

# Adolescent Group Counseling

*J. Bartholomew Schlachter*

I am a counselor in a 4-year, college-preparatory, private, Catholic high school. Of the 685 students in this all-male school, approximately 50 percent come from upper middle-class homes in the suburbs; the other half are from middle-class homes, sons of steel workers, mill workers, and government employees who reside in the city.

During my first year on the school staff, compulsory counseling groups for freshmen were initiated. There were two counselors, one who was interested in career counseling and myself, who was interested in the students' more personal concerns. Because of the difficulty of maintaining groups for extended periods when students are not voluntarily participating and because of our diverse interests, we decided that students would spend one semester (14 sessions) with each counselor. The program was explained during the freshman orientation program, and the students were divided into 20 groups, each counselor taking responsibility for 10.

I had been involved in groups in high schools for many years, but felt that it would be helpful to develop a structure in order to cover the areas I had found to be important concerns for this age group. I wanted to insure that "group" would not become an unpleasant requirement, but rather something that was meaningful and useful to the boys. After several semesters of this program, the feedback I have received from students encourages me to believe that the counseling groups have been useful. This article briefly describes my goals and activities for each of the 14, 40-minute group sessions.

## **Session 1**

*Goal.* To get to know each others' names, a little about each other, and the rules of the groups—mutual respect and privacy of information.

First, I introduce myself, and then the person on my right says, "That is so and so (using my name), and my name is Bill." The person on Bill's right says, "That is so and so, and that is Bill, and my name is Joe." This procedure

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continues around the circle. The members take turns introducing themselves and telling why they came to this school.

Next, we demonstrate the two rules of the groups through role playing. One student leaves, and, while he is outside the class, I ask two other students to start a conversation about a recent ball game on a given signal from me. I then call the student back into the room and ask him to introduce himself to the group in greater detail. As soon as he begins to talk, I give the signal for the other two to start talking. After about 30 seconds, I ask the student who is introducing himself how he feels and explain this is why only one person at a time can talk—mutual respect.

The second rule is that whatever is said in the group must stay in the group. As an example, one student plays the role of my father and asks me, the son, what happens in my counseling group. I reply tersely, “I am not allowed to tell anyone anything that happens in group.” I ask the students how their parents would react to such a statement, and explain that they may tell their parents the topics that are discussed but not statements like “John Jones hates his father.”

## **Session 2**

*Goal.* A better understanding of how they view their lives—their lifestyles.

At the beginning of the session, I ask the students to try to remember three or four incidents that happened to them before they were 6 years old (early recollections), for example, where they lived, early birthday parties, Christmas, summer vacations, etc. I relate six of my own early recollections and help the group understand how to analyze them; we then repeat this procedure for each member of the group. If a student says he cannot remember anything, we simply proceed to the next person.

## **Session 3**

*Goal.* To illustrate how children are good observers of what is going on around them but poor interpreters; i.e., just because my older brother is a good student does not mean that I cannot be a good student (their place in the family constellation).

The students are arranged in small groups according to their positions in the family constellation, and each group is asked to list the advantages and disadvantages of its respective position. After 10 minutes, the scribe for each group reads the report to all of the students. I allow them to argue for a few minutes and then ask them to form their small groups again and list their

characteristics. When they return, we discuss why they think they have developed these characteristics.

#### **Session 4**

*Goal.* To understand why children misbehave—the four goals of misbehavior.

Four students who are coached in one of the four goals (attention getting, power, revenge, and withdrawal) role play a scene in which each demonstrates his particular goal. Next, I ask four group members to role play a teacher, and attempt to get the “teachers” to identify their feelings and the group to understand why certain students or children misbehave.

#### **Session 5**

*Goal.* To demonstrate how their lifestyles developed.

By this session I have a good idea of the lifestyle of each member of the group. After determining which student has the easiest lifestyle to analyze, I ask him (privately) if I can do a lifestyle analysis on him. I ask the other group members to answer the questions for themselves.

