

Long Island Institute  
for Group Work With  
Children and Youth  
North Shore Child & Family  
Guidance Center  
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# HUH ?!?

a newsletter about working  
with children and youth in groups

Volume 2, Number 2.

Spring - 1997

The Mission of the Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children and Youth is: To promote and enhance effective group work practice with children and youth through advocacy, education, and collegial support. **HUH?!** is the Institute's quarterly newsletter dedicated to providing information, inspiration and support for anyone working with young people in group settings.

## From the Inside-Out

Today we hear a lot about mentoring. Mentors are teachers and role models. They share experience and wisdom. Young and old have much in common and can benefit from mentoring. Both generations can be abused and forgotten, making them allies along a shared road.

Several years ago I worked with a group of six high school students who met weekly with members of a senior center. The purpose of the group was to help bridge the gap between the generations. Adolescents have their fingers on the pulse of the day and older people offer a lifetime of experience.

Despite obvious differences, it was the similarities that helped to build a bridge. As hopes, dreams, and life goals were shared, the group members started to see the real people before them.

The elders commented that the students were straight forward in their opinions about difficult subjects. They liked this trait, explaining that they too like to "tell it like it is." As issues of divorce, sibling rivalry, and self respect emerged, it became clear that many concerns were the same for all group members - young and old. The elders provided hope by revealing some of their own struggles and how they survived and even thrived.

As the weeks passed the members drew closer to one another. Since families are so mobile today, both generations often feel invisible. The group experience created a sense of mutuality. The elders commented that, when the students responded to them, they "felt like grandparents." The students said that they felt listened to, asserting that "in here it feels like what we say counts." For some this was a new experience. The art of being heard had a profound effect on their self esteem. As the group continued to develop, the members experienced a safe environment that allowed them to feel free to express their points of view.

The elders shared past mistakes that they felt had a negative impact on their lives. There was enormous interest in how they worked through these problems and changed or accepted consequences. Their disclosure encouraged a free dialogue that led the way for understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of one's imperfections.

Stereotypes about the young and old were dispelled, empowering both age groups. Structured in a time limited format,

## From the Editor

An early influence on group work was the progressive education movement. The idea was to prepare individuals for democratic experience in the community through the small group. The classroom was to be transformed from a place where competition and anxiety would give way to cooperation and mutual aid. The thinking was that a relaxed and gratifying environment was more beneficial to learning than one governed by rigid rules and autocratic leadership.

Musician Wynton Marsalis, in a 1995 interview appearing in American Heritage Magazine, provides us with modern variation of the same theme by comparing jazz to democracy, as follows:

♪ Jazz is a music of conversation, and that's what you need in a democracy. You need to be willing to hear another person's point of view and respond to it. In democracy, as in jazz, you have freedom with restraint. It's not absolute freedom, it's freedom with structure.

As he describes the essential traits of jazz he points out that they have nothing to do with music. As you'll discover, however, that they have a lot to do with group work:

♪ First comes the concept of playing. You take a theme, an idea, and you play with it...You have to have the spirit of play.

♪ Second is the desire to play with other people. That means learning to make room. Take the kid who wants to be the star. You have to teach him the rules of sportsmanship. You have to tell him, "You have to let the others play too."

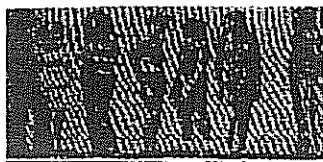
♪ Third, playing jazz means learning to respect individuality. You don't have to agree with me. You have your own way of thinking, and that's good. Playing jazz means learning how to reconcile differences, even when they're opposites. That's why it's such a great thing for kids to learn. Jazz teaches you how to have a dialogue, with integrity.

Group work with kids as jazz? It has a nice sound to it. Don't you think?

Andy Malekoff  
Editor

the group ended with many unanswered questions. It was not necessary, however, to find all the answers, but rather to get to know one another in a meaningful way. When all was said and done one could ask, "who were the mentors and who were the students?"

