

Solving Problems Together: The SPT Model for Group Counseling

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A comprehensive school counseling program supports the academic mission of schools through fostering academic, career, and personal/social development of students. School counselors provide a range of services designed to facilitate this development, including individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom guidance (American School Counselor Association, 2003). With limited amounts of time, however, the use of group counseling increases the potential impact of the school counselor on the school environment. Since children interact daily in groups, the interaction and cooperation with other students in the group counseling environment reinforces daily living skills and helps prevent future social problems.

Group counseling is imperative in the school setting; however, many school counselors struggle with teaching students problem-solving skills while simultaneously serving the purpose of the group. Students struggle to problem-solve and are unable to apply new knowledge or skills to different settings. Counselors are seeing the same students being referred to them for different problems because students cannot apply what they learned in the group setting to real-life. This article describes an innovative group counseling model, referred to as Solving Problems Together (SPT), that not only enables students to collaboratively solve their own current problems but also empowers them to begin solving future problems.

SPT Overview

Solving Problems Together (SPT), based on the philosophy of problem-based learning (Barrows, 2000), provides the opportunity for students to increase critical thinking and problem-solving skills while simultaneously working towards a solution for

his/her presented problem (Hall, 2004). Students work collaboratively to uncover solutions to a common problem and practice skills that are discovered through independent research.

Group counseling sessions are structured according to an adapted problem-based learning model: data identification, questions, hypotheses, learning issues, and resources (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Barron et al., 1998; Barrows, 2000; Mennin, Gordan, Majoor, & Osman, 2003; Mergendoller, Bellisimo, & Maxwell, 2000; Schmidt, 1993; Vernon & Blake, 1993; Wood, 2003). Students review a problem statement presented by the counselor and identify facts from the statement. Students devise a list of open-ended questions surrounding each fact and then discuss possible answers (hypotheses) for each of the questions. Key questions (learning issues) that must be answered in order to solve the problem are identified and possible resources are listed. Students then research each of the learning issues using identified resources. Once answers are found, each question is discussed during group counseling, and skills discovered through the research are practiced. The process repeats itself until all learning issues are answered and the problem has been resolved.

The SPT Model with Victims of Bullies

The application of the SPT model has the potential of serving various student needs in group counseling. The following section will describe the author's use of the SPT model with a group of five seventh-grade students who were victimized by bullies.

Planning for SPT

In designing a group based on the SPT model, the author composed a realistic problem statement that related to students in the group. In order to compose a successful

problem statement, the counselor considered a) objectives for the group, b) evaluation of the group, and c) a realistic problem scenario that related to students. The objectives for the group were identified as 1) students will identify, apply, and practice effective responses to name calling; and 2) students will identify, apply, and practice effective responses to physical aggression. Evaluation of the group included a pretest and posttest that asked students to identify strategies for responding to name calling and physical aggression. The problem statement was then developed by utilizing a real world scenario and incorporating items from the objectives. The author composed the following case specific to bullying:

John is frustrated and sad because students tease him at school. Some call him names, while others push and shove him. He's tired of being a victim of bullies. This problem statement incorporated information from the two objectives (name calling and physical aggression) and was realistic for a seventh-grade student who was being victimized at school.

After the problem statement was written, the author went through the SPT model to anticipate students' questions and hypotheses. These replies were anticipated to ensure that confusing or unnecessary information was removed from the problem statement and that questions posed would lead students to the objectives (see Appendix A). The author then devised the following anticipated schedule of events for eight counseling sessions:

1. The pretest will be administered. Students will introduce themselves and go over group rules. Students will review the problem statement and identify facts. If time allows, students will begin asking questions for each fact.

