewing the member in the context of the group and the community.

b. The familial, social, political and cultural contexts that influence members' social identities, interactional styles, concerns, opportunities, and the attainment of their potentials.

c. The capacity of members to help one another and to change.

d. The capacity of members to contribute to social change in the community beyond the group.

e. Using competency-based assessment, the group worker places an emphasis on members' strengths, in addition to their concerns. The worker also must understand protective and risk factors that affect individuals' needs for services and their ability to act.

f. The worker has an appreciation and understanding of such differences as those due to culture, ethnicity, gender, age, physical and mental abilities and sexual orientation among members that may influence practice.

**2. Knowledge of groups and small group behavior.**

a. The worker understands that the group is an entity separate and distinct from the individual members. The group has its own dynamics, culture and other social conditions.

b. The worker understands that the group consists of multiple helping relationships, so that members can help one another to achieve individual goals and pursue group goals. This is often referred to as "mutual aid."

c. The democratic process in a group occurs as the members develop a sense of "ownership" of the group in which each member's contribution to the group is solicited and valued.

d. The group can develop in such a way that members, individually and collectively, are empowered to act on their own behalf as well as that of the group.

e. Groups can develop goals that members are committed to pursuing. These goals may be for individual member growth, group development and/or social change.

f. Group members as well as the group-as-a-whole can seek changes in the social environment.

g. The phases of group development influence change throughout the life of the group.

h. Group processes and structures encompass all transactions that occur within the group and give meaningfulness to the life of the group. These consist of such conditions as roles, norms, communications, expression of affect, and the nature of interaction patterns. These shape and influence individual member behavior as well as the development of the group and also determine whether and how the group will accomplish its purposes. The members can come to understand how group processes and structures shape and influence individual member behavior as well as the development of the group.

i. Groups are formed for different purposes and goals (e.g., education problem solving, task accomplishment, personal change, social action) and this influences what the worker does and how the group accomplishes its goals as well as the nature of the contract between the worker and members, among the members, and between the group and the sponsoring organization.

**3. Knowledge of the function of the group worker.**

a. The worker promotes individual and group autonomy.

b. The worker helps the group members to select means of achieving individual and group purposes.

c. The worker's assessments and interventions are characterized by flexibility, sensitivity and creativity.

d. The worker should have a clear understanding of the stages of group development and the related group character, members' behavior and tasks and worker tasks and skills that are specific to each stage.

e. Practice should be based on currently available knowledge and research and should represent contemporary practice principles.

f. The worker has responsibility for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the success of the group in accomplishing its objectives through personal observation as well as collecting information in order to assess outcomes and processes. The worker seeks the involvement of

the members in the process of evaluation. Specifically this means that members should be involved in evaluation of outcomes throughout the life of the group. Workers should systematically evaluate the achievement of goals. The worker should be knowledgeable about methods of evaluation of group work and ways of measuring or otherwise determining accomplishment of group and individual goals. The worker should use all available evidence regarding effectiveness of particular interventions for different groups.

g. The worker should maintain appropriate records of group processes and outcomes and ensure their confidentiality.

h. The worker should have a commitment to supporting research on group work and to disseminating knowledge about effective practices through professional meetings, education and scholarship.

i. The worker adheres to professional, ethical, and legal requirements generally associated with social work practice as well as those specifically associated with social work with groups. The worker seeks to prevent any action in the group that may harm any member.

j. Workers should have a commitment to engage in reflective practice in which they assess their own practice and seek supervision and/or consultation in order to enhance their practice.

**SECTION II**

**PRE-GROUP PHASE: PLANNING,  
RECRUITMENT AND NEW GROUP FORMATION**

**A. Tasks and Skills**

**1.** The worker should identify aspirations and needs of potential group members as perceived by members, worker and agency.

**2.** The worker should obtain organizational support for and affirmation of the group.

**3.** The worker should select the group type, structure, processes and size that will be appropriate for attaining the purposes of the group.

**4.** The worker should reach out to and recruit potential group members.

**5.** The worker should obtain consent from potential members and relevant others as required by ethical guidelines and organizational requirements.

**6.** The worker should clarify potential group members' goals and expectations of the group work service and use this information to assess prospective members' potential investments in the pursuit of group goals. The worker should help members specify these goals in terms that can lead to the determination of their attainment.