✉ Sue Rosner, ACSW  
Chair, Association for the Advancement of Social Work  
With Groups, L.I. Chapter



## Looking Back...A Reminiscence Unforeseen Events and Unintended Consequences By Ralph Kolodny

*This is the second  
piece in a continuing  
series.*

My late mother's favorite poet while in high school back in Fall River, Massachusetts not long after the turn of the century, was Robert Burns, Scotland's greatest. She quoted him at every opportunity and used his clipped epigrammatic phrases with the children she later taught in rural schoolhouses and with her own family, including my two kids, who out of the love they bore her, were willing to pretend that the quotations from Burns were anything other than confusing to them. Anyway, my mother's favorite phrase from her favorite poet was "The best laid plans of mice and men gang'd aft a'glee." In the language of my generation, "No matter what you do, there's bound to be something coming in from left field." Unforeseen events and unintended consequences of actions beyond my control, in the world at large have brought home to me the truth of Burns' reminder, from the effects on "me and my gang" of our entrance into W.W.II, to the bus bombings accompanying the first three years of a process intended to bring peace to my daughter and her family in Israel. But the homely incidents of ordinary work with groups of youngsters, in varying degrees deprived, isolated, or troubled emotionally, drove home to me the importance of remembering Burns' cautionary statement. In the fifteen years I did such work under the aegis of Boston's Children's Service

Association I had to learn to "expect the unexpected." I'm not only speaking here of refraining from trying to get too close too fast to youngsters for whom closeness and warmth have been accompanied by painful experiences since infancy, but of other actions which seem and are well-intentioned but are misinterpreted by youngsters of their parents.

The practice of my agency was to draw together a group of "more socially capable" kids in a neighborhood around one or more youngsters who were less capable because of emotional disturbance or physical handicap. I had taken particular pride in my preliminary work in forming one such group. The child's mother had been referred by a physician in a poor neighborhood, and she had very little English. She had been a Displaced Person in Germany along with her husband, was Russian speaking originally, and most anxious about her socially isolated 9 year old son. I struggled manfully to recover the shreds of German and Russian I had studied in college, and to my surprise, I succeed in conducting a successful interview. The mother was pleased and relieved, and I was delighted with myself. With her permission I conferred with the boy's grade school teacher who made some fine suggestions for other group members. As was our practice, I wrote explanatory letters to the parents of the boys suggested, after the teacher

called and explained to them that I would be contacting them. I then visited each of them. One family of Ukrainian Displaced Persons greeted me with particular graciousness. They spoke English haltingly but intelligibly. Emboldened by my success in my interview with the original referred child's mother, however, I asked if they spoke Russian as well. They did, and I launched into a disquisition in broken Russian as to what the group was about, filling in the blanks with broken German. They smiled and accepted politely what I had to say, and proceeded to ask a couple of questions in English. They then whispered together and said that, if I didn't mind, their child would not be joining the group. I was startled, but then quickly began to put a number of things together. These were Eastern Europeans. They had lived under the Soviets. They had come to America a few years before, right after the war. This is the early Cold War period. They are approached by this social worker, whatever that is, who invites their son to join a group of youngsters. He speaks (sort of) Russian. Is he trying to recruit for the Komsomol, the Young Communists? (Or is he an agent provocateur sent by Immigration?) I finally blurted out, "Vwi doomayete shto ya Kommunist"? "You think I'm a Communist"? Quickly the wife protested that this was not the case. "Um Gottes Willen, nyet!"

"For God Sakes No!," she said in mixed German / Russian. Her blush and embarrassed smile, however, indicated that I was probably right. I had tried to make these parents feel comfortable, and to appear non-threatening and accepting and I had achieved the opposite effect. I left them without getting them to change their minds. It was only hard work by the principal and teacher who had suggested their youngster that persuaded them to let him join the group two weeks later.

