

LONG ISLAND INSTITUTE FOR GROUP WORK WITH CHILDREN & YOUTH

HUH?!?

a newsletter about working with children and youth in groups

Volume 5. Number 1.

❖ Fifth Anniversary Issue ❖

Winter 2000

From the Editor

This issue marks the fifth anniversary of HUH?!? I asked members of the steering committee of the Long Island Institute for Group Work with Children and Youth to write briefly on a subject of their choosing. The formation of the Institute is a grass roots effort. There has been only one criterion for membership: commitment to promoting good group work for children and youth. This open group is composed of experienced group work practitioners and scholars and beginners to the field, three generations working in a variety of settings. We trust that several of these voices will speak to you and hope that this anniversary issue will give you our valued readers a lift to stay the course. My own contribution follows.

Take the Path

With a Heart

On the surface two of people's greatest fears about working with groups are opposites: 1. the group will be chaotic, spinning wildly out of control and 2. the group will be silent, doing nothing and going nowhere. Closer examination reveals a commonality: something is happening (or not happening) that the group

worker feels is out of his or her hands. But is it? And if so, so what?

Anyone who has worked with kids in groups knows that they tend to look different than grown ups in groups. There is often more noise and movement, greater decibel and motion unpredictability. Anyone whose frame of reference or supervisory directive finds them trapped in a focused-discussion-only box is likely to suffer from perpetual frustration.

Periods of prolonged silence occur in groups of all ages. Group worker discomfort during quiet spells may be increased by the anxiety provoking belief that nothing of value is happening. However, such a conclusion is no more valid than believing that during chaotic moments the group is aimlessly unraveling.

What I've come to know about kids' groups is the more they look and sound and feel like what natural groups of kids look and sound and feel like the better. In other words it is really okay (preferable) when our groups resemble natural groups of kids hanging out in the mall, playground, street corner, bowling alley, or concert

hall.

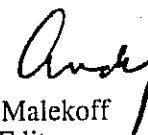
Have you ever participated in a group meeting with polite and articulate adults, maybe a staff meeting or interagency committee conference or legislative hearing, that has left your head spinning and stomach churning. The hidden agendas, power plays, hostility, and anxiety are a fine brew for madness. But it's the noisy kids' groups that always seems to raise a critical eyebrow.

As for silence, there is a concept in the Chinese *Tao Te Ching* referred to as *wu-wei* which means non-action, sitting quietly and doing nothing and letting things follow their natural course. As a group worker this is what I have come to know as *group process*, a logical unfolding that doesn't always follow a clear path. Group workers need to understand, respect and value group process.

It concerns me that so many blindly advocate

for kids' groups to conform to an adult like discussion-only format. To take only this path is to suck the life from kids' groups. Too often this is the path where control is sought for control's sake and silent refueling and reflection are prematurely interrupted with demands for empty, meaningless, and heartless chatter.

When in doubt, take the path with a heart.



Andrew Malekoff
Editor



**Watch for the
Spring Issue of
HUH?!?**

Our Spring issue will feature a report on the very successful Group Work Conference held on October 29, 1999.

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.

"Humor Me Guys!"

Twenty-one years old and just out of college, I had a decidedly limited knowledge of group work when assigned to work with the residents of a facility for the mentally-ill. In fact, most of what I know about groups I had gleaned from television shows (*Dear John*), Woody Allen Movies, and a few passages from Irvin Yalom's *Love's Executioner*. I had a romantic notion of group work - bringing together a group of neurotic adults to share their most sensitive problems and receive divine insight from their all-knowing therapist. There would be tears shed for certain, but I as the compassionate group therapist would somehow bring the group together to rally around one another. I would take these patients to places they had never been before!

My fantasy was crushed on the first occasion that I sat down with my group in the living room of the home. As I sat there, encouraging the half dozen group members to open up about their problems, the group went off in several different directions. "Could we turn on the television?", one member asked. "What the hell are we doing here, anyway?", another demanded. One older member got up to leave saying that he would rather be in bed. Another curled up into a ball on the couch and started sleeping.

"What was I missing here?" I asked myself. "Why weren't these folks behaving like they were supposed to behave?"

It would be nice to say that group work comes easier to me now - with nine more years of experience and some group work training under my belt. But I still find myself struggling at times to make sense of what is going on in group, particularly with adolescents. I think it is exactly this challenge that continues to motivate me for this work - how to make something happen in group. The young people that I now work with demand that I let go of my Ivy League educated ego. Actually, they seem to be most happy when I am self-parodying. "Humor me guys; how is everyone *feeling* today?", I ask them. Although there are moments of insight and sympathetic words exchanged, more often my group is sharing gossip and jokes, fighting to be the center of attention. And the "clinical breakthroughs" look much different from how I had originally imagined them. Mutual aid is demonstrated not so much by words but by members' proximity to one another or one member giving another a hug. Empathy is expressed most eloquently by one group member telling another: "Dude, I thought my life sucked 'til I heard about yours!" I've only recently realized that

successful group work draws less on my skills as an analyst or diagnostician and more on my sense of humor and playfulness. And that talking about problems may not be the only way to solve problems. Ironically, as I get further away from the

