

## GROUP THERAPY WITH CHILDREN/ADOLESCENTS: THE FUTURE OF MENTAL HEALTH

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### Abstract

Significant global events, such as pandemics, wars, or divorce, have led to increased levels of stress and anxiety, particularly for children and adolescents, necessitating profound changes in psychological services. However, the demand for psychological support far exceeds the available services for individuals of all ages worldwide, but more so for children. Based on research, group therapy is a primary or supplementary form of treatment, presenting an effective solution. However, children are not traditional clients, they require unique methods of group treatment. In this presentation I introduce small intimate groups based on emotional interaction, influenced by the Emotion Focused Theory (Greenberg, 2002). The goals of these groups are to reduce stress and anxiety and increase a sense of control. To achieve these goals, we use various therapeutic methods, such as art therapy, bibliotherapy, therapeutic cards and games. These methods are necessary to engage children in the therapeutic process. A large body of studies indicated the validity of such groups. In this presentation I will show the results of some selected articles. Specifically, they showed positive outcomes on the reduction of stress, aggression, anxiety, traumatic symptom, and behaviour problems, and increase in self-confidence, social relationship, school adjustment, and school achievements. Moreover, these groups were as effective as individual therapy, and more effective compared to psychoeducational groups. These groups are evidence-based, effective and efficient with various populations.

**Keywords:** *Group, therapy, child, adolescent, research.*

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### 1. Introduction

Significant global events, such as pandemics, wars, or parent divorce, have led to increased levels of stress and anxiety, for many individuals of all ages worldwide, necessitating profound changes in psychological services. The demand for psychological support far exceeds the available services for individuals of all ages, and even more so for children. Based on recent research, group therapy is a primary or supplementary form of treatment, presenting an effective solution (Whittingham, Marmarosh, Malow, & Scherer, 2023). However, group therapy is way underused, mainly because psychologists lack training in group therapy. The situation for children and adolescents, in this respect, is even worse. Children present a particularly vulnerable population, but they are probably the last to receive psychological help. They can be easily reached in schools and community centers and yet, most psychologists prefer to work with an adult population, because children are particularly difficult clients, requesting trained therapists.

### 2. Objectives

1. *Introduce the Emotion Focused Mode* (Greenberg, 2002): Most group interventions with children are psychoeducational and cognitive-behavioral oriented. To address current difficulties of children, I suggest a relatively new model of intervention that focuses on emotions. These small intimate groups are mostly non structured, based on mutual disclosure of feelings, distress and difficult events, with strong provision of social and emotional support. The goals are to reduce stress, increase self-confidence and a sense of control.

2. *Introduce therapeutic methods*: To engage children in a therapeutic process we use various therapeutic methods, such as art therapy, bibliotherapy, therapeutic cards, and therapeutic games. Art therapy is more often used with children; however, the use of stories, poems, and photos are quite rare, and yet they are extremely useful. We use these methods according to the stages of group development,

the type of population and problems, and age. At the beginning stage we use them to increase a sense of safety, a language of feelings, and the provision of support. At the working stage we use them to increase self disclosure, deepen the processes of self-exploration, and the development of insight. At the termination stage we evaluate personal functioning in the group, summarise personal gains, and deal with separation (for more information see Shechtman, 2007).

3. *Demonstrating the validity of this group modality*: A large body of studies evaluated this group modality. The groups were conducted in schools and included a variety of children demonstrating emotional, social and behavioral problems. Groups usually contained 5-8 children and lasted between 12 to 15 45-minute sessions. Most quantitative studies used an experimental design based on questionnaires reported by self, teacher, or parent. In addition, we also collected qualitative data to help explain the results.

### 3. Method

For this presentation I selected several of our studies to demonstrate the achievements of these groups. Treatment of aggression was one of our focus. Results indicated the reduction of stress, aggression, anxiety (Shechtman, 2000; Shechtman & Ben David, 1999; Maixner-Schindel & Shechtman, 2020), traumatic symptoms (Shechtman & Mor, 2010), behavior problems (Maixner-Schindel & Shechtman, 2020). Friendship was another focus with excellent outcomes (Shechtman, Vurembrand, & Hertz-Lazarowitc, 1994). School adjustment and academic success was a third subject with very good results (Shechtman, Gilat, & Fos, 1999; Pastor & Shechtman, 2005). In addition, studies indicated that these groups were as edffective as individual therapy (Shechtman & Ben David, 1999) and more effective when compared to psychoeducational groups (Pastor & Shechtman, 2005).

### 4. Discussion

Quantitative methods were used along with questionnaires. They confirmed the rational of our method. When verbal responses were analyzed, results pointed to two major outcomes: a *sense of relief* ("I feel better after sharing", "I am less anxious", "I am less angry"), and improved friendship ("People like me more", "I have more friends", "I am less rejected") (Meixner & Shechtman, 2020). These results suggest that our goals to reduce stress and improve relationships were achieved. We tend to explain the outcomes by the cohesiveness established in the groups. Cohesiveness is a major therapeutic, as suggested in the literature (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020) and found as the most important factor in children's groups (Shechtman & Gluk, 2005).

### 5. Conclusions

Overall, the EFT modality works effectively with troubled children and youth, leading to many positive outcomes. However, the process is quite challenging, especially at the beginning stage of the group. The therapist must be knowledgeable of the child development theory so he/she can adjust the therapeutic methods to the age and problem of the participants. The therapist needs to demonstrate good functioning skills including self-disclosure, as self-disclosure of the therapist appears to be a crucial skill in child group therapy (Leichtentritt & Shechtman, 1998). The groups are safe, useful, and helpful, and should be used more frequently to increase child and adolescent mental health.

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