

The Parent to Parent Group

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Abstract: *This piece of writing endeavours to display how Groupwork is a valued and tangible approach to exploring many sensitive issues in social work practice. In particular the author reflects on her experience of co-facilitation of a mutual support group. This group was developed by an innovative Young Person's Probation Team, who acknowledge that, in order to enable young offender's desistance from deviant, criminal behaviour, parents require mutual support and acknowledgement. This paper begins with exploring definitions and descriptions of Groupwork and considers its application in the practice context of probation with young offenders. This piece of writing which accounts for the author's experience of co-facilitation explores the theoretical perspective being utilised and reflects on the process and outcomes of this experience of groupwork.*

Keywords: *mutual support; working in partnership; resilience and acknowledgement; groupwork; groups*

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Introduction

Social groupwork is a method of social work which helps individuals to enhance their social functioning, through purposeful group experiences, and to cope more effectively with their personal, group or community problems. (Konopka 1963 in Brown, 1992, p.8)

Groups may be defined in many ways, indeed providing an absolute definition of a group, as with much of the theory around groupwork, is highly problematic and contestable. Brown provides a modernised and more comprehensive definition of groupwork (1992, p.8). He states that

groupwork provides a context in which *individuals help each other*; it is a method of *helping groups* as well as helping individuals; and it can enable individuals and groups to *influence* and *change* personal, group, organisational and community problems.

Thus the role of groupwork can be seen as one which places emphasis on sharing of thoughts, ideas, problems and activities.

Preston-Shoot (2002) describes groupwork creating a sense of belonging and mutual identity, encouraging the formation of relationships which foster mutual identification and influence, thus feelings of isolation and singularity with issues of difference and oppression may be reduced. Also, the group may be encouraged to use its internal resources to move towards individual or group problem-resolution, reducing feelings of helplessness, building self worth, and discouraging worker dependency.

The Probation Service deliver services to help protect the public, improve communities and to support offenders in integrating into their communities. They provide probation supervision, community service, anti-offending behaviour programmes and specialised support services.

The Young Person's Probation (YPP) service is a specialised team within the Probation Service established to work with youth aged 12 to 18 years old who have come to the attention of the courts. The YPP team works with the criminal justice system and courts and makes provision for the sanctions imposed by the courts on young people who offend. These include the community sanctions that were introduced as part of the Children's Act 2001. The team also prepares

the Pre-Sanction Reports ordered by the Court which assist the court in making judgements and determining sentences of the young people who offend. It also provides supervision to young people who are placed on a probation bond or who are released from detention. With a preventative orientation the YPP service works with young offenders by engaging and supporting them to make better choices and encouraging them to make efforts to turn their lives around. This team also work at protecting victims and communities and encourage the young people who offend to take responsibility for their actions. The YPP team also work in partnership with families and communities in order to reduce offending and explore ways of building individual, family and community resilience to the reduction of crime and offending. This in turn encapsulates an ecological approach to working with young people, their families and the community at large in order to encourage desistance from crime.

The Parent to Parent Support Group is one of many efforts to engage the 'system' (parents) in its endeavours to reduce offending. This support group acknowledges the existence of societal pressures on families and aims to show acknowledgment and reassurance to parents. It provides a forum to realise, build and reaffirm the innate qualities of persons and give greater confidence to parents who wish to alter their approaches to dealing with their young person's behaviour.

Purpose of the group

A statement of the purpose should be broad enough to encompass different individual goals, yet specific enough to define the common nature of the group's purpose. (Toseland & Rivas, 2001, p.157)

The essence of the development of the Parent to Parent Support group to a large extent lies neatly between the definitions that Brown and Preston-Shoot provide. One of the main aims of the Parent to Parent Support Group is to provide a forum where individuals help each other; by helping the group and helping the individual members of the group and in turn building awareness which can enable individuals and groups to influence and change personal, group and community problems. The role of this group is to place emphasis on the skills the parents have,

and facilitate on the sharing of thoughts, ideas, problems, activities and ways of dealing with their young people.

The Group aims to reduce the feelings of isolation and singularity with issues of difference and oppression, increasing feelings of self worth and acknowledging that we all have areas and aspects of our lives that we like to build on.