And then there was the time I was sent by the Agency to help a Settlement House with a group of pre-adolescent "pre-delinquents." I was immensely pleased with myself when I was able, gradually, to help the members substitute talking for groin kicks and punches in the face. Much of the talk was loud and nasty but, over time, they even began to take turns. I remember leaving them one evening and turning around in the corridor to watch them from a distance as they sat together engaged apparently in earnest discussion. I did this several times. Only later did I discover that the subject of this discussion was their planning of petty pilfering in the department stores of the area. The group worker who took over from me later on was both less naive and more successful. But that's another story.

✧ *Ralph Kolodny is Professor Emeritus, Boston University School of Social Work.*

## In the Trenches

Have you ever experienced scapegoating? You know: teasing, name calling, a chair pulled out from under, the cold shoulder and other similarly delightful behaviors aimed at one unfortunate group member. If you've worked with kids the answer is probably "yes." A worker's instinct is often to find a way to protect the individual who is being attacked. Once "rescue mode" is activated several futile interventions follow such as reprimanding, lecturing, or squashing the attackers. However, these measures only add to the targeted youngster's growing distress, everyone in the group becomes further entrenched in their respective roles, and worker ends up feeling inept.

A few of the approaches that have been attempted include: diverting the members attention through activity and conversation; structuring the group in such a way as to limit the *free moments* available for attack; experimenting through role reversal to give different members a chance to experience empathy with the scapegoat, and humanizing the scapegoat by helping the group to get beneath the surface of the image that has been created. Removal of the scapegoat should only be considered as a last resort.

Group workers need to remind themselves that the process is not a one-way interaction as the label "scapegoat" seems to imply. The worker's role is to mediate between the individual and the group. The purpose is to overcome the obstacles in the way of

both sides reaching out to one another. Victim and victimizers bear responsibility for scapegoating, therefore the solution requires mutual problem solving.

*We'd like to hear about your experiences, successes and failures, in addressing scapegoating. Please write to HUH?!? so that we may consider your submission for publication (500 words or less).*

**NEW!! SPRING 1997 RELEASE**  
**Group Work With Adolescents:**  
*Principles and Practice*  
 by: Andrew Malekoff, ACSW  
 Contact: Guilford Publications, Inc.  
 Toll Free: 1-800-365-7006

## chaos corner

*New Member: Act One (a true story)*

*what's he doin' here,  
 sittin' in my chair,  
 frontin' like he don' care.  
 hey you over there,  
 yeh you, you c'mere.  
 think you got real flair?  
 think you got no fear?  
 think life's so unfair?  
 think you got a prayer,  
 at tryin' to get near,  
 to borrowin' our ear,  
 at dumpin' your despair,  
 by gettin' in our hair?  
 actin' hard, runnin' scared,  
 a livin' breathin' mid-nightmare.  
 well,  
 listen here,  
 drop the sneer,  
 lend an ear,  
 free a tear  
 cause*

*we*

*all*

*been*

*there.*

*by Andrew Malekoff*

## Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children & Youth

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**Project Coordinator:** Andrew Malekoff

## From the Co-Chairs

### *Whose Turf Is It Anyway?*

These days, collaborating on the development of a group service with other organizations is essential. Some call such efforts "joint ventures." Working cooperatively is a value of my agency. However, time and again I find myself in situations where, had I done my "homework", unnecessary problems could have been avoided. I've learned that hard way that careful inter-organizational planning is a must. Potential areas of conflict need to be addressed up front with your partner before the program begins. Among the questions to consider collaboratively are: Are your goals the same? What do all partners hope to accomplish? What are your philosophies about working with groups? What expectations are there for the behavior of participating youth? For example, if you are running the program on another facility's turf, you need to consider their behavioral guidelines. Discuss with your partner ahead of time who will handle what responsibilities. Are you both providing staff to cover the program? If so, what is each staff member's responsibility? Is there a cost for the program? And if so, who will pay what portion? Are funds readily available? Finally, I have learned that because I truly believe in the group work process, it becomes my responsibility to educate others about the purpose and value of group work so that we can work together more effectively.

