

## Empowerment Through Group Process

Contributed by Leslie Stanton, BSW

The decision to enter the field of social work was the result of many difficult years in my life. As an older non-traditional student, pursuing a career in social work would enable me to reach out to others in need. It was through the empowering process of a dedicated social worker that I was guided into this field of work.

The first three years of preparing for a career in social work are concentrated on defining what it means to be a generalist social worker. As students, we are required to take classes in psychology, human behavior, ethnic and minority relations, and research. It is a time when students learn and take to heart the Code of Ethics for social workers. In the last year, we are assigned to a field practicum and have the opportunity to implement the skills, knowledge and values important to social workers.

Senior year is a time of excitement. Graduation is close at hand, and now everything we have learned can be applied in a field placement. Reaching this point, one feels both excitement and apprehension. Utilizing everything that we have learned, and under the guidance of a field supervisor, we cautiously enter into the role of helping others. My Placement

My placement involved working with families that were in need of basic parenting skills. As a facilitator of a parenting group, it was my responsibility to help educate these clients on appropriate ways to parent their children. The parents who attended this group were often mandated by the Division of Youth and Family Services or the legal system. The majority of parents attending group had temporarily lost custody of their children. Their children had either been placed in foster care or were living with relatives. Each child's removal was due to an assortment of reasons, which included neglect; substance abuse; or emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse by a caregiver. As I began my work with the group, I frantically tried to remember what course discussed all of these issues.

Factors that contribute to the mistreatment of children involve stress, poverty, marital discord, and lack of social support (Gershater-Molko, Lutzker, & Wesch, 2003). Abused children are often robbed of their childhood and left with doubts as to whether life can be trusted. The typical neglectful parent is an isolated individual who has difficulty forming relationships or carrying on the routine tasks of everyday life (Crosson-Tower, 2005). Burdened with anger and sadness over unmet childhood needs, this parent finds it impossible to consistently recognize and meet the needs of his or her children (Crosson-Tower, 2005). Physical and sexual abuse of a child by a parent is also caused by interconnected groups of characteristics and events. When dealing with these types of abuse, social workers need to recognize that the characteristics of the parent, the interaction between the victim and the abuser, or the dynamics within the family give rise to an abusive situation, and the environment and the stressors present also play a role in abuse (Crosson-Tower, 2005). The Group

The individuals in the group were predominantly young, single women in their twenties, struggling to raise their children. Many of the women indicated they had either been in or continued to enter into abusive relationships. Group members often were receiving assistance for housing, food, and day care expenses. Members expressed on numerous occasions that they had also been the victims of abuse or neglect as children. Some of the stories these young parents told were of childhood horrors of physical or sexual abuse at the hands of trusted caregivers. Many, as children, were left to babysit younger siblings when their parents worked. Now these individuals are faced with the challenge of raising their own children without basic parenting knowledge. After listening to the mothers in the group talk about their lives, it was obvious that these parents loved their children but were repeating what was done to them.

My role as facilitator was that of teacher and educator, providing different techniques for more appropriate parenting methods. The issues discussed in group encompassed safety, punishment versus discipline, self-care, and parenting styles. As part of the group process, it was important that I present a caring and empathic attitude. Although some of the stories that I heard were horrific and difficult to understand, it was important that my attitude remain non-judgmental. My time spent with the group members proved to be a very rewarding experience.

As group members became more comfortable with each other, the process of mutual aid came to light. They were gradually able to share with each other the most painful of stories, and they came to depend upon their fellow members for support. As facilitator, it was at times necessary for me to refocus the group to the issues at hand. An invaluable tool that I used in working with the group was humor. Many of the clients felt these to be the darkest moments in their lives, and the ability to see them laugh and feel optimistic toward a better future reflected the amount of self-determination each client held.

There were times during group interaction when I chose to disclose small portions of my life. Revealing pieces of myself helped the group to connect with me on a human level.

My interest has always been in the area of child welfare. The parents present in this group were representative of the resiliency found in survivors of abuse. Many of them have beaten the odds and are recognizing that what they endured as children was wrong. By taking a look at their life experiences and hardships, they are working toward changing the lives of their children. The Right Decision

At the end of one particular group meeting, a young woman in her early twenties stated that she had come to realize that she could depend upon herself. She did not need someone else to make her feel whole. She, all by herself, was sufficient. I do not know if it was something I said, a revelation she had on her own, or the reflection of another group member, but at that moment I knew the decision to be a social worker was the right decision. References

Crosson-Tower, C. (2005). Understanding child abuse and neglect. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Gershater-Molko, R., Lutzker, J., & Wesch, D. (2003). Project safecare: Improving health, safety, and parenting skills in families reported for, and at-risk for child maltreatment. *Journal of Family Violence*, 18, 377-385.

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