Before commencing the group, a great deal of discussion took place with the facilitators. The co-facilitators had been involved with the first Parent to Parent group which was rolled out last year and they were clear as to the nature and style of the interactions with parents needed to achieve the goal, which was to facilitate awareness and change in the lives of the families who are involved with the probation service. By encapsulating these ideas in the form of a group it encourages exploration into the experiences of parents. Preston-Shoot (2002) explains how groupwork is a process of enquiry and discovery in which all participants are prepared to engage.

When I was provided with the opportunity to be involved with the Parent to Parent Support Group, I was enthused and delighted at the invaluable learning experience it had the potential to become. I pride myself on my ability as a team member and I was looking forward to the challenge. From the beginning it was clear that I was to co-facilitate the group and I was continually encouraged to have input into the delivery and experiences. The initial work involved the booking of the venue, the letters to interested parents and the programme for the group. Many of the group members had children who were involved with the YPP team and had previously expressed a willingness to engage in the group.

Type and Style of the group

Given the success of the previous group it was decided that a similar format would be utilised. This included the delivery of information which included anger management, stress, conflict management, self care/personal development and information on drugs- signs, symptoms and effects.

Preston-Shoot (2002) explains how groups vary greatly in character and type. They can be long or short term, on-going or time-limited, with a closed or open membership. They may be led by one person or

more and rely on open or topic-orientated discussion or on exercises and games. They may aim to foster support or social interaction, or to provide opportunities for members to develop their potential abilities, to use untapped personal resources, or to resolve particular problems experienced by members outside the group or on issues and difficulties experienced by members outside and within the groups.

From the beginning it was evident that much thought and consideration was given to the style and type of the group being formed. As this is the second time this type of group was being offered to parents, the co-facilitators explained to me the style of the group, and were very clear that this was an opportunity to support the parents who were dealing with challenging behaviours. This included acknowledging the skills and strengths that already existed and building on them in a collaborative and sensitive manner. This involved creating a safe non-judgemental and supportive environment in order for them to reflect, grow and develop themselves as interested and valued parents.

The Group was to run for 6 weeks each Wednesday morning from 10.30a.m.-12.30p.m. in the Pastoral Centre in Limerick, Ireland. The Pastoral Centre was a neutral location and suited the style of the group.

Planning for the Parent to Parent Support Group

The Parent to Parent Group had previously taken place therefore many of the ideas for its delivery centred on the success of its initial facilitation. However, given my relatively limited experience with groupwork and my need to discover and recognise what personal attributes could be utilised with enhancing the group experience, I set out to explore the many groupwork approaches and consider what this group was striving to achieve.

Pre-Planning of the group

The pre-planning involved exploring what was necessary to encourage the 'mutual' support element of the group. Consideration was given to the type of environment that would encourage participants to candidly explore the elements of their interactions with the children on which

they required assistance or guidance. The facilitators were mindful that this forum should not only become space for the parents to vent difficulties but also for them to seek to explore tangible and realistic responses to how best respond to their children. Examples were given of how the previous group had engaged. In addition it was identified that a parent who was a member of last year's group wished to be part of the new group. All involved acknowledged that this had potential to be a very powerful and encouraging message to new members. There was collective mindfulness of the potential for the group process to take over to the detriment of the task of the group, and this was agreed to be managed by the facilitators adapting initial roles within the facilitation. For example we adopted positions within the group and agreed to begin sessions with an exploration of how people were feeling and allow the discussion of incidents that may have occurred since our last session. This would be followed by the introduction of the theme for that session and concluded with suggestions of what the group could explore or consider for the next session. It became apparent that each facilitator's roles would be multifaceted and include a focus on acknowledging the strengths the parents displayed and encouraging members to seek other ways of dealing or responding to their children who have offended or are at risk of offending. In addition it was largely acknowledged that they as parents tend to know more about their young people and their experiences and were in the best position to consider what responses would initiate more favourable outcomes to the management of their child's behaviour. The ultimate aim was to subtly remind them of what options were available to them and encourage them to acknowledge their innate skills and adopt new or alternative ways of being.

