

# Lambs and Lions: The role of psychoeducational groups in enhancing relationship skills and social networks

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*Abstract:* Didactic parent training classes are often the treatment of choice for parents reported for child maltreatment. While these classes can be effective, they do little to reduce parents' social isolation, a key contributor to child maltreatment and family stress. Herein, two psychoeducational support groups for maltreating parents are described, in which parenting is not the primary focus of curriculum. The Learning About Myself group is aimed at parents being served for neglect, and is focused on improving social skills and social networks, in order to reduce depression and social isolation. The Rightful Options and Resources group is aimed at women experiencing woman abuse, in order to increase assertiveness skills in relationships and reduce social isolation. The curriculum and group content of each group is described, with evaluative results of the effect on social relationships.

*Key words:* groupwork; child maltreatment; assertiveness; self-esteem; psychoeducation

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## **Introduction**

Public child welfare agencies are charged with the prevention and treatment of child maltreatment, with the priority of preserving families while keeping children safe (Barth and Berry, 1994). Achieving such a complex objective requires a sound knowledge base of risks associated with child abuse and neglect and the resources associated with family well-being, and a strong practice base of the techniques and programs that are effective in a variety of circumstances, cultures and populations (Berry, 1997).

Certainly, parents and families need to possess particular skills and resources in order to sustain and nurture their members. Child abuse and neglect are related to poor parenting skills, parental depression, family stress, economic hardship, and other characteristics and conditions (Garbarino and Gilliam, 1980; McDonald and Marks, 1991). Many studies have also identified social isolation as a key correlate of child maltreatment (Belle, 1982; Brunk, Henggeler and Whelan, 1987; Crittenden, 1985; Darmstadt, 1990; Leifer, Shapiro and Kassem, 1993; Strauss, 1980; Zuravin and Greif, 1989).

Not all families, however, have the same combination or configuration of risks and service needs. Families vary in their assets, resources, and risks. Programs must also pay attention to the social environment of the clients they serve. Programs that address the social environment are often based on an ecological paradigm of practice (Whittaker, Schinke, and Gilchrist, 1986). Whittaker and colleagues posit that effective interventions that are based on an ecological or systems view of human behavior must attend to two aspects of human life: improving life skills and enhancing socially supportive relationships.

Many have posited that without attention to the social relationship needs and skills of parents, advice and training around parenting or other family care strategies will not be effective or lasting (Cochran, 1991; Lovell, Reid and Richey, 1991; Lovell and Richey, 1997; Miller and Whittaker, 1988; Whittaker and Tracy, 1988). Indeed, Patterson, Chamberlain and Reid (1982) have found that parent training 'enhanced' by attention to relationship skills results in bigger and more durable gains in parenting skills.

Griest and colleagues (1982) have also found 'enhanced' parent training to produce improvement in parenting, longer lasting effects, and greater generalizability to other skills.

## **The role of psychosocial groups**

One method of increasing the skills and social support of parents is to use groups that make use of a predetermined plan and set curriculum that is facilitated by a professional leader (Pappel & Rothman, 1980). The focus of the groups is to teach parents to manage their own feelings and needs so they can be more nurturing and responsive to their children (Meezan, O'Keefe & Zaraini, 1997). Transmission of specific knowledge and skills is done through the didactic presentation of information by a knowledgeable professional as well as the mutual encouragement, support and group pressure from other members to change behaviors that result in harm to the client or their children (Fritz, 1985).

The cost-effectiveness of groups as well as the mutual support provided by members offers a valuable method of working with parents (Iwaniec, 1997). Groups offer specific advantages to clients including:

- Learning that they are not alone in experiencing their problems, and that others have similar concerns;
- Increasing social contacts for persons, many of whom are socially isolated;
- Engendering altruistic behaviors as members help each other by listening, providing mutual support, giving feedback, making suggestions, and providing useful information to other group members;
- Instilling hope that one's situation may improve, by seeing the successes of others;
- Observing how others solve similar difficulties; and
- Having multiple opportunities for role playing, testing new skills and rehearsing new behaviors in a safe and supportive environment (Toseland & Rivas, 2001).

The role of the worker in groups is to facilitate the creation of a safe setting for mutual sharing, support and problem solving by recognizing the strengths of each member and modeling respectful communication that minimizes critical and hurtful interactions. Through hearing other members' triumphs and struggles, the members begin to identify with one another, lessening fears of expressing themselves and decreasing feelings of defensiveness often experienced by parents in the child welfare system (Tunnard, 1989). The structured activities encourage positive enjoyable interactions amongst members, develop problem solving skills and support learning how to give and receive positive as well as critical feedback. The diversity of perspectives offered by group members increases the options for members whose problem solving skills have been limited by personal and environmental barriers. Use of topics and situations that are common in the everyday lives of the participants encourages generalization to interactions with family and community members in the community (Meezan, O'Keefe & Zariani, 1997).