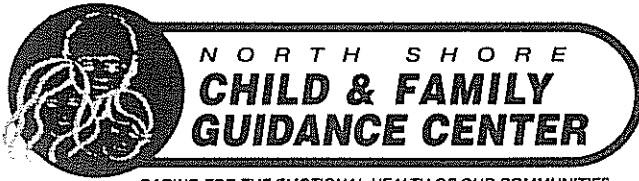
These are just a few of the issues we face when we collaborate. Planning and honest communication are critical for nurturing successful inter-organizational programs and providing quality services for young people. Neglecting careful preparation is sure to trickle down to the youth themselves. It's only a matter of time.

When we do it right - together, we can offer opportunities we may only dream of alone!

*Cindy Cavallo, Co-Chair*

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< A Program of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center >

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## TIPS For: GROUP COMPOSITION

There are no definitive guidelines for group composition. Who to include in a group should always be a function of need. This suggests that you cannot determine who should be a member of a new group until you've identified the needs that the group intends to meet. Once this moves into focus decisions about group composition can be made with greater confidence.

➔ **TIP:** FRITZ REDL'S "LAW OF OPTIMUM DISTANCE" IS A USEFUL CONCEPT ONCE NEED HAS BEEN DETERMINED. IT STATES: "THE GROUP SHOULD BE HOMOGENEOUS IN ENOUGH WAYS TO ENSURE STABILITY AND HETEROGENEOUS IN ENOUGH WAYS TO ENSURE VITALITY."

## BOOK BRIEFS

**CHILDREN AND GRIEF;** J. William Worden. Guilford Publications, Inc., 72 Spring Street, New York City, NY 10021, 1996, 225 pages, \$26.95, hardcover.

*Children and Grief* is based on a research project, the Child Bereavement Study, which investigated the behavior of bereaved children between the ages of 6 and 17, for a two year period, after the death of a parent. The book details the mourning process for children and makes distinctions between bereavement ("adaptation to loss"), mourning ("the process children go through on the way to adaptation") and grief ("the child's personal experiences associated with the death"). Tasks of mourning, how children respond, and avenues for intervention are highlighted. This book is a useful aid in understanding the needs of bereaved children and adolescents and will help group workers in their decision making about providing group services for the bereaved.

HUH?!? is the quarterly newsletter of the Long Island Institute for Group Work, a program of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center; 480 Old Westbury Road; Roslyn Hgts., NY 11577-2215; Phone: (516) 626-1971 •• Fax: 626-8011; Director: Marion Levine, ACSW; Director of Program Development and Newsletter Editor: Andrew Malekoff, ACSW. Newsletter Design and Layout: Jane E. Meckwood-Yazdpoor. Agencies: Youth Directions and Alternatives, Huntington; Herricks School District; Sanctuary Project, Huntington; Plainedge School District; L.I.Crisis Center, Bellmore; Flushing Hospital Medical Center. Copyright March 1, 1997/USA.

## EVENTS AND RESOURCES

- The video tape of *A Sense of Alienation or Belonging: Building Bridges through Group Involvement* is now being edited. The video will be about 25 minutes long and will contain highlights of the Long Island Institute on Group Work with Children and Youth's Action Research Conference. The video and report will be ideal for motivating the development of new groups in your agency and/or community. Watch for ordering information in the next issue.
- For information on how to join the Long Island Chapter of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups please call: 516-933-8519.
- Subscribe to *Social Work with Groups*, a quarterly professional journal for clinical and community practice published by Haworth Press. Call 1-800-342-9678 for information.
- **Professional Workshops:**
  - April 11, 1997 Overloaded Families and Overloaded Systems: Strategies for Working With Seriously Emotionally Disturbed Children - Sandra Whiteside
  - May 9, 1997 Keeping the Peace: Enhancing the Educative Process to Reduce Group Tensions - Irving Levine
  - June 6, 1997 Mothers, Babies, and Recovery: Treatment of Co-Dependent Mothers and Their Babies - R.Barros/S.Lipzig
  - Workshops are held through the Training & Consultation Center of NSC&FGC; 480 Old Westbury Rd.; Roslyn Heights, N.Y. 11577-2215. The cost is \$40 per person/per workshop. Contact Jane Yazdpoor at (516) 626-1971 for registration information.

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