#### **Session 6**

*Goal.* To demonstrate the need for mutual respect and how it affects communication.

To set a quiet mood, I play the record *Father-Son* by Cat Stevens. Afterward, I distribute the words to the song and play the record again. At this point we discuss certain lines in the song and interpret them. Some boys will talk about their own relationships with their parents. Groups usually decide that any breakdown in communication between parent and child is usually the fault of both.

#### **Session 7**

*Goal.* To demonstrate how students can back administrators into a corner and leave them no alternative but detention or suspension.

The school in which I am working has a very traditional approach to discipline. In this session, I play the role of a high school junior who walks to school every day with a close friend. I talk him into cutting school to spend the day at my house listening to tapes. The next day we try to lie our way out of it. A student is asked to role play the Dean of Students and eventually the truth comes out. The consequences of truancy are 5 days detention and a letter to

my parents. We “con” the Dean into not sending the letter home. However, a neighbor who had observed us informs my father. A student is asked to play the role of my father. When I get home, I am confronted by him. I lie at first, but then admit that I cut school. Father is angry and calls the school to complain that he was not notified of my misbehavior. This incident is very helpful in assisting the students understand the position of the administration.

### **Session 8**

**Goals.** To demonstrate how the trust level of a parent toward his son can drop and to demonstrate the perplexity of the problem of alcohol and the difficult decisions parents must make.

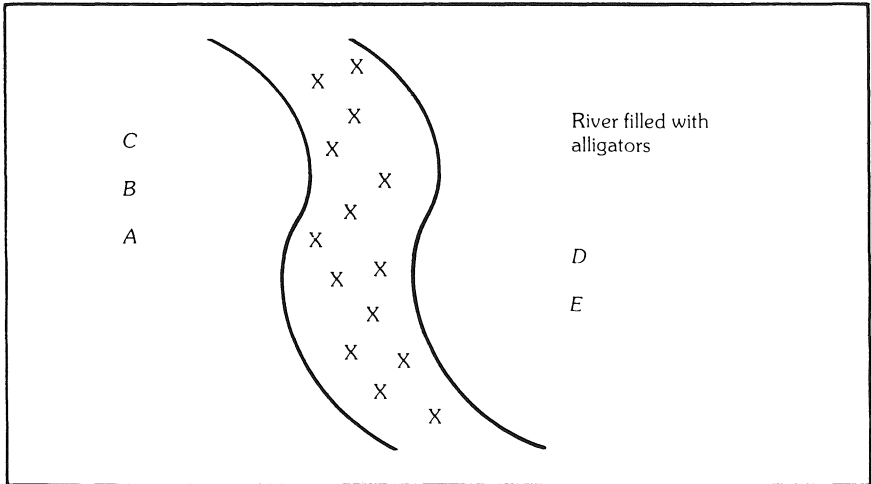
This session presents a good opportunity to discuss power struggles. Again, I role play the same student in session 7, and invite my friend and two girls to my house on a school holiday while my parents are working. During the course of the day, we share two six-packs of beer. Before my parents return, we clean up the house, and my friends leave. However, when my father comes home, he finds an empty beer can. He confronts me and we discuss how his trust level is falling; first, my cutting school and lying about it, and now the beer and the party with the girls. I decide to try to rebuild the trust level by being honest with him and explain to him my drinking habits. I drink every weekend. My father explains his feelings about my drinking, his fears—it is against the law, etc. Eventually, the students see why parents feel they cannot allow them to drink or allow friends to drink in their homes. Depending on the time, many interesting role-playing situations can occur. Other drugs can also be brought into the discussion.

### **Session 9**

**Goal.** To demonstrate some of the reasons why their parents have such a different value system regarding sex and to demonstrate their own differences and the need for mutual respect.

