

***School Social Work Association  
of America***

***Ethical Guideline Series***

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**School Social Work  
and  
Group Work**

***By***

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The NASW Code of Ethics assumes that most social work services are provided on an individual basis. This is problematic for school social workers because many of their services are provided to groups of students, including classroom groups, group counseling, and pair therapy.

The purpose of the SSWAA ethical guideline series is to provide general principles for practice by school social workers. They are not intended to provide advice about specific situations nor should they be considered a substitute for ethical and/or legal consultation.

## Ethical Issues

- How should nontherapeutic groups (e.g., classroom groups) be differentiated from therapeutic groups?
- Are disclosures made during group sessions considered privileged communications?
- What pregroup preparation should group leaders provide to prospective members and their parents?
- Should students be required to participate in treatment groups or be given a choice?
- What norms should be established to clarify expectations about prosocial behavior between members?
- How and how often should group work services be evaluated?

## Current Realities

As more local education agencies adopt a Response-to-Intervention framework for comprehensive service delivery to students, school social workers are likely to be involved in providing more group work since up to 15% of youth are expected to be served in early intervention services (Batsche et al., 2006).

Group work services approximate the interpersonal milieu of the classroom and therefore give school social workers insight into how group members regularly interact with their peers and relate to authority figures. Thus, group work provides an excellent opportunity to intervene in the social microcosm that students recreate in their natural settings (Yalom, 1995).

Nontherapeutic groups, however, should be distinguished from therapeutic groups because the former have no reasonable expectation of privacy (Weinberg & Schneider, 2007). Nontherapeutic groups include, but are not limited to, classroom groups, service learning groups, and student leadership groups.

## Legal Parameters

The major legal issue is whether privilege is protected during therapy groups. The general rule is that the client is the “holder” of the privilege. Since group therapy involves more than one client, the issue arises as to whether confidential communications about one of the group participants will be privileged if later subpoenaed in a lawsuit. The question arises because state laws usually provide that if the participant voluntarily shares otherwise confidential information with a third party (e.g., other group members), the privilege is waived (Parker, Clevenger, & Sherman, 1997). Some states provide specific legal protection for privileged communication to occur during treatment groups, but this should never be assumed. Even the extent to which Confidentiality Agreements are enforceable by one participant against another will also depend upon state law. Finally, parents should give informed consent for the participation of their minor children.

## Professional Association Guidance

The NASW Code of Ethics (1999) warns all social workers that:

When social workers provide counseling services to families, couples, or *groups*, social workers should seek agreement among the parties involved concerning each individual's right to confidentiality and obligation to preserve the confidentiality of information shared by others. Social workers should inform participants in family, couples, or *group counseling* that social workers cannot guarantee that all participants will honor such agreements (1.07(f), emphasis added).

The Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (2006) identifies several elements of ethical practice applicable to social group work with students in schools, including:

1. Knowledge of and use of best practices that reflect the state of the art and knowledge and research evidence regarding social work with groups.
2. A basic discussion with prospective members of informed consent and an explanation of what group work offers and requires of members individually and as a group.
3. Maximizing member choice and minimizing coercive processes by members or worker to the extent possible. Emphasizing member self-determination and empowerment of the group.
4. Discussion of the importance, limits, and implications of privacy and confidentiality with the members.
5. Helping the group maintain the purposes for which it was formed, allowing for changes as mutually agreed upon.
6. Each member is given the help s/he requires within the parameters of the group's purpose, including individual meetings when appropriate.
7. Clarifying how members may be chosen for or excluded from the group.
8. Maintaining group records and storing them in a secure location.

The American Group Psychotherapy Association (2007) identifies several adverse conditions that may occur more often in group therapy than individual treatment. These include (but are not limited to):

- Verbal abuse (in member-to-member exchanges)
- Limited therapist control or influence over what occurs during and outside of sessions
- Poorly motivated peers who may have a limited capacity to work productively on treatment goals
- Greater potential for dual relationships with other members

The American Group Psychotherapy Association (2007) also notes that treatment monitoring prevents adverse outcomes for children and adolescents.

The American School Counselor Association (2004) identifies four specific tasks for group workers in schools:

- Screens prospective group members and maintains an awareness of participants' needs and goals in relation to the goals of the group. The counselor takes reasonable precautions to protect members from physical and psychological harm resulting from interaction within the group.
- Notifies parents/guardians and staff of group participation if the counselor deems it appropriate and if consistent with school board policy or practice.
- Establishes clear expectations in the group setting and clearly states that confidentiality in group counseling cannot be guaranteed. Given the developmental and chronological ages of minors in schools, the counselor recognizes the tenuous nature of confidentiality for minors renders some topics inappropriate for group work in a school setting.
- Follows up with group members and documents proceedings as appropriate.

The Association for Specialists in Group Work (1998), a division of the American Counseling Association, recommends that:

Group Workers employ an appropriate ethical decision-making model in responding to ethical challenges and issues and in determining courses of action and behavior for self and group members. In addition, Group Workers employ applicable standards as promulgated by ACA, ASGW or other appropriate professional organizations.

### **Recommendations to Guide Practice**

1. School social workers working with non-therapeutic groups should defer any sensitive issues that arise during discussions to a more appropriate setting for further dialogue.
2. School social workers should determine if privilege is protected for group therapy participants statutorily or judicially in their state. If it is not protected, group workers should routinely ask members to sign a developmentally appropriate Confidentiality Agreement that promises nondisclosure of other members' sensitive information.
3. School social workers should carefully screen out inappropriate members. Those who do not wish to provide mutual aid to their peers have no place in group therapy.
4. School social workers should also inform those with legitimate educational interests about who is in the group, being careful to share only the minimum information necessary to obtain permission for the student to miss class or other functions.

5. School social workers should coach group members about ways to discuss one's own group experience with vested third parties (e.g., parents or teachers) without disclosing the identities or information of other members.
6. School social workers should be sensitive to children and adolescents' greater susceptibility to peer pressure and should confront antisocial behavior whenever it occurs in groups.
7. School social workers should consider deviant group members who repeatedly violate major group norms to be "unresponsive" to group intervention and refer them for individual treatment (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2007).
8. School social workers should also be sensitive to those topics which are best addressed outside of the school setting (e.g., child sexual abuse).
9. School social workers who see clients concurrently in both group and individual modalities should be especially cautious about raising issues that originated in individual sessions later on in group sessions as this would be a violation of the client's confidentiality (AGPA, 2007)
10. School social workers should carefully document the sessions, subjects discussed, and interventions used so that vested third parties can determine if appropriate services have been provided to each participant.
11. School social workers should routinely and regularly evaluate the progress of students participating in counseling groups. Progress should be measured against the purpose of the group and the individualized goal(s) of each member.
12. School social workers should be familiar with current ethical decision-making models (e.g., Raines, 2008; Strom-Gottfried, 2008). They should employ the model consistently when confronting ethical dilemmas and seek appropriate ethical or legal consultation when necessary.

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