

Long Island Institute  
for Group Work With  
Children and Youth  
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# HUH ?!?

a newsletter about working  
with children and youth in groups

Volume 2, Number 4.

Fall - 1997

## From the Editor

Recently Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve social policies and programs published a study (see Book Briefs in this Issue) that promotes a "youth development" approach to working with adolescents. "Youth development" is a strengths-based and preventive approach, a counterforce to deficit models that target at-risk youth only.

The seven developmental supports and opportunities highlighted by P/PV are:

1. A Sense of Safety; 2. Challenging and Interesting Activities; 3. A Sense of Belonging; 4. Social Support from Adults; 5. Input and Decision Making; 6. Leadership; and 7. Volunteer and Community Service

In their latest newsletter (Spring 1997) P/PV highlighted the study and brought group work into the mix in the following way:

*"Social Workers trained in "group work" used to staff (youth serving) agencies, working with individual kids, running group activities, trying to attract kids in gangs from the street corners - succeeding with some, failing with others. Now, social work education focuses more on clinical work, and a new generation of "youth workers" from many different backgrounds staff these safe havens for youth in hundreds of low income communities."*

What does all of this tell us? The arena for group work education and training has broadened. It is a widely accepted view that most schools of social work have missed the mark in teaching group work in the past few decades. The curricula may have fallen, however the methodology and tradition remain. The question is how to get it out there so that those youth workers, regardless of their educational background might benefit from its rich tradition.

*Andy Malekoff, Editor*

The Mission of the Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children and Youth is: To promote and enhance effective group work practice with children and youth through advocacy, education, and collegial support. **HUH???** is the Institute's quarterly newsletter dedicated to providing information, inspiration and support for anyone working with young people in group settings.

## From the Steering Committee

Adapting to life in a new school can be an overwhelming experience for newly arrived immigrant children. Feelings of frustration, confusion and anxiety are not at all uncommon. The inevitable detours that follow one's search for belonging may lead to withdrawal from classroom activities, isolation from peers, and/or acting out behaviors such as fighting.

In one of the elementary schools where I work as a prevention counselor I was referred a number of newly arrived Haitian students. They were identified as having behavioral problems in and out of the classroom. I was considering forming a group of these students. As a first step I met with each of them individually to get to know them and to learn about their needs and hear their perceptions of the stated problem. One student who was identified as always fighting talked about the frustration of being picked on and called names in the classroom. She said that her only recourse was to fight to get them to stop. Another student reported sadly, "no one wants to play with me." Others said that homework was a problem because they could not follow the directions. They added that there was no one at home who speaks English well enough to help them. What these students seemed to have in common was trouble coping with their new environment. I then presented them with the idea of forming an acculturation group.

In the first meeting there was anxious anticipation about what the group was all about and what they would do together. First we took some time to get to know one another. They seemed especially pleased and relieved when they discovered that I speak Creole. They asked me if I could conduct the group in Creole. This enabled the members to voice their concerns and needs more fully with all of the fullness and subtlety of their native language.

As the group progressed the students started to feel more comfortable in expressing their feelings about being left out, their confusion about the school system, and their desire to belong. They learned that they could find comfort,

» » » *Continued on Pg. 2.*

**SPECIAL NOTE:** One of the regular features of this newsletter is FROM THE INSIDE-OUT. In this column we would like to feature group members' experiences and reflections about their involvement in groups. We invite readers to send materials to us for consideration. All submissions will be carefully reviewed. This is a great opportunity to project young people's voices. For example in this issue we are re-printing a middle school group's letter to their teachers, an attempt to increase understanding in the school community. Submissions should be in the neighborhood of 500 words. Publishing an article is a great way to help build a sense of competence among your young group members.

We also invite you and your group members to submit poetry or brief reflections of 50 words or less for consideration in CHAOS CORNER.



## Looking Back...A Reminiscence Bidding Farewell to THE Group of My Life by Kurt Sonnenfeld

*This is the fourth  
feature in a  
continuing series.*

There are a number of reasons that I was drawn to group work. One of the major reasons was my own involvement as a group member. For me there was one group which was central to my life - the group which was particularly meaningful. Separation from such a group can be traumatic, leaving one with feelings of unease, guilt and immobilization. I had such an experience, under trying circumstances, but one where the indigenous leader in the group helped us to deal effectively with the separation process. Upon reflection his role looms even larger.

When I arrived in Paris, France from my naive Vienna as a beginning teenager, a youth group was formed with children whose parents were among the emigres from Austria who were politically active there, some of whom I had known and some who were new to me. The group met regularly for discussion, social get-togethers, weekend outings and summer residence in a youth hostel. We spent almost a year together in a war-time children's home and, just before the fall of Paris we traveled (fled) from the north to the southern non-occupied zone of France, to the small town of Montauban (where incidentally, group work's Gisela Konopka also took refuge). When I was in

Montauban my father joined my mother and me after fleeing from a French internment camp for "enemy aliens," refugees from Hitler but yet so classified. This family reunion meant that we could use our previously obtained American entry visa to leave France and look ahead to a rosier future. But for me it also meant paying a price - leaving the youth group.