### **The Importance of Social Support**

The importance of social support and supportive networks at the community level is made very clear in Fred Wulczyn's (1991) report, *The Community Dimension of Permanency Planning*. Wulczyn examined a variety of indicators of family well-being for New York City on a household-by-household basis, and using census tract mapping, found that high percentages of families experiencing poverty, teen pregnancies, infant mortality, and child removals all clustered in the same neighborhoods and communities around the city. What is especially striking is his finding that, in some communities, in excess of 12% of all infants were placed in foster care before their first birthday. This analysis speaks to the importance of supportive networks and the skills to use those networks.

Lovell and colleagues (Lovell, Reid & Richey, 1991) evaluated a group program to enhance socially supportive networks for low-income abusive mothers. The program followed an agency-

based parenting group, so was a form of 'enhanced' parenting education, teaching and rehearsing skills basic to friendship and self-assertion in relationships. The program was developed in reaction to the finding that the parenting group alone, while providing opportunities for friendship and ongoing relationships, did not result in increases in social networks over time. Group leaders found that members did not know how to give and receive support to each other in the group; that skills in supportiveness had to be taught first for the group to serve as a support group. An evaluation of the enhanced social support training found significant increases in social network size as well as improved quality and quantity of social interactions. Associated reductions in child maltreatment were not addressed.

A repeated evaluation of this intervention with non-random assignment to a treatment and a comparison group (Lovell and Richey, 1997) found few statistically significant differences between groups after a seventeen-week intervention. The authors noted consistent patterns in 'the social ecology of [clients'] daily lives' (p.240), including interactions with family and friends, that were relatively unaffected by skills and knowledge addressed in the intervention.

Cochran's (1991) study of the Family Matters program in New York found that a community-based program to 160 families of three-year olds was successful in enlarging social networks, compared to a control group who did not receive the program. Participation in the program was associated with greater linkages to supports and higher perceptions of self as parent for both unmarried and married mothers. However, there were key cultural differences, corroborated by other research highlighting differences in social support across cultures (Timberlake and Chipungu, 1992). For white mothers, growth largely took place with nonrelated social network members, and this growth was associated with enhanced parental identity and the child's improved performance in school. The majority of increases in the social network were confined to relatives for Black mothers, however. Among Black unmarried mothers, growth in the social network of relatives was associated with increases in parent-child activities, while growth in the social network of nonrelatives was associated with the child's improved

academic performance.

Despite the caveat that families served by public child welfare agencies are poor candidates for group attendance and participation (Polansky, Ammons, and Gaudin, 1985; Polansky, Chalmers, Williams, and Bittenweiser, 1981), the public child welfare agency in this study has developed and provided two specific and effective support groups for its child welfare clients over a number of years, and enjoys high participation rates. The two groups are called Learning About Myself (detailed evaluation results in Rickard, 1998a), and Rightful Options and Resources (detailed evaluation results in Berry, Letendre & Brook, under review).

Learning About Myself (LAMs) is aimed at depressed and neglectful parents, while Rightful Options and Resources (ROAR) is aimed at increasing the assertiveness skills of women experiencing woman abuse. What follows is a brief description of these two groups: the group curriculum, characteristics of typical group members, and the improvements observed among group members.

## **Learning about myself (The LAM group)**

The Learning About Myself psychoeducational support group meets weekly at the public child protective services agency for twelve weeks. This is a group for both women and men, attended primarily by women, who are taught to be more assertive, make better choices and improve their self-esteem. The particular emphasis of this group is self-esteem and self-image. Much of the group exercises and content include hands-on activities such as games, crafts and role-plays. Positive affirmations are used weekly, including a 'pretty prize,' awarded each week to a group member. Transportation and child care are provided to group members. At graduation, all participants receive a diploma and a stuffed toy lamb (reflecting the LAMs acronym).

### **Group members**

The Learning About Myself group has been provided most

commonly to women who are young mothers of children. Most live in poverty, and have one or two children. Evaluations have found women participants to be receiving child welfare services primarily for child neglect, although other forms of child maltreatment are also common.

Most of these women have been abused in childhood. About a third have also been abused in adulthood. They dislike many things about themselves, most commonly their appearance or their personality. Therefore, a group approach to this population of women needs to be particularly nurturing, positive and caring.

