A F D A S
Adolescents Facing Divorce And Separation

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PURPOSE AND AIMS OF GROUP

Many adolescents have a difficult time coping with their parents divorce or separation. It may help adolescents to be part of a support group where they can share their experiences and feelings with others who are in a similar situation. AFDAS aims to provide a fun and relaxing environment where adolescents can enjoy themselves and discuss issues, concerns or feelings if they wish.

The purpose of the group is for participants to share similar experiences and feelings whilst having fun and socialising with new people. The group aims to utilize social learning theory throughout the sessions yet still provide a comfortable and friendly environment for it’s participants. By the end of the sessions, AFDAS hopes to minimise the negative effects of divorce or separation on the adolescent, raise a level of consciousness regarding parental divorce or separation and help participants realize that they are not alone and support is available. It often helps adolescents if they are aware that there are others in similar situation to themselves.

Divorce and separation are common occurrences and sometimes members of society seem to forget the impact that this has on children especially adolescents. Adolescents are at a crucial stage in their own personal development, where they are searching for answers as to who they are and where they fit into the world. This is hard enough in itself without the extra confusion and emotional turmoil involved with parental divorce or separation. This topic has been chosen as we felt it was an area where further support and comfort would be useful to adolescents during this period. In addition, it appears that there is an apparent lack of support groups for adolescents whose parents are divorced (or they have otherwise experienced situations involving divorce or separation).

WHY GROUP WORK?

Although group work is a popular method of intervention within social work practice, there has been little controlled research to assess its effectiveness (Compton & Galaway, 1999). Research reports have relied largely on anecdotal evidence, Corsini (1988; p. 34) provides us with an example, while he claimed that “I know of absolutely no really good research at all in group therapy” he uses the experiences of his clients to demonstrate that the group has been effective. Davis (1975) describes group work as an extension of our everyday interaction, he claims that as individuals we spend a lot of times in groups, at school, at work, in sporting clubs and so on. Because of this experience Davis claims that we are comfortable in this interaction, and thus group work provides a normal forum to tackle the presenting problem. Group work also provides the opportunity to reduce an individual’s sense of isolation, develop recreational skills and interests, release tension and anxiety (Davis, 1975), provide opportunity to rehearse new ways of behaving, provide help or assistance to other group members, and perform new tasks or take on new roles that they would find difficult in other settings (Andrews, 1995).

GROUP WORK AND ADOLESCENTS

During adolescent years the peer network plays an increasingly significant role as a source of company, support and behaviour validation (Pederson, 1996). A young person’s friends can also be effective in behaviour modification. The group experience provides an opportunity for an adolescent to interact with other young people who are also experiencing family separation. Because the experience of each member will be different, the opportunity is also available to learn new skills and new ways to approach a problem through discussion and
modeling and observation of other group member’s behaviour. Group work provides a young person with the opportunity to voice their experience of the divorce or separation in a supportive peer environment at a time when they may not feel comfortable discussing the issue with close friends or family or one on one with a professional.

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND BACKGROUND OF TOPIC**

A considerable amount of research has been conducted in recent years attempting to document the deleterious affects of divorce on adolescents. In 1991, it was estimated that over one million adolescents experience parental divorce each year. By 1995, almost one in five Australian adolescents will have experienced their parents divorce (Busey, 1996).

The dissolution of marriage is a time of crisis and adjustment for both the parents and adolescents. Each individual experiences divorce in many different ways. Studies conducted by Goldstein & Solnit (1994) found that marriage breakdowns resulting in divorce cause a great deal of emotional pain and social disruption for everyone involved. For adolescents, parental divorce is a painful experience that may influence their outlook on life in significant ways (Warren et al, 1995).

A group of ten adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16 years would be selected to discuss their experience of divorce and how it has impacted on their lives to date. We believe such a group will assist adolescents in dealing with the many emotional issues inherent in divorce and separation. The literature shows that the change of family structure is a very stressful period for children resulting in grief which may be long term. Such feelings and others accompanying them, like worry and insecurity need addressing if the child is to cope with life.

Whatever the reactions, we believe that a group of the following type can positively contribute in some way to these adolescents coping better with the divorce or separation experience. And finally, the facilitators decided that the underlying theoretical assumptions governing the group would be based on social learning theory

**SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY**

Perhaps the best accounts of social-learning theory can be found in the work of Albert Bandura. According to Bandura (1977), people are neither driven by inner forces nor buffeted by environmental stimuli. Rather, psychological functioning is explained in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants. Another distinguishing feature of social-learning theory is the prominent role it assigns to self-regulatory capacities. By arranging environmental inducements, generating cognitive supports, and producing consequences for their own actions, people are able to exercise some measure of control over their own behaviour. The self-regulatory function is created and occasionally supported by external influences.

Furthermore, the notion of an external source of influence is much broader than the concept of reinforcement in behaviourism. Bandura gives prominence not only to the reward and punishment of one’s own behaviour, but also to observation of the behaviour of others and the consequent effects of that behaviour. This learning by observation is called modelling. We learn what to do in a given situation by watching what others do and by copying them.