**7.** The worker should establish an appropriate meeting place and meeting time that will be conducive to members' comfort, safety and access to the group.

**8.** The worker should prepare members for the group in ways that are appropriate. This will differ depending on the extent to which the group is intended to attain individual goals or to accomplish task purposes in the agency and community. The worker should be empathic in identifying members' feelings and reactions to joining the group.

**9.** The worker should know how to select members for the group in relationship to principles of group composition, although this principle may not apply to some task groups in which other bodies determine the group's membership.

**10.** The worker should develop a clear statement of group purpose that reflects member needs and agency missions and goals. This is often done cooperatively with the group members.

**11.** The worker should consider potential contextual, environmental, and societal impacts on the group.

**12.** The worker, as appropriate, should explain group purposes and processes to non-members such as other agency personnel, relevant community entities, and parents or referring agencies in the case of groups promoting individual change.

**13.** The worker should appropriately enhance group content (what will go on during sessions) as well as the use of activities, supplies and other resources.

**14.** The worker should identify methods that will be used to track group progress (e.g., group progress notes, formal and informal evaluations).

**15.** After each session, the worker should debrief and plan with the co-facilitator (if there is one) and arrange for consultation and/or supervision on a regular basis. If there is a co-facilitator, they should consider together the implications of their similarities and differences with respect to such issues as approaches, styles and communication.

## **B. Required Knowledge**

**1.** Organizational mission and function and how these influence the nature and development of group work service.

**2.** Social and institutional barriers that may impact on the development of group work service.

**3.** How to assess the impact on the group of the community and agency context.

**4.** Issues associated with group composition (e.g. gender, education; socio-economic status, previous group experience, occupation, race, ethnicity, age and presenting problems.)

**5.** The influence of cultural factors on potential members' lives and their ways of engaging in group interactions and relationships with others, the agency and the worker.

**6.** The importance of diversity in relationship to how a group attains its goals.

**7.** The theoretical approaches utilized by group workers and how to select the ones most appropriate and effective for the proposed group.

**8.** Issues associated with group structure (e.g. group size, length of sessions, duration of group, meeting place, open or closed to new members, resources, supplies and transportation).

9. The impact of human development/life cycle factors on potential members' needs and abilities and group goals.

10. Types of groups (e.g., task groups, treatment groups, psycho-educational groups, socio-recreational groups) and their applicability to individual, organizational and community needs.

11. Issues related to group content such as discussion processes, and purposeful use of activities and simulations. Such issues include how these kinds of content are affected by stages of group development, capacities of members and the purposes of the group.

12. Contracting procedures including the identification and clarification of group purpose and behavioral standards and norms needed to actualize group goals as determined by potential members, the worker and the agency.

13. Recruitment procedures, such as community outreach and referral processes.

14. How to identify and develop resources required for group functioning.

15. Group monitoring and evaluation procedures (e.g., pretest-posttest measures, group process notes, questionnaires) to track worker interventions, group progress and the group work service.)

16. The importance of consultation and supervision in enhancing the quality of group work service.

### SECTION III

#### GROUP WORK IN THE BEGINNING PHASE

##### A. Tasks and Skills

###### 1. Task: Establishing a Beginning Contract

Skills/Actions:

a. The worker and members collaboratively develop a beginning contract for work that identifies tasks to be accomplished, goals to be achieved and the process by which the work is to occur.

b. The worker identifies the community's and/or agency's stakes in the group, the group purpose and process and clarifies worker and member role.

c. Confidentiality and limits thereof are clearly identified.

d. The worker assists members in identifying and clarifying individual goals and group goals.

e. The worker helps the members to link individual goals with group purposes.

f. The worker invites full participation of all members and solicits member feedback on the progress of the group.

g. The worker employs special skills in working with mandated members and understands the impact on group dynamics of member's mandated status.

###### 2. Task: Cultivating Group Cohesion

Skills/Actions:

a. The worker establishes rapport with individual members and the group as a whole.

- b. The worker also aids the group members in establishing relationships with one another so as to promote group cohesion.
- c. The worker highlights member commonalities, links members to one another and encourages direct member-to-member communication.