### **Curriculum**

Over the twelve weeks of the course, the following twelve topics are emphasized and explored: myself, my attitude, my relationships, my appearance, my time for myself, my friends, my education, my health, my family, my finances, my home, and my goals/a celebration. Each exercise or activity is read aloud in order to assist those members who may not be able to read. The curriculum has been developed by Verna Rickard, group creator and leader over a number of years, and has been published in book form (Rickard, 1998a), with an accompanying workbook of exercises and affirmations for group members (Rickard, 1998b).

Much of the curriculum emphasizes taking charge of one's life, recognizing choices where clients may see none. The presentation of many topics is nurturing and fun, through playing games, making crafts and so on. For example, participants make hair bows together, and many times this is the first time they have made something attractive and functional. During 'budgeting' week, participants play 'The Price is Right' with paired generic and name brand products, and the winners take the products home.

Each week's content stands alone, to minimize the negative effects of absences. Each group session lasts for two and one-half hours. Clients are free to attend on an open-ended basis, attending sessions they may have missed in the past. Finally, a meal is prepared and served by all group members and leaders at each session.

### **Questions and worksheets**

A set of intake questionnaires ask both the client and her caseworker about the following: the client's childhood experiences and beliefs, goals for herself and her family, and beliefs about her self (self-efficacy, appearance, social support and friendships, etc.). Most of these questions are in the form of open-ended questions, to which the respondent can write or relate a brief response. These written responses generate a host of opportunities to incorporate each participant's strengths, experiences and needs into group curriculum and discussions.

The graduation questionnaires ask about the client's and/or caseworker's perceptions of the usefulness or effectiveness of the group, both globally and in specific terms, and the client's current perceptions of self-efficacy, appearance, social support and friendships, and so on. These are helpful in discussing the client's progress with her, as well as more structured evaluations of group effectiveness.

### **Group results**

Parents who participated in the LAMs psychoeducational groups have reported that they had learned new ways of solving problems or making decisions, become more assertive and improved in parenting skills. Caseworkers reported improvements in self-esteem, client appearance, children's appearance and greater independence. To date, all clients evaluated have reported that they made new friends as a result of the LAMs group (Berry, 1998).

### **Rightful options and resources (The ROAR group)**

The Rightful Options and Resources psychoeducational group is an assertiveness and empowerment group for women experiencing domestic violence. Group members meet weekly for twelve weeks, but the group works on an open format, in which members can join at any time. The group is co-led by two experienced CPS caseworkers in the public child welfare agency's Intensive Family



Preservation and Intensive Family Reunification Units. Child care and transportation are provided by child protective services. Upon graduation, all participants receive a diploma and a stuffed animal lion (reflecting the ROAR acronym). At the graduation, group leaders prepare and serve a meal in honor of the graduates, and a picture is taken and presented to each graduate.

### **Group members**

As in the Learning About Myself group, the women participating in this support group are commonly young mothers with young children. Most live in poverty. This group, given its focus on domestic violence, is more likely to contain mothers who are married or cohabitating. For these women, the relationship has been found to be three to four years old. While the Learning About Myself group is most commonly provided to families containing child neglect, Rightful Options and Resources is typically concerned with families with physical child abuse. Most commonly, the perpetrator is the mother's partner.

The majority of participants usually report having been abused in childhood, physically, emotionally and/or sexually. This is particularly likely among younger mothers. One evaluation of this group found that three-quarters had experienced battering as an adult, and one-fourth had been raped (Berry, Letendre, & Brook, under review).

Questions at the first session find these women to be largely passive, particularly in regard to self-expression. The self-esteem of a participant is typically less of an issue than is her ability to express her own opinions and needs.

### **Curriculum**

Classroom exercises concentrate on understanding the cycle of violence in families, tools for developing assertiveness skills, and development of an understanding of individual rights: the right to be respected, the right not to be abused, and the right to leave an abusive relationship. Leaders also impart a knowledge base of community resources available to women and children. Group

leaders participate in all exercises and activities with members, enhancing cooperation and human connections within the group.

The twelve-session curriculum covers issues of the cycle of violence, legal options and assistance, making decisions about relationships and family, making changes in your life, myths and realities of romance, and sexuality and protection. This group is primarily didactic in nature, employing a number of guest speakers from community agencies, including legal assistance, public financial assistance, community counseling, job counseling, and the public health department. Many therapeutic elements are included as well, including weekly affirmations, discussion of 'brags' or accomplishments of each member during the previous week, and group support and challenge around issues of domestic violence, assertiveness and parenting. Sessions last for two and one-half hours each week.