The group connected me with my past in a country that was strange to me in many respects, even outrightly rejecting of me. It also was the first group with which I could identify wholeheartedly, that recognized my contributions, helped me to develop new strengths and guided me in the growing up process. The group represented the only consistency, regularity, and security in a broader context of crumbling outer conditions. In a time of crisis common experiences assume extra meaning to group members, yet for me it finally meant leaving all of this - saying farewell to the group, my fellow members, and a part of myself. There was great apprehension on my part, almost a fear of having to face future realities without the group.

The culminating impact of the separation occurred at the anniversary celebration for the group's summer hostel stay, when the group's chairperson

pointed to the importance of the occasion by referring to my leaving within a few days. He talked about what I had meant to the group, engaging the others in the reality of the loss, and made the group members aware of the fact that from then on there would be more separations, more members leaving. By taking the time in the group to address my leaving, he helped me to take the next step in my life's journey. This meaningful separation enabled me to experience myself as an individual in a way that I hadn't before the group. The importance of a good ending, and the role of the worker (indigenous leader in this case) in helping to make this happen is something I learned from this experience.

My separation from the group was made somewhat smoother later on when, at the last moment, some more of the group members, without having known it previously, were slated to go the same route as I, to the United States or Mexico. Others unfortunately perished.

Although a number of the group members were able to be together in the US, the group which at one moment in history was so very dear to us, continued only in loose form afterward (a la an alumni group). Most of us joined other groups since our needs and

interests at that time took on other forms, a very natural phenomenon. Nevertheless from time to time we called one another to reminisce.

From this early group experience I learned that it is okay to let go of even very intimate groups, whether of a friendship, social or political nature and to separate from them if we have outgrown them or if they have become dysfunctional. But I must admit that I never thought that this could or would happen to the group of my life.

*Kurt Sonnenfeld, Ed.D. is a consultant to the Forest Hills Community Center in Forest Hills, New York.*

## OOPS!!

My apologies to readers for the light green print in the last issue of the new/letter. It was a shade or two lighter than we had anticipated. It was a real challenge for me to get through the newsletter. I tried squinting, sunglasses, reading in the dark...but nothing seemed to help. (I didn't try an ultraviolet light. Hmmm). Lime is a nice summer color but it was frustrating. I think that I started to hallucinate at one point. I hope that you all got the black and white copies we sent to you for a smoother read. If not, let me know.

A.M./Editor

## From the Steering Committee

(Continued From Page 1.)

support and guidance from one another. The girl who often fought when teased was confronted by two group members in her class. They helped her to find alternatives to dealing with the taunting and managing her anger. The members decided to monitor one another's problematic behavior and attempts to cope outside of the group and to bring their observations and experiences back into the group for discussion and further exploration. This became an important part of the group contract as they became

increasingly tuned in to one another, what they needed to improve, and how it was going.

As the group progressed the members made friends and improved their academic as well as social functioning. They reported feeling good about positive reinforcement received from teachers for improved behavior in the classroom and were delighted when they made friends not only with other Haitian students but with someone of another nationality.

The group allowed the students to address their needs and

release their frustration in a safe place. The members had an opportunity to experience mutual aid and to become self-motivated as they gradually came to understand how the school system worked.

For me, also an immigrant from Haiti, the group provided me with an opportunity to reach back and leap forward, giving a new group of newly arrived youngsters a chance to move ahead on firmer ground.

☞ Roseline Felix

**FROM THE INSIDE-OUT**

This past year I worked with a group of seventh and eighth grade students whose parents had been divorced. They spoke about the pressures that they experienced at home and in school. Among these were frustration about keeping up their grades and the many people that they felt were disappointed in them, including parents, teachers, and themselves. I often felt as they did - sad, overwhelmed, and helpless. I wondered if any of this could be changed. As the group prepared to separate at the end of the school year the members decided to write a letter to the teachers describing life from their unique point of view. Composing the letter turned out to be a wonderful way to end the group. It appeared in the final addition of the school newspaper and read as follows:

**DEAR TEACHERS:**  
*Understand Our Stress*

*We have been meeting as a group since November discussing various topics concerning Middle School students. One topic came up about how stress affects us. We wanted you, our teachers, to know what goes on in our lives. We would like you to understand all the pressures we feel. When we fool around in class, come in late and don't hand in homework, we understand why you get upset. But it is not always just another homework excuse! We have many teachers all expecting different things. We are often involved in activities outside of school (some are not our choice), and sometimes we have serious family problems to deal with. Then added to this pressure, we also have to keep up with our social lives and you know how important that is!*

*It does matter how you feel about us, even though we may not show it. It is scary to enter a classroom when we think you do not like us. A teacher that lets us know s/he cares, helps us to do better in the class. It is easier for us to concentrate when we feel you are on our side. Believe it or not, we really do care about*

*how we do in school.*

*As middle school students, we are embarrassed easily. If we get a low grade, we would really appreciate it if you would not share it with the rest of the class. We admit that we have trouble seeing you as people; we think that you also don't see us as people, but as "students." When we do not do well in your class it is not because we do not want to. A lot of things interfere with our studying.*

*In conclusion, please do not give up! Hang in there with us! We appreciate it.*

I am hoping to continue this idea next year in one of my groups. If it gets printed earlier in the year we can ask for teacher reactions and writings about life from a teacher perspective as well. An ongoing dialogue can be developed between students and teachers in this new "group" column. I'll keep you posted...