**3. Task: Shaping Norms of Participation**

Skills/Actions:

- a. The worker seeks to aid the group in establishing norms for participation that promote safety and trust, facilitate a culture of work and cultivate mutual aid.
- b. The worker is active in modeling these norms and instructing members when needed about productive group participation.
- c. The worker appreciates the impact of various psychological, socio-cultural and environmental forces on these norms.
- d. The worker promotes group exploration of non-productive norms when these arise.
- e. The worker demonstrates respect for socio-cultural differences, promotes autonomy and self-determination, and encourages member empowerment.

**B. Required Knowledge**

- 1. An understanding of the dynamic interaction between the community, agency, group and individual members of the group with which he/she is working.
- 2. The relevant theories and evidence-based practices regarding the developmental, psycho-social, and clinical needs of the group members and how this informs beginnings.
- 3. The group type and technology being employed and the ways such may impact group functioning in the beginning stage.

- 4. The characteristics and needs of the group in the beginning stage of group development and the related skills. Knowledge is needed regarding such variations as working with mandated members; replacing a previous worker; and receiving new members into an on-going group.

**SECTION IV**

**GROUP WORK IN THE MIDDLE PHASE**

**A. Group tasks and worker skills/actions:**

- 1. Task: Assist group to make progress on individual and group goals. When group goals are a major focus, as in task and community groups, the worker encourages individual members to use their skills in pursuit of group goals.

Skills/Actions:

- a. Reinforce connection between individual concerns/needs and group goals.
- b. Offer programmatic ideas and activities that support group purpose and assist in helping members achieve individual and group goals.
- c. Assess progress towards individual and group goals.
- d. Identify difficulties and obstacles that interfere with the group and its members' abilities to reach their goals.
- e. If obstacles are related to the specific needs of an individual member, when appropriate, offer individual time outside of group.
- f. Ensure that the group has attended to any special needs of individual members (e.g., physical, cognitive, language or cultural needs).
- g. Assist members to engage in problem-solving, in making choices and decisions, and in evaluating potential outcomes of decisions.
- h. Summarize sessions with the group.

i. Plan next steps with the group.

j. Re-contract with members, if needed, to assist in achieving individual and group goals.

**2. Task:** Attend to group dynamics/processes.

Skills/Actions:

a. Support members to develop a system of mutual aid.

b. Clarify and interpret communication patterns among members, between members and worker and between the group and systems outside the group.

c. Develop, model and encourage honest communication and feedback among members and between members and workers.

d. Review group values and norms.

e. Assist members to identify and articulate feelings.

f. Assist members to perceive verbal and non-verbal communication.

g. Help members mediate conflict within the group.

h. Assist members to make connections with other group members that may continue after the group ends, if this is appropriate.

i. Use tools of empowerment to assist members to develop “ownership” of the group.

**3. Task:** Use best practices within the group and utilize resources inside and outside the group.

Skills/Actions:

a. Assist members to identify and access resources from inside and outside the group.

b. Include knowledge, skills and other resources of group worker, group members and sources outside the group.

c. Use group approaches appropriate to the populations served and the tasks undertaken as demonstrated in the literature, worker and agency experience, and other sources of professional knowledge.

d. Use record-keeping techniques to monitor leadership skills and group process.

e. Access and use supervision.

## **B. Required Knowledge**

**1.** Group dynamics.

**2.** Role theory and its application to members’ relationships with one another and the worker.

**3.** Communication theory and its application to verbal and non-verbal interactions within the group and between the group and others external to the group.