Doel (2006, p.28) explains that in addition to knowledge of groupwork, the worker needs knowledge and theoretical understanding around the content of the group. I felt it necessary during this stage to inform myself about current parenting supports available in order to distinguish what was required to capture the essence of the group. I wanted also to use the skills I have to aid the development of others. I did this through arranging to meet with a Manager of the Parenting Support Programmes as this was extremely helpful and they provided me with a library of resources to utilise. In addition I met with a co-ordinator of Parenting Support which provided me with many examples of parenting course content. These two visits gave me a clear direction on how this

Parent to Parent Support Group was to be delivered/ facilitated. The co-facilitators were clear on how they wanted it to differ from the style of parenting available and that we the facilitators were not to be seen as the experts. Much of the delivery and facilitation of the topics was to be delivered from the more inclusive 'we' perspective.

In one of the initial meetings with the co-facilitators, I suggested the option of compiling a resource pack for the parents which was both information giving and visual, taking into consideration the literacy needs of the members. This idea was well received, and I began gathering information and visual illustrations of the topic content. I got the opportunity to utilise my creative skills, by making the resource pack user friendly and inviting to the members.

The co-facilitators advised that a number of parents had expressed interest in joining the group. I had responsibility for gathering names and contact details of interested parties. This included sending an email to all YPP team members to advise them of the starting date of the group and to request names of interested parties. Subsequent to this letters were sent to all interested parties, which were followed by a phone call to confirm their attendance nearer to the time. As this was going to be my first contact with the parents I took time and reiterated the content and idea of the group and wanted to foster a great deal of empowerment and enthusiasm into the initial contact.

Theoretical perspective/model

The theoretical perspective/model being utilised in this group was expressed through positive reinforcement and behaviour modification techniques. We acknowledged that each member had skills and strengths, yet possibly needed to regain sight of what is important and up skill themselves in coping and dealing with the difficulties that arise. The group were given homework for example, when doing the anger management techniques, they were asked to identify triggers to their anger and new responses and thinking in response to their anger. One of the sessions was spent doing role play around anger techniques.

The aim was to promote individual personal development among the group members. This type of groupwork allowed for the members to consider new ways of looking at their anger and focus on alternative

ways of responding to their feelings of anger. This model was similar to the cognitive behavioural therapy approach, while also allowing the group to deal with the here and now, looking for realistic ways to respond to real difficulties.

The strengths perspective was also very much to the fore, as we clearly acknowledged the strength and resilience of each member and acknowledged the efforts they made to engage. The group formation was relatively smooth as the participants all had children who were displaying challenging behaviour and all acknowledged that they wished to access support. The participants

will usually share some common identified need and will recognise the existence of that need such that they are prepared to attend a relevant group as a possible means of dealing with the need. In addition, members are seen as being capable of giving reciprocal care to other members of the group. (Nichols & Jenkinson, 1991, p.11)

... the concept of mutual aid in action!

The approach of all facilitators was person-centred. Our interactions encapsulated the three facilitative aspects of the person-centred approach that are central to the success of person-centred therapy; congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. According to Rogers, when these three attitudes are conveyed by a practitioner, clients can freely express themselves without having to worry about what the practitioner think of them. Working in partnership, building on strengths and empowerment are all important aspects of working with families. Trevithick (2000) argues that central to Rogers' theory is the belief that individuals know more about themselves and their lives than anyone else and because of this they are in the best position to deal with problems that emerge. In addition Trevithick (2000) articulates how the therapist or practitioner's aim should be to get 'alongside' the client in ways that show willingness to enter the world of another human being and to provide an experience and presence that is validating, releasing and restorative.

Facilitation of the group

Nichols & Jenkinson (1991, p.44) explain that groups are about change thus those involved in leading them need to value and understand the nature of personal change. I was very appreciative of the opportunity to be involved in this group and wanted to explore what skills and strengths I had to offer the group. I was kindly given the opportunity to be responsible for the general organisation and planning of the group. The strength of the facilitation of the group I believe was that it was co-facilitated by three people.