One student role plays my father. When he comes home from work, he learns that his wife has found my copy of some soft-core pornography. I ask the group what they think my father should do. After this discussion I ask if anyone has seen an X-rated movie and ask that they describe it. Then I point out that, when their parents were in school, *Gone with the Wind* was given a bad rating by the Catholic Church because of the line, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” The same film is now rated G. I draw out the fact that, even though four-letter words are very common to them and they hear them in films and read them in books assigned by teachers, they must respect the value system of teachers, parents, etc., who find such language distasteful. I then divide the students into two small groups and ask them to do an exercise called “alligator river” (Figure 1).

Figure 1  
Alligator River Exercise



A is engaged to marry D but cannot cross the river. There a large rowboat on her side of the river, but she is unable to handle it. She asks B to row her across, but he agrees to do so only if she will have sexual intercourse with him. She refuses and asks C to take her across. He refuses because he does not like to get involved. She returns to B, agrees to his demand, and he takes her across. Being an honest girl, she explains to D what happened, and he tells her to get out of his life. E then asks A to marry him.

The two groups are asked to rank the five people according to who made the best decision. When they have completed this exercise, we compare the ratings and talk about values and the importance of remembering that, when we reject a person's values, we cannot reject the person. It also demonstrates that we frequently make judgments without all the information.

## Session 10

*Goal.* To demonstrate the need for mutual respect regardless of a person's reputation, etc., and to discuss double standards.

In this session, one student role plays a boy who takes a girl to a school dance. Unknown to him, she has a very bad reputation in her neighborhood, which she has earned. Her nickname in the neighborhood is "Brookline Betty." Several other group members role play some boys from Brookline who know Betty and who make the typical remarks that they think would be made as they see "Brookline Betty" leaving the dance with her date. At this point, we discover that one of the boys from Brookline is a friend of Betty's date.

I ask the group if they would tell a close friend that he was dating a girl with a bad reputation. I set up one or two more role-playing situations in which the girl has a bad reputation, and we discuss how the students feel about such a girl. They usually react negatively. Then I ask how they feel toward the boys involved. They respond that they are jealous, etc. We then discuss the double standard.

### **Session 11**

*Goal.* To demonstrate that they have similar feelings and that they should admit their feelings.

I ask the students to share an embarrassing situation after I have given an example, i.e., how did they feel watching a television program with their parents when there was a sexy scene being portrayed, etc. This usually creates a care-free atmosphere. We also discuss how they feel while watching a film like *Brian's Song* and the methods they use to hold back or hide their tears.

### **Session 12**

*Goal.* A better understanding of birth-control methods and their responsibility for their behavior.

At the beginning of this session, I role play a boy in high school who has just learned his girlfriend is pregnant. One of the group role plays my close friend, and we discuss my feelings. In this discussion I tell him the method of birth control that I used, which turned out to be no birth-control method at all, but simply an old wives' tale.

After the role-playing situation, I carefully explain the eight methods of birth control as described in *The How-Not-To-Book*, distributed by the Julius Schmid Pharmaceuticals. I ask them if they know any other methods. (I think it is extremely necessary that they have the proper information.) We briefly discuss venereal diseases, and I explain how I take students, on a confidential basis, to the health department for VD tests and treatment. As a result of this session one semester, I took three boys to the health department.

### **Session 13**

*Goal.* To better understand girls.

Since this is an all male school, the boys have many questions and misunderstandings about girls. I tell them that we are going to write a little booklet called "All I Wanted to Know about Girls, But Was Afraid to Ask." I ask them to write down their questions on index cards, and then I print them on large sheets of newsprint. The questions are taken to a nearby girls' school

to be answered. In return, the girls send a list of questions they want answered by the boys.

### **Session 14**

*Goal.* To have the students answer the girls' questions and to get the answers to their own questions.

This session usually raises more questions and some anger. I take six boys to the girls' school for a panel discussion, which often results in an additional series of co-educational counseling sessions.