**4.** Problem-solving processes in groups.

**5.** Conflict resolution in groups.

**6.** Organizational theories.

**7.** Community theories.

**8.** Developmental theories.

**9.** Evaluation theories and methods.

**10.** The impact of diversity: class, race, gender, sexual orientation and ability status.

**11.** Knowledge about the group’s relations with its environment.

**12.** Specific knowledge of issues being addressed in the group.

**13.** Awareness of self.



## SECTION V

### GROUP WORK IN THE ENDING PHASE

#### A. Tasks and Skills

1. Prepare members for the group's ending in advance.
2. In a direct practice group help members identify gains they have made and changes that have resulted from their participation in the group. In a task group, members may discuss what they have learned from this experience that will be useful to them in other task groups. This involves a consideration of how achieving group goals will contribute to the functioning of the organization and/or community.
3. Discuss the impact of the group on systems outside the group (e.g., family, organization, community).
4. Discuss the movement the group has made over time.
5. Identify and discuss direct and indirect signs of members' reactions to the group ending.
6. Share worker's feelings about ending with the group.
7. Assist members in sharing their feelings about ending with one another and with the worker.
8. Systematically evaluate the achievement of individual and group goals. Routine and systematic evaluation of the group experience could/should occur over time rather than in the ending stage alone.
9. Help members make connections with other agencies and programs as appropriate.
10. Assist members in applying new knowledge and skills to their daily lives.
11. Encourage members to give feedback to the worker on the worker's role and actions in the group.
12. Help members apply new knowledge and skills to their activities outside the group.

13. Prepare record material about the group for the agency, for individual members and for referrals as needed.

#### B. Required Knowledge

1. Group dynamics related to endings. These will be different depending on the type of group (e.g., long- term, short- term, open-ended, single session). There are also special issues when a member or worker ends but parts of the group continue or there is a new worker.
2. Formal and informal resources that maintain and enhance members' growth.
3. Influence on endings of past losses and separation in lives of members and the worker.
4. Agency policies related to worker maintaining connections following ending of a group or member service.
5. Various forms of evaluation, formal and informal and of evaluation measures, both qualitative and quantitative.

## SECTION VI

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

National and/or regional social work organizations typically have codes of ethics to which social workers must adhere. For example, social group workers in the United States of America are expected to be knowledgeable about and responsive to the ethical mandates of the social work profession, as explicated in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. While the entire code is important, there are items with particular relevance to social group work.

Similarly, Canadian social workers must follow the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics/Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux (2005). The expectation of IASWG is that social workers will respect the code of ethics relevant to their locations of practice wherever in the world, as long as these codes call for respect of all persons.

Other social work/ethical guides exist and may be more relevant for specific countries. Each needs to be considered in the context of work with groups and may call for some modifications or additions that reflect the different situations of group work.

#### **A. Elements of Ethical Practice in Social Group Work.**

1. Knowledge of and use of best practices that reflect the state of the art and knowledge and research evidence regarding social work with groups.
2. A basic discussion with prospective members of informed consent and an explanation of what group work offers and requires of the members individually and as a group.
3. Maximizing member choice and minimizing coercive processes by members or worker to the extent possible. Emphasizing member self-determination and empowerment of the group.
4. Discussion of the importance, limits and implications of privacy and confidentiality with the members.
5. Helping the group to maintain the purposes for which it was formed, allowing for changes as mutually agreed upon.
6. Each member is given the help she/he requires within the parameters of the group's purpose, including individual meetings when appropriate.
7. Clarifying the decision-making process.
8. Clarifying how members may be chosen for or excluded from the group.
9. Maintaining group records and storing them in a secure location.

#### **B. Ethical Issues in the Use of New Techniques**

As new techniques are used, such as those based on electronic communications, workers should pay attention to ethical issues, practice

skills and knowledge and evaluation of these techniques. The following is a general statement with reference to electronic communications:

Increasingly, practice with groups of all kinds is being done by utilizing technologies such as computer and telephone facilities, and professional associations are assessing both effectiveness and ethical issues. Issues such as member interaction, decision-making, group structure, mutual aid and, particularly, confidentiality are of vital concern. Worker competency may require new skills and knowledge, not only in technology use, but also in communication techniques.

Clearly these technologies are likely to be valuable for all persons seeking resources, as well as for the profession's ability to share information about practice, including emerging approaches. In the meantime, workers contemplating the use of such technologies should consider the appropriate codes of ethics as a guide and document processes related to such work.

#### **Notes**

1. The terms "social group work," "social work with groups" and "group work" are used interchangeably in these Standards.
2. In the NASW Code current at the time of approval of these Standards these sections include the Preamble and Ethical Principles 1.01, 1.02, 1.05, 1.06, 1.07, 2.06, 3.02, 3.07, 3.09, and 4.01.

#### **References**

National Association of Social Workers (approved 1996, revised 1999) Code of Ethics for Social Workers, Washington, DC: NASW.

Canadian Association of Social Workers/Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux (2005) Code of Ethics, Ottawa. CASW/ACTS.

January 2006  
Copyedited July 15, 2010  
Copyedited October 1, 2015