The self-generated sources of influence include the imagining of different courses of action and their expected effects (self-modelling) and the verbal rehearsal of the sequence of
anticipated behaviours. Imagining, anticipation and verbal rehearsal are cognitive processes, which have an important role in mediating the observable behaviour.

It can be seen that reinforcement operates at several levels: one’s own behaviour may be reinforced by the subsequent outcomes; the behaviour of another person may be reinforced, thereby providing vicarious reinforcement for one’s own imagined behaviour; or we may self-reinforce our own behaviour or intended behaviour. Bandura gives a prominent place to self-regulation of behaviour and to self-reinforcement. By setting standards for our own behaviour, we come to self-evaluate and consequently to acquire self-esteem. This acquisition of self-esteem appears to be increasingly important for adolescents facing divorce or separation, given that they are at risk of experiencing long-term emotional and behavioural problems due to the potential exposure to increased hostility and violence. Therefore, through interaction with other group members who are facing divorce or separation, adolescents can not only perfect or borrow coping strategies from other members but also engage in a validating experience. This validation, through having contact with peers who have had similar experiences, can serve to normalise their situation somewhat and decrease the likelihood of their experiencing long-term emotional and behavioural problems.

GROUP SETTING

For inclusion in the group applicants must be adolescents of 14-16 years, whose parents have separated or divorced within the past three years. They would have to volunteer, fill out an interest in-group form and take part in a pre-group interview, to determine their suitability for the group. The members of the group can be either male or female, however there will be one male and one female facilitator for the group. It was felt that this would be beneficial for the group as it is expected that there would be males and females in the group. Further, it would enable the adolescents to view a male-female relationship that is amicable. In addition, if they had any issues with one of their parents then they would be at least able to identify with one of the facilitators. There is to be a maximum number of 10 adolescents in the group, and a minimum of 8, not including the facilitator and the co-facilitator.

It was decided that the group would be run on a weekly basis at the Family Mediation Centre (close to public transport). If any of the adolescents had trouble getting to the sessions, they would be picked up in the agency bus. The sessions will ran for approximately an hour and a half, with two breaks. The sessions will start at 4.30pm and finish at 6.00pm, with a ten minute break at the beginning and in the middle of the group. It was also suggested that the group be run during spring, as in winter it will be dark when they leave and summer will be during their holidays.

OUTLINE OF EACH SESSION (including content and rationale)

As our group starts after school we will be providing food and drink at the beginning of each session. This provides a caring, sharing atmosphere to the group and brings the adolescents together as they help with the preparation and serving. In addition to this, each week (except the first introductory session) whilst eating we will have a round of good news and bad news. This involves each person, including the group facilitators, sharing one good event and one bad event that has happened in the last week. This begins each session in a gentle, non-threatening way, fostering trust and openness within the group. It also acts as a preparation for the group work session (Smith & Pennells, 1995).
Session One
The introductory session which is aimed to ‘break the ice’ and give the members of the group and the facilitators a chance to get to know one another. This is of particular importance at this pre-affiliation stage of the group where members are likely to be ambivalent and hesitant about the group process. Some of the activities in this session will include facilitators introducing themselves, discussing what the group wants to get out of the program. We will also make use of some ‘icebreaker’ games to get to know group members.

Session Two
Session two is aimed at helping the group to develop trust in one another. This is of particular importance in helping the group move from approach and avoidance behaviour to developing intimate relationships. Bonding, self esteem and trust games will all be used to achieve this.

Session Three
Session three will involve talking about and normalising feelings. This allows the adolescents to feel that they are not alone in how they feel whilst working toward our overall aim. This will also help develop intimacy between group members by developing a familial frame of reference. The main activity of this session will be to make a group mural expressing feelings.

Session Four
Session four is aimed at finding and developing positive role models for the adolescence. This is important in allowing the group members to develop an understanding that there are supportive and positive people available to them. Another activity for the session involves each member writing down positive and negative qualities about themselves. These will then be joined together with other members to help develop group cohesion.

Session Five
In this session, we will investigate any self-blame or guilty feelings experienced by the group members. This conversation will be opened by asking the question. Why do you think your parents divorced/separated? The aim of this session is to help the adolescents to stop feeling responsible or guilty about their parents’ split. We will help them to see that although they are part of a family, they are not necessarily responsible for the actions of other members of the family. We will also put forward the concept that there is no such thing as a ‘perfect’ relationship. To bring these ideas into reality, we will use role-play to demonstrate the different perspectives that may be felt by family members. This will include the group members playing the part of some of their family members, which will give them an idea of what is like to be in that person’s position. In this way, the adolescents may realize that feeling self-blame or guilt is unnecessary, as they are not blamed by others. Another aim is for the group members not to feel guilty about living their lives and having fun (while their parents may be struggling).

Session Six
The aim of this session is to look at both the negatives and positives of divorce, the intent being for the group members to recognize the positive aspects of their situation. During this session, the young people will brainstorm the positives and negatives of divorce/separation. Even if unable to think of positives, each group member will be able to benefit from positive aspects recognized by other participants. Another objective will be to look at turning some of the negatives into positives.

