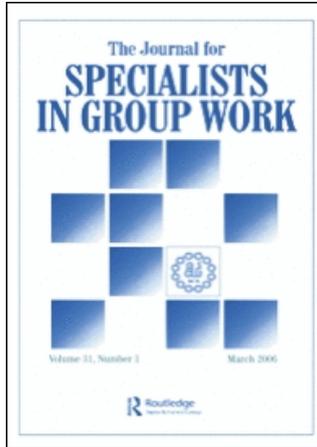


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### Using Creative Group Techniques in High Schools

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# Using Creative Group Techniques in High Schools

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*Groups in high schools that use creative techniques help adolescents express their emotions appropriately, behave differently, and gain insight into themselves and others. This article looks at seven different creative arts media—music, movement, visual art, literature, drama, play, and humor—and offers examples of how they can be used in groups for high school students.*

**Keywords:** *creative arts techniques; high school groups*

High school is an ideal environment for employing groups and using creative group techniques. Adolescents are in the midst of major transitions in cognitive and emotional development (Craig & Dunn, 2007). Most high school students desire to develop skills that facilitate growth and increase their level of competence in interacting with others (Erford, 2007). Therefore they are open to input, feedback, and group experiences that are developmentally appropriate and attractive. Thus group workers who are involved with high school students individually and collectively have a unique opportunity to assist these adolescents as they struggle to become young adults and balance independence and dependence. High school groups are an ideal medium to help adolescents grow and gain greater comfort with themselves, others, and the outside world, especially if they are innovative and creative in their focus (Gladding, 2003).

One way this goal can be accomplished is by using creative group counseling techniques and procedures. In high schools, these methods can be positive and productive. Furthermore, such procedures are economical and often are able to convey large amounts of information in a brief time frame. These techniques are also attractive and

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non-threatening means of uncovering or resolving issues. In addition, creative group procedures are effective in promoting cohesiveness and in helping group members gain insight in multiple ways (Gladding, 1997). Therefore, there is a strong rationale for employing such measures in high school groups regardless of the intervention format.

In this article, group techniques associated with the creative arts, particularly music, movement, visual art, drama, play, and humor, will be examined. Special attention will be paid to the appropriateness of each of these methods with high school-age students.

## CREATIVE GROUP TECHNIQUES

Creativity has been defined by Sternberg and Lubert (1996) as “the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original or unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful or meets task constraints)” (pp. 677–678). Creative group techniques include those that center on stimulating affect within adolescents while simultaneously offering them cognitive insight and behavioral observation. Thus students can learn in multiple and integrated ways from these group methods.

### Music in High School Groups

Music is popular with teenagers and is a particularly powerful source of social communication and social influence in high school (Ostlund & Kinnier, 1997). At its best, music can be life saving by increasing prosocial behavior. Some teens, for example, find music quite inspirational because it evokes “images of movies . . . in which movie characters triumphed over adversities” (Gfeller, 1988, p. 41). Popular music is both a reflection of and an exacerbating influence upon attitudes, values, and behaviors (Bushong, 2002). The rhythm and words of popular recording artists speak to adolescent youth in unique and powerful ways.

In addition, high school students are often interested in song writing and may wish to express themselves lyrically (Roscoe, Krug, & Schmidt, 1985). To foster a preventative and therapeutic process, counselors can work with adolescents using a number of song-writing techniques “including changing the words to familiar songs, filling in the blanks of edited familiar songs, vocal improvisation, adding new verses to known songs, parodying familiar songs, and using natural rhythms of speech as a starting point” (Goldstein, 1990, p. 119).

Most adolescents in groups wish to be in concert with themselves and others (Gladding, 2003). Music can be especially powerful in an adolescent group at its beginning or end. Select music can help set

an upbeat or sedate tone quickly when adolescents first enter the group room. Beginning a group through drumming is a "unique way to jump start conversations about group dynamics and each person's role in them" (Camilleri, 2002, p. 264), thus maximizing the brief time frame for groups. Likewise, select music or music activities can help instill in high school students a sense of closure and can promote integration (Plach, 1996).