Each facilitator provided a different perspective. One was male with grown up children and worked in the young person's probation team and was actively involved with outreach services in Limerick city. The male co-facilitator provided excellent user friendly anger management techniques. In addition his skills of utilising his light wit and caring and reflective personality had a significant impact on the group and its members. The female co-facilitator, who is also a member of the young person's team, exerted subtlety on the group and this quality proved equally vital to its success. In particular she explored varying perspectives on the content of the discussions of the group. She managed the interactions of the members by providing or creating opportunities for all members to be involved and by encouraging participation. Simultaneously she provided clear explanation of the role of the Parent to Parent Group and was conscious of the maintenance of the group, by clarifying what was been delivered and giving examples in order to ensure each member understood what was being discussed.

Preston-Shoot, (2002) explains how co-workers require similar views, common working values and similar basic assumptions and professional outlooks to be able to work together. The three facilitators involved fostered a shared approach to working with this group of parents and responded openly, honestly and effectively to the group needs.

The author's role and behaviour in the group

Throughout our planning, preparation and intervention group roles developed both through formal appointment and because of the personal characteristics and interpersonal relationships that developed between the facilitators. The roles which developed were constructive and supportive of the group and its members in achieving its goals.

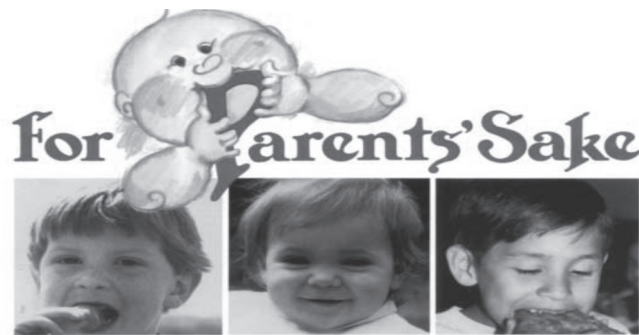
At the beginning I was very apprehensive about my ability to deliver such rounded support to parents. Although a confident team member, I have had limited experience in the formal setting of groupwork. From the onset I was determined to ensure that this experience challenged my apprehension and increased my confidence in co-facilitation of groups. Johnson (2001) outlines leadership roles in groups in terms of the task and maintenance roles of a group. He explains how all groups, whether organised or therapeutic reasons, problem solving, or other purposes, rely on members performing task roles and group maintenance roles satisfactorily. In this area I underestimated my ability to perform many roles that were both concerned with task and maintenance of the group.

Prior to this group experience I would have been of the opinion that I performed mostly within the maintenance role. At many stages of the group I developed and utilised many skills which included Summariser, pulling together related ideas or suggestions and coordinator, showing relationships among various ideas by pulling them together. The role I assumed most frequently throughout the duration of the group was the Energiser – by stimulating a higher quality of work from the group. Many of the group discussions were very sensitive as all of the group members were dealing with crisis situations in their families. My ability to regain focus on the task in hand for each session was evident. This was a strength each of the facilitators utilised and this was carried out in a sensitive and caring manner by all facilitators.

For many of the sessions I planned Ice Breakers and activities that were appropriate to the discussions of each day. All members seemed to thoroughly enjoy the activities and it created an element of fun and laughter and complemented a statement used regularly to great effect by one of the facilitators, 'when you're laughing you can't be crying'. My ability to explain and deliver these aspects to the group saw me perform quite competently in the tension reliever role.

There were many benefits to co-working this support group. I was

a younger single person with no children, whereas my co-facilitators both had children of varying ages. In addition they both have extensive experience working with young people with challenging behaviour. Prior to each session the facilitators met to plan the next session and debrief from the previous session. This provided us with great support and allowed time to reflect on the dynamics and formation of the group. I believe I gave great commitment to the planning and organisation of the group and I sensitively and appropriately planned activities and elements of the sessions to attain the required effect which I believed to be acknowledgment, empowerment and respect of all members. I prepared the information packs with great thought and enjoyed the reactions of parents when given items which made up the parental survival kit.