Session Seven
This session’s focus will be on communication skills and resources. We will begin to wind up the program, partly by introducing the group members to resources through which they can access ongoing support. One of these resources will be in learning how to communicate with their family effectively. This will include ‘I’ statements, whereby the young people will...
learn how to clearly articulate what they need and want, honestly and openly (an example common to this situation is which parent they want to live with). The families of these adolescents will obviously be the most vital support networks they can use, and thus it is important that the group members be able to talk to family members and voice their opinions and concerns. Again, role-play will be used so that the group members can voice their concerns within a ‘safe’ environment, which will make it easier for them to both recognise and be able to vocalise their issues.

Session Eight

This session will conclude the program. Group members will create a mural; similar to the one they did in Session 3. This will be an opportunity for the adolescents to again express their feelings about their situation, and be able to compare these to their feelings of five weeks ago. We will also explore the support networks available to them outside of their families.

There will be the opportunity for the group members to say anything they wish to about the program (or anything else). We will look at whether the aims of the program have been met, and both the group members and facilitators will be able to complete the program having expressed all they need to.

EVALUATION

Through the process of the group, outcomes can be determined. Evaluation of this group will indicate whether the goal or goals for this group were achieved. If other groups are held in the future, this evaluation will indicate whether the group successfully obtained their goals through the program or whether the program should be redefined in some or all areas. The benefit of small-scale qualitative research can lead to models being proposed for future social work intervention. The questionnaire also provides a record of participant’s feelings, hopes and achievements.

Evaluation of Group for Adolescents from Divorced or Separated Families

Performance Indicators

A. Attendance How many meetings did each member of the group attend

B. Assessment of individual record sheet (see example below)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Since the last group, what have you done or what has happened that was important?</td>
<td>(To be completed before a session starts)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are you hoping to achieve at this meeting?</td>
<td>(To be completed at the end of the session)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What have you achieved at this meeting?</td>
<td>(To be completed at the end of the session)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How do you feel about it?</td>
<td>(To be completed at the end of the session)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Groupworker’s notes (feedback)</td>
<td>(To be added between sessions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The impact of the social and therapeutic benefits to the participants can be measured qualitatively by the above questionnaire. The questionnaire will be administered after three sessions and then again at the end of the group.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: Sample letter of interest (expressed by potential group member)

The Family Mediation Centre is starting up a group for adolescents (aged 13-16 years) whose parents have, or are currently going through a divorce or separation.

The proposed group aims to provide an opportunity for young people to share their experiences and feelings in a safe and supportive environment, as well as to have fun with a new group of people.

If this sounds like a group for you, please answer the following questions and forward your application to the above address.

**PERSONAL DETAILS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Telephone:</th>
<th>Address:</th>
<th>Gender:</th>
<th>Age:</th>
<th>Culture:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. The proposed time for the group meetings is 4:30pm to 6:00pm weekly.  
   + Is this time suitable for you?  
   + If no, what other times would be convenient?

2. At present, no specific day has been set for these meetings. What weekday would best suit you?

3. The meetings will be held at the above address. Is this location convenient for you?  
   If no, perhaps alternative arrangements, such as car pooling, could be organised.

**PERSONAL INFORMATION REGARDING DIVORCE/SEPARATION**

4. Are your parents  
   a) Currently in the process of a divorce or separation? or  
   b) Currently divorced or separated? If yes, how long have they been divorced/separated?

5. Why do you wish to join such a group? (Please feel free to write as much as you like).
APPENDIX B: Sample parent/guardian consent form

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your son/daughter has expressed interest in participating in a new group, Adolescents Facing Divorce or Separation (AFDAS). This group is designed to provide adolescents with a safe and understanding environment in which they can share their experiences and feelings with other adolescents going through similar experiences.

The program will run for approximately 8 weeks, from September 13th to the November 8th. A total of 8 sessions have been scheduled, each running from 4.30pm to 6.00pm on a weekly basis (at present as specific weekday has not been set). Your son/daughter has not been selected for the program as yet, and will not be considered until your written permission is given.

As the client-counsellor relationship is based on trust, the group leader(s) will keep the information shared by the group members confidential, except in certain circumstances where the counsellor has an ethical responsibility to breach this trust. You will be notified in case of the following circumstances:
1. If your son/daughter reveals information about harming himself/herself or another individual.
2. If your son/daughter reveals information involving child abuse.
3. If your son/daughter reveals information about criminal activity.

By signing this form I give my informed consent for my son/daughter to participate in the group counselling. I understand that:
1. The group will provide an opportunity for members to explore their feelings and experiences of their parents/guardians’ divorce/separation, to share ideas, support each other, make new friends and have some fun.
2. Except in the above mentioned exceptional circumstances, the contents of group discussion will not be disclosed by the group leader(s)

Parent/Guardian ___________________________ Date __________
Parent/Guardian ___________________________ Date __________
Student ___________________________ Date __________

Please return to the above address. Thank-You.