Hodas (1994) reported using music in a mixed group of European American and African American male adolescents to help the group handle anger, learn coping skills, and appreciate universal truths about human nature. In this group, a variety of songs, some with themes of violence, were played. The group members came to realize through the music that when wrongs occur in society, actions other than revenge can be taken.

### **Movement in High School Groups**

Movement can be used preventatively and therapeutically with adolescents, too (Block, 2001). Preventative movement focuses on helping adolescents explore "the radical changes in body image and awareness [they are undergoing] and the transient feelings of depersonalization this engenders" (Emunah, 1990, p. 103). Movement also leads to the expression of creativity within adolescents in healthy and actualizing ways (May, 1975). Therapeutically, movement allows adolescents to express their conflicts in an active, behavioral form that is often easier for them to communicate. Thus, adolescents who are angry or confused can show their feelings in a safe and dynamic form by enacting them through movement that may be accompanied by music.

When adolescents enter a group, they often feel a great deal of tension. Their ability to feel relaxed in the group and to sense a structure that is supportive, safe, and predictable is crucial if members of the group are going to function well (Sandel & Johnson, 1996). In these situations movement can help alleviate tension, break down barriers, and energize the group as a whole in an expedient manner.

A movement exercise to start a group suggested by Mintz (1971) is known as the "hand dialogue." In this exercise, two individuals are partners. They are instructed to improvise dances with their hands with one person initially leading and the other following. They are encouraged to close their eyes to get the full impact of this nonverbal experience as they put their hands together. Participants may use their fingers, palms, or both in performing their dance. Likewise, they may use the front or back of their hands. The leader then instructs them to switch their positions as leader or follower after they have "danced" for about 60 to 90 seconds in one position. Talking is reserved

for after the dance. Time is set aside for discussions between pairs, and then the larger group, about feelings and emotions associated with what they have experienced and how such affect is expressed nonverbally.

A similar type of movement that comes at the start of many groups, but can be implemented during the working stage of the group as well, is "shadows." This exercise involves one person imitating another in a follow-the-leader style. Sometimes it is done in silence, sometimes with music. After the activity, participants talk about their experience in groups of two, four, eight, and then in the group as a whole. This type of movement increases awareness, gives the group a basis for sharing, and provides adolescents with familiar channels of communication.

### **Visual Arts and High School Groups**

The use of visual arts for adolescents varies depending on their age and their situation. Visual arts have been found to have potency in multiple domains. They have been applied to counseling with sexually abused adolescent girls (Brown & Latimir, 2001), juvenile sexual offenders (Gerber, 1994), mixed groups of teenagers (Rambo, 1996), adolescents in crisis (Appleton, 2001), depressed adolescents (Riley, 2003), adolescents in recovery from addiction (Friedman & Glickman, 1986), and even blind adolescents (Herrmann, 1995). The visual art experiences range from preventative to restorative and are particularly indicated when adolescents face a variety of challenges in high school, for example, conflict with peers, career exploration, or substance abuse (Kahn, 1999). Art materials used with adolescents include clay, paints, collages, and photo equipment.

Adding art to a high school counseling group may help students' developmental needs related to individuation, identity, cohesiveness, and concrete forms of connection with peers (Good & Rosal, 1999). Visual arts counseling work in a group fosters identity development, for example, by offering the adolescent a different medium for self-expression and self-exploration. Instead of limiting groups to traditional verbal exchanges, the addition of visual art techniques helps the group process become multidimensional and opens pathways for greater individual expression. For example, in a solution-focused group employing visual art techniques, the group members may depict unique individual strengths and identify ways to continue to develop these assets (Kahn, 1999). Furthermore, the visual arts may provide avenues for communication of thoughts and feelings and assist members in identifying initial and ongoing goals. In addition, the visual arts supply a means of viewing problems and issues from different

perspectives and stimulate creative thinking and new ideas. Finally, this art form provides an historical record of the group's progress.