2. Students will review the problem statement and facts listed during the previous session. Students will identify open-ended questions (who, what, when, where, why, how) for each fact and begin forming hypotheses.
3. Students will review problem statement, facts, and questions. Students will continue to form hypotheses for each question.
4. Students will review the case, including facts, questions, and previous hypotheses. Students will determine at least two learning issues that they want to research and answer. Students will identify resources to help them answer these learning issues. Students will utilize resources to answer one learning issue as homework.
5. Students will discuss findings with group. Students will practice skills that were identified in the resources. Students will research the second learning issue as homework.
6. Students will again discuss new findings with group. Students will practice skills that were identified in the resources. Students will further research learning issues as homework.
7. Students will discuss any new findings with group and practice skills.
8. Students will practice skills and discuss how they will continue to use these skills. The posttest will be administered.

After this schedule was developed, the author was then ready to implement the SPT model in group counseling.

SPT Group Counseling

Presenting the Problem. During the first session, the author wrote the problem statement on a long sheet of bulletin board paper.

John is frustrated and sad because students tease him at school. Some call him names, while others push and shove him. He's tired of being a victim of bullies. A student read the statement to the group. The author then asked the group if a similar situation had ever happened to them. After a brief discussion, students identified the facts from the problem statement while the author listed these on paper.

Facts:

1. John is frustrated and sad because students tease him at school.
2. Some students call him names.
3. Some students push and shove him.
4. He's tired of being a victim of bullies.

Questioning. After identifying facts in the problem statement, students asked open-ended questions for each of the facts that were listed. The words “who, what, when, where, why, how” were written on the paper to encourage them to ask open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions. All questions were written.

Questions (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How):

- 1a. Why do students tease John?
- 2a. Why do students call him names?
- 2b. What names do students call him?
- 2c. Where is he at when students call him names?
- 2d. When do students call him names?
- 2e. What can John do when they call him names?

- 3a. Why do students push/shove him?
- 3b. When do students push/shove him?
- 3c. What can John do when they push/shove him?
- 3d. Where are the teachers when they push/shove him?
- 4a. What can he do to not be a victim of bullies?
- 4b. Why is he a victim of bullies?

Hypothesizing. After students had listed questions for each of the facts, they then began hypothesizing possible answers for each of the questions. Students were instructed to consider their own experiences with bullying and strategies that they had tried in the past. During this time, the counselor utilized the counseling skills of paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, and summarizing (Rogers, 1951) as students shared their own experiences with bullying.

Hypotheses:

- 1a. he's smaller than them, he's smarter, he's nice
- 2a. they don't like him, they are jealous, they are mean
- 2b. goober, nerd, cry baby
- 2c. outside, hallway, cafeteria
- 2d. changing classes, lunch time, recess/break
- 2e. yell at them, ignore them, tell the teacher
- 3a. they are mean
- 3b. when the teacher is not there
- 3c. ignore them, tell the teacher, push/shove back
- 3d. not around, not paying attention

4a. tell the teacher, tell his parents, tell the principal

4b. they are mean and he is nice

Identifying Learning Issues. The group reviewed the problem statement again and looked over the list of questions and hypotheses. The author asked, “Of all of these questions, which of these do we have to answer in order to solve the problem?” Students identified one main question, but with the help of the author broke this question down into two parts. These questions were written and then prioritized in order of importance to the group members.

Learning Issues:

What can John do to not be a victim of bullies?

1. What can John do when others call him names?
2. What can John do when others push/shove him?

Locating Resources. Students were then asked “Where will you find the answers to these questions?” Students were encouraged to identify multiple resources, including people as well as written material.

Resources:

Teacher	Counselor	Principal
Parents	Books	Internet
Youth Leader	Friends	Coach

Learning Issue #1. The first learning issue was assigned as homework. The author provided multiple books on the topic of bullying along with print-outs from the Internet (see Appendix B). Students chose at least one book or print-out to take home and also agreed to interview at least one person. Using these resources, students researched the

question, “What can John do when others call him names?” At the beginning of the next session, students reviewed the problem statement and then discussed answers to the first learning issue. Strategies that were discovered through reading and interviews were written on the board. After all students shared what they had learned, the group members practiced those skills. For example, in several of the books the main character responded assertively when he/she was being called names. Therefore, students practiced responding assertively through role-play.