✉ *Joanne Ditchik-Stutz*



**Time to Renew**

This is the last issue of the current subscription year. Winter 97/98 will mark the third publication year of HUH?!?. We thank you for your support. We hope you will continue to find HUH?!? useful. To renew your subscription, please complete the coupon below and return it to us with your check for \$5.00 payable to:

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**Project Coordinator:** Andrew Malekoff

**Time  
to  
Renew**



**chaos corner  
Decision Making**

With teeth gritted, the group groped and grappled until they gradually discovered common ground.

To gain a grip on the grueling task ahead, they agreed to grind coffee to be served with granulated sugar in green cups.

**by Andrew Malekoff**

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## TIPS For: ROLE PLAYING

This month's "TIPS for:" column is devoted to the use of role playing as an activity in group work. Role playing can be a valuable tool for practicing new skills, exploring complex issues from new angles, problem-solving, and developing empathy.

**TIP:** Role playing should be more than a skit created for entertainment value. (Although there's nothing wrong with having fun role playing). It is important to prepare group members by explaining the roles to be enacted, provide some direction as to how they are to be carried out, and to make clear what is to be taking place. Debriefing at the end of the role play is critical. Otherwise group members may suffer from "character hangover" and take the roles beyond the group. You must always be conscious of allotting time to debrief and conclude without rushing through this important transition.



## BOOK BRIEFS



**Safe Havens: The Contributions of Youth Organizations to Healthy Adolescent Development.** Michelle Alberti Gambone and Amy J.A. Arbreton. Public/Private Ventures, One Commerce Square, 2005 Market Street, Suite 900 Philadelphia, PA 19103, April 1997, 89 pages, \$7.50, softcover.

*Safe Havens*, a research study of 15 youth organizations across the United States, advocates for program evaluation that focuses on how well these programs provide developmental experiences for youth. The study argues for a universal approach that targets all youth versus one that is remedial and addresses only at-risk youth. The study concludes that "the developmental benefits provided by these organizations seem to accrue to all youth - regardless of poverty or risk profiles." Group workers are encouraged to read this meaningful and well conceived study. As you will discover good group work is at the heart of the "youth development" approach - the two are inseparable.

**HUH?!?** is the quarterly newsletter of the Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children and Youth, a program of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center; 480 Old Westbury Road; Roslyn Hgts., NY 11577-2215; Phone: (516) 626-1971 •• Fax: 626-8043; **Executive Director:** Marion Levine, ACSW; **Director of Program Development and Newsletter Editor:** Andrew Malekoff, ACSW. **Newsletter Design and Layout:** Jane E. Meckwood-Yazdpour. **Participating Agencies:** Youth Directions and Alternatives, Huntington; Herricks School District; Sanctuary Project, Huntington; Plainedge School District; L.I. Chapter/Assoc. for Advancement of Social Work With Groups; L.I. Crisis Center, Bellmore. Copyright September 1, 1997/USA.

## EVENTS AND RESOURCES

☑ **Forthcoming Workshop:** Spring, 1998. Sponsored by the Long Island Institute for Group Work with Children and Youth. The tentative theme is: **Beyond Labelling...Promoting Inclusion for Isolated and Alienated Youth Through Group Work.** Issues of inclusion and exclusion will be addressed as they relate to several groups of youngsters including children in special education, gay and lesbian youth, immigrant youth, youth with serious emotional disturbances, and so on. This will be an all-morning workshop to be held at North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center in Roslyn Heights, New York from 8:30-12:30. DATE TO BE DETERMINED AND ANNOUNCED IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF HUH?!?

☑ **Professional Training:** October 15, 1997 - "Behavior Management - Time-Out for the Teachers". November 5, 1997 - "The Importance of Children's Emotions: What We Are Learning from the New Research". Workshops are held on Wednesday mornings and are presented by Sandy Wolkoff, nationally known lecturer and trainer and Coord. of the Lindner Early Childhood Training Institute of NSC&FGC. Call (516) 626-1971 ext. 3009 for registration information. Fee for each workshop is \$20.00.

☑ **Video Tape of the "A Sense of Alienation or Belonging: Building Bridges through Group Involvement"** conference is now available. The 23 minute video is available to HUH?!? subscribers for \$15.00 and \$20.00 for non-subscribers. It is ideal for motivating the development of new groups in your agency and/or community. The video depicts an intergenerational, cross-cultural meeting using an integrated large- and small-group format to address the need for more and better groups for young people. Make checks payable to the Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children & Youth/NSC&FGC and send to NSC&FGC; Attn: Jane Yazdpour; 480 Old Westbury Road; Roslyn Heights, NY 11577-2215.