An example of the use of the visual arts in a group is an exercise called *Balloons* (Dansby, 2003). In this experience each member of a group is given a sheet of paper with his or her name on it and a drawing of several balloons. Members pass their paper around the group, and other members of the group write out or draw a good quality about the person. Members continue passing the sheet around the group until it is returned to its owner. Similarly, the group experience entitled *Rainbow* depicts a brightly colored rainbow with every group member's name on a stripe (Dansby, 2003). The group leader then focuses on each member's strengths and gifts that contribute to the beauty and uniqueness of the group. Members call out strengths of fellow group members, which are written down or symbolically drawn on that person's stripe by the leader. This activity aids in addressing both the identity development of each member and the cohesion of the group in sharing the experience of identifying strengths of members. Both *Balloon* and *Rainbow* are excellent ways to end a group.

### Literature in High School Groups

Literature serves a useful function in helping adolescents realize possibilities and meaning for their lives. Biographies and autobiographies are especially relevant to this population. Such books as *Margaret Mead: A Life* by Jane Howard (1984), *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* by Edmund Morris (1979), *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* by Ben Carson (1991), *Hoyt Street* by Mary Helen Ponce (1993), or *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* by Robert Shelton (1986) are effective in giving teenagers insight into what they can be and how they can grow, thus enhancing developmental tasks of identity and individuation. Reading literature in a directed way assists teens in coping and thriving during their transition to adulthood. However, in order to obtain the most potential from this process, which is known as bibliotherapy, adolescents need to go through four distinct stages—identification, catharsis, insight, and universality (Kelsch & Emry, 2003). During the identification stage, adolescents intellectually identify with characters, situations, and settings found in various stories. Through catharsis adolescents become emotionally involved in the story and share the motivations, conflicts, and feelings of the characters with whom they have identified. The end of this stage leads to insight where adolescent readers apply the outcomes of the story to their own lives. Finally, adolescents reach the stage of universality where they realize that their own issues are shared with others and their empathy and sensitivity are

enhanced. In this final stage, a connection is made with the larger world outside of the immediate one in which adolescents live.

Groups are a popular setting for using literature. Creative writing exercises, called scriptotherapy, help heighten the use of language and emotion within a group (Wenz & McWhirter, 1990). These groups, which are usually open-ended, can also use literary works to generate a common bond at the start of their sessions and to stimulate the expression of emotions. For example, a poem may be read at the beginning of an adolescent group as a catalyst. Lessner (1974) described reading a nondidactic poem—such as one by Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, or James Dickey—to group participants after they have been through a series of warm-up exercises. Each person in the group is then asked to identify with an image in the poem and to talk about this image in regard to how it represents him or her. A teen might identify with a tree image and talk about how life seems rooted in family or school and yet branches out toward others.

In closing a group, participants may write couplets or lines and link them together in an interactive way that results in a collaborative poem (Yochim, 1994). Such a procedure requires involvement by everyone in a receptive (listening and reading) and expressive (creating) way (Mazza, 2003). The group experience is then terminated permanently, or for that session.

### **Drama in High School Groups**

Adolescents are often dramatic in their actions. Their participation in a number of ritualistic activities, such as sports or on stage, provides them with opportunities to play out parts of life in a highly charged, physical way and to keep their impulses in check.

Drama can be used to assist adolescents in gaining greater control over their lives, as well as in learning new roles. For instance, Shaffer (1996) has used a psychodrama technique based on Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* to help teens learn to become more aware of actions, consequences for themselves and others, and choices in what they do. This approach works on both an experiential and cognitive level. The adolescents first warm up (by reading or viewing a video version of *Hamlet*), and then examine the wants and needs of each character. A role-play follows in groups of three with one student playing the protagonist and the other two students enacting the roles of revenge and caution, action and inaction. In these role plays, which last for 15 minutes, each of the supporting actors tries passionately to persuade the protagonist to choose his or her point of view. After time is called, the protagonist shares with others in the group the thoughts and feelings that emerged in making a decision. The process is

repeated until each of the trio (and ultimately everyone in a group) has an opportunity to participate actively as the protagonist.

Overall, adolescents, especially those who are prone to act out, benefit from drama in groups because of the differentiated tasks they are given and the role structures provided within each session (Johnson & Eicher, 1990). Moreover, the use of drama in counseling serves as an additional example of the way creative arts speak the language of teenagers, offering means of communication to which they have become accustomed.

### **Play in High School Groups**

Play activities are natural for use with adolescents. Most counselors who work with this age group include play activities for their clients. Play with teenagers may center on the use of video games, basketball, volleyball, and games that involve eye-hand motor skills and a sense of achievement or teamwork.

Play can be used in groups in many ways, but one of the best and most structured is in the form of games. Games can make individuals in groups more aware of themselves and others. There are literally hundreds of games that may be utilized with adolescents. Some are "classics" and have been used for many years. Others are of a more recent vintage. Among the more classic games are some of the following. Mintz (1971) has devised a number of games based on Gestalt Therapy: In *name game*, two individuals carry on a conversation using only their names and no other words. In a variation of this game called *yes no*, they have a similar conversation, but in this case only the words "yes" and "no" can be used.

An interesting game created for high school freshmen is called *Frustration* (Teeter, Teeter, & Papai, 1976). In the original group game (and updated versions of it), entering students are exposed to some of the hazards of high school and the effects that chance circumstances may have on their lives. They may draw a card that imaginatively places them next to a popular or unpopular classmate at a school assembly. If they choose to think about such situations while playing the game, they have gained insight and understanding about themselves as well as their upcoming environment. In this way, games may foster rare moments of reflection on the typical developmental challenges of the adolescent years.

### **Humor in High School Groups**

Often adolescents want to have fun. Although such light moments may be enjoyed collectively, it is crucial to make sure that fun and

laughter are used positively in an adolescent group and that laughter is not the result of sarcasm or a mask for other negative ways of dealing with life situations. One way to do this is to work with librarians to keep popular and prosocial humor on display at schools such as books, periodicals, and even cartoons, including *Zits* or *LuAnn*.

Humor may have a positive effect on groups. Groups that last frequently contain a humorous component (Scogin & Pollio, 1980). Humor gives members a "shared history" and a bonding experience and helps them look forward to group sessions (Meggert, 2005). In addition, it eases tensions, distills hostility, and promotes creativity and positive communication (Murstein & Brust, 1985). Groups able to laugh at their failures will be able to take risks together, will be prone to communicate openly and without fear, will be sensitive to the membership needs of the participants, and will be open to change (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2002). Such constructive interaction with peers, as noted above, taps directly into the developmental needs of adolescents.

One way to work with teenagers in groups is to have them make up skits that humorously address subjects they have concern over, such as the environment, war, dating, and drugs. A type of cooperative humorous activity also involves videotaping skits and then replaying tapes to participants. Through such a combination of action and process involving humor, teenagers gain a sense of empowerment and empathy that gives them more freedom to operate constructively within societal boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

As this article has pointed out, creative group work techniques may be potent in working with adolescents. The reason is twofold: adolescents enjoy working in groups and creative group counseling techniques are appealing to teens. Often high school students are engaged in activities that involve the creative arts such as music, movement, drawing, drama, play, and humor. Therefore, coupling group work with creative techniques is a relatively easy, attractive, and familiar format for adolescents.

Counselors may work with high school groups using creative techniques to help group members gain insight into themselves, express their emotions, and behave in different and healthier ways. For instance, music may help teens realize that there is a tone and rhythm to life, while movement techniques can help energize a group and break down barriers between members. Likewise, drawing may give adolescents a new, tangible perspective on how they are experiencing

life and others. Literature may similarly promote identity and connectedness with others outside of the adolescents' immediate environment, while drama provides a forum in which high school students can express themselves and receive feedback. Likewise, play may help adolescents gain experience through taking on different roles. Finally, laughter increases teens' positive interactions with the world and others. While data are not yet available to support each of these techniques as they relate to group outcomes, they do provide means to connect and engage students in powerful ways.

With such variety and versatility, creative group techniques are ideal to use with adolescents. Their potential is great and their power dynamic as they enhance flexibility by meeting students' developmental tasks pertaining to individuation. Few other ways of working with high school students in a group setting provide such an opportunity for growth, good will, and positive results in such a time-effective manner.

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