Learning Issue #2. After practicing these skills, the group then looked at the second learning issue, “What can John do when others push/shove him?” Again students were instructed to take home at least one book or print-out and interview at least one person. At the beginning of the next session, students reviewed the problem statement and answers to the first learning issue. Students then shared their findings for the second learning issue and practiced skills discovered in the readings or through interviews.

Continuous Research and Practice. During the last two sessions, students continued to take books home to further research learning issues. Sessions were spent practicing skills and role-playing scenarios that could happen in the school. A final list was made that included strategies for responding to name calling and physical aggression.

Advantages of the SPT Model

The SPT model empowers students to take charge of their problems. Students learn critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and transference skills (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Barron et al., 1998; Barrows, 2000; Mennin, Gordan, Majoor, & Osman, 2003; Mergendoller, Bellisimo, & Maxwell, 2000; Schmidt, 1993; Vernon & Blake,

1993; Wood, 2003). The process forces students to analyze their own situations and then locate resources for help. SPT also teaches them the problem-solving process step-by-step and enables them to apply new knowledge to similar situations in the future.

In the group mentioned above, students were also intrinsically motivated to solve the problem statement because the problem was real to them. Amazingly, students not only completed all homework assignments, but went above and beyond the requirements. Students took home three to four books/print-outs and interviewed multiple adults. They were excited about what they had learned and encouraged other students to try new skills that were discovered in the readings or through interviews.

Conclusion

In the previous example, students were constantly engaged in the learning process. They were solving a real problem and learning how to utilize resources. The author merely acted as a facilitator by questioning, encouraging, and serving as a resource for students. Students, however, mastered the skills needed for effectively responding to students that bully, and they felt empowered by their own discoveries.

Many school counselors utilize group counseling as an efficient tool for impacting the school environment. The SPT model can make that process even more efficient by teaching problem-solving and critical thinking skills while simultaneously working on a specified problem. Based on the methods of problem-based learning, SPT not only promotes the academic, career, and personal/social development of students but also emphasizes the academic missions of schools.

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Appendix A

Objectives:

- Students will identify, apply, and practice effective responses to name calling.
- Students will identify, apply, and practice effective responses to physical aggression.

Problem Statement:

John is frustrated and sad because students tease him at school. Some call him names, while others push and shove him. He's tired of being a victim of bullies.

Desired Learning Issues:

1. What can John do when someone calls him names?
2. What can John do when someone pushes/shoves him?

Facts of Problem Statement:

1. John is frustrated and sad because students tease him at school.
2. Some students call him names.
3. Others push/shove him.
4. John is tired of being a victim of bullies.

Possible Questions for Each Fact:

- 1a. Why do students tease him?
- 1b. How do students tease him?

- 2a. Why do they call him names?
- 2b. Who calls him names?
- 2c. When do they call him names?
- 2d. Where is he when they call him names?
- 2e. What does John do when they call him names?
- 2f. What can John do to make them stop calling him names?
- 3a. Why do they push/shove him?
- 3b. Who pushes/shoves him?
- 3c. When do they push/shove him?
- 3d. Where is he when they push/shove him?
- 3e. What does John do when they push/shove him?
- 3f. What can John do to make them stop pushing/shoving him?
- 4a. Why is John a victim of bullies?
- 4b. What can John do to stop the bullies?

In going through the questions section of the SPT Model, questions 2f, 3f, and 4b are all similar to the desired learning issues. The problem statement will lead students to ask questions that will then lead to the objectives.

Appendix B

Resources for SPT Model with Victims of Bullies

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Verdick, E., & Lisovskis, M. (2003). *How to take the grrrr out of anger*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

Watkins, C.E. (2000). *Dealing with bullies and how not to be one*. Retrieved November 1, 2004, from <http://www.ncpamd.com/Bullies.htm>

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