### **Questions and worksheets**

The Rightful Options and Resources group utilizes a set of questionnaires that are consistent between the first and last sessions of the group (Harris & Alexander, 1982). These instruments are primarily multiple response, although they do include some open-ended questions. Clients are asked whether they agree with a set of fifteen statements exemplifying (non)-assertiveness, such as 'It is difficult for me to ask my friends for help' and 'I believe that I am responsible for others' feelings.' Answer choices included 'yes' 'no' and 'not sure.' For purposes of a simple program evaluation, the proportions of 'yes' responses can be compared from pre-test to post-test.

In addition to the questionnaire developed by Rightful Options and Resources, group members also complete the 'Me As I See Myself' instrument (Harris & Alexander, 1982) at the first and last group sessions. This instrument was created to measure self-esteem in a form that is easy to read and answer, for use in evaluations of child welfare programs. Each of twenty items is marked on a three-point anchored scale, as to where, on the continuum of an attribute (e.g., successful to unsuccessful; good to bad, beautiful to ugly) the client rates herself. The twenty items

are not collapsed into any subdimensions for summary scoring. Each item is a three-point line with no qualifiers at each point.

### **Group results**

Clients and caseworkers have agreed that participants who graduated from the Rightful Options and Resources group intervention had improved in assertiveness and strengthened their parenting skills. Group participants also report more positive perceptions of self-image and self-esteem compared to pre-test. Some of the largest gains are in the domain of self-importance and self-reliance (Berry, Letendre, & Brook, under review).

### **Conclusion and discussion**

Parenting children can be a joyful, but nonetheless challenging task. For parents who are isolated and lack resources and support from others, it is difficult to care for children in a way that encourages healthy development. For many child welfare agencies, the intervention of choice is parent training, where parents attend classes to learn effective methods of praise, discipline and self-control. When these classes are well-structured and teach behavioral methods of discipline, they can be very effective (Blatt, 2001; Kazdin, 1998).

The importance of 'enhancing' the didactic presentation of practical parenting skills with attention to social relationships is often lacking (Lovell, Reid & Richey, 1991; Iwaniec, 1997; Vitaro, Tremblay & Bukowski, 2001). Groups can provide on-site support and interaction as well as skill building opportunities with other parents who are experiencing similar challenges. Within this setting, members can learn more effective interpersonal skills that will enable them to better meet their needs and those of their children (Meezan, O'Keefe & Zariani, 1997).

The power of the group to educate, and provide mutual support to its members was recognized early in the social work profession by the settlement house workers who provided group settings for poor, immigrant and disenfranchised families to meet.

Rather than individualize family struggles, the settlement house workers used collective strategies to provide an environment where families could congregate, engage in enjoyable activities, celebrate their cultural diversity, discuss concerns, share points of view and develop strategies for creating better living situations which supported the development of their children (Toseland & Rivas, 2001).

As child welfare services have moved away from prevention and toward case management, the emphasis has changed to professionals instructing parents on effective parenting practices, but ignoring the empowering element that mutual sharing and reciprocity can bring to the learning process of the group. Although case management services are certainly of importance to families who are struggling with personal and environmental barriers to caring for their children, they fail to address the effects that social isolation has on parents who do not live in close proximity to supportive neighbors or extended family (Iwaniec, 1997). Such isolation prevents parents from learning alternative ways of coping with challenging situations as well as opportunities to be valued for what they can contribute to others.

Social workers need to rethink their approach to service delivery given the support for the helpfulness of groups methods in increasing parental self-esteem, assertiveness, anger management and problem solving described in this and other studies (Berry, 1998; Iwaniec, 1997). Didactic instruction combined with the mutual aid provided in groups helps parents, the majority of whom are women, to learn about themselves and to develop strategies for better meeting their own needs as well as those of their children. This is especially important since women have been socialized to care for others, but often not taught to care for themselves.

Social workers can be leaders in developing curricular models for group work with parents based on their knowledge of the skills that parents need to manage their lives more effectively. Attention to the cultural strengths and challenges that individuals bring to the group can support members in their successes, further the understanding of the environmental factors that contribute to parenting difficulties (i.e. racism, poverty, dangerous neighborhoods) and contribute to development of effective ways

of managing these situations (Miller, 1997). Social workers can be instrumental in training and supervising child welfare workers in the knowledge of group dynamics that will enable them to enhance group interaction and problem solving.

Well-facilitated groups that attend to the unique and collective concerns of parents, foster the development of meaningful social contacts with others, promote feelings of being valued for one's contributions and encourage generation of diverse solutions to problematic situations. Through such an experience parents realize that they are not alone with their problems, and that they possess strengths that can contribute to helping others. Social workers can be instrumental in developing the resources for such groups, acting as facilitators, training others for group work and evaluating the outcomes of such interventions.

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