Puzzle Piece

To remind you that you are an important piece of your child's life

Rubber Band

To remind you to be flexible

Eraser

So everyone can start each day with a clean slate

Band-Aid

To fix hurt feelings and boo-boos along the way

Reflection on what the author has learnt

The Parent to Parent Support programme provided emotional and informational support to parents of children who have offended and are at risk of offending. This group's strength was that each Parent has shared the experience of dealing with challenging behaviours in the family, and that aspect in itself provided a unique form of support that only another parent who has 'been there' can. Our role as facilitators was to provide a safe, inclusive and empowering forum for the Parents to discuss their daily challenges, which delivered a key message to our group, it was an acknowledgment that they are not alone in their daily challenges and that they are deserving of support. I have learned that providing this type of forum ensures we best support others in their personal empowerment by letting them deal with their unique challenges and realise the solutions, rather than highlighting flaws and teaching new ways.

The greatest achievement of this experience was that the parents who participated in the group acknowledged the benefit and the support they received. In addition the parents exchanged numbers and, due to the friendships formed, expressed a wish to stay in contact, which in turn would provide a social network that could emanate mutual support. On reflection one element that was very powerful was the parents' capacities to reflect on their own behaviours so candidly and show willingness to provide more balance to their lives. In other words as they all acknowledged how they allowed their young person's difficulties to impact on all aspects of family life, they now realised that they needed to take a step back and allow their children to take responsibility for the behaviours and deal with the consequences.

Throughout the duration of the group most of the parents were dealing with particular crises, for some their children were appearing in court and possibly being sentenced for crimes. One parent's child had been remanded for a short period, many of them were dealing with pressures of their child's drug debt. Given the intense and extreme natures of these incidents many of the sessions needed to allow for discussions that elicited practical and emotional support. It was often challenging to move on from this type of discussion as it was so powerful and necessary, yet impeded the plan for some session. Unequivocally this became secondary as we could not have underestimated the huge

benefit of this form of support. This in turn gave more time to the group process to the detriment of the task, yet was equally as important, indicating the power of mutual aid.

The core elements of this experience encapsulated ideas central to Rogers' theory in the belief that individuals know more about themselves and their lives than anyone else and because of this they are in the best position to deal with problems that emerge (Trevithick, 2000). The group participants provided tangible and real responses to the themes that emerged, which yielded a unique learning opportunity for all involved. This was evidenced with members providing guidance, encouragement and responses to dealing with incidents or issues that transpired while attending the group. On one occasion, one member explained how she had been informed that her son had been arrested in an area three hours from their home when she had understood he was staying with a friend in the local area, she had not heard from him in three days and she was at a loss as to what she could do. The parents were all able to acknowledge how she must be feeling and provided descriptions of their experience of similar events and together they broke it down and gave great direction on how to deal with it. Trevithick (2000, p.81) explains that empathy involves trying to understand, as carefully and as sensitively as possible, the nature of another person's experience, their own unique point of view, and what meaning this carries for that individual.

My involvement with this group has aided my development both professionally and personally. By being treated as a co-worker and valuable resource by my co-workers it has increased my confidence and given affirmation to the values I strive to uphold. The greatest learning I gained was to see the benefits that the parents reaped from their involvement; during my interactions with this group I was touched by the individual strength and resilience of each of these parents. They gave me great hope and security in confirming my belief that I have chosen the right path in my professional development. As I arrive at the point where I am given the opportunity to put my learning into practice I am excited about what future endeavours lie ahead. Trevithick (2000, p.13) explains how the transferability of skills involves students and practitioners being

able to explain in a coherent, comprehensive and convincing manner how their practice is informed by their knowledge base, and being able to apply their knowledge and learning to new situations through appraising what is general and what is particular in each situation. (CCETSW 1995a, p.19)

This experience has given me a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting. In addition this experience of groupwork has endorsed the idea of the use of groupwork in my future practice. The core elements and principles adopted by those involved will resonate in many practice contexts and has the potential to reap similar benefits to those who engage.

Conclusion

Toseland & Rivas (2009, p.14) explain how the term purpose can be defined as the general aims of a group. The importance of purpose in a group cannot be overemphasised. A group's purpose identifies the reason for bringing members together.

The Parent to Parent Support Group evolved out of the innovative and dedicated work of the probation officers of the Young Person's Probation Team in Limerick, Ireland. They daily interact with young offenders and their families and are aware of the difficulties these families face when dealing with challenging and offending behaviour. The Parent to Parent Support Group encapsulates the respect, acknowledgement; non-judgemental and self determination that the probation services aims to foster when working with young people and their families. I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to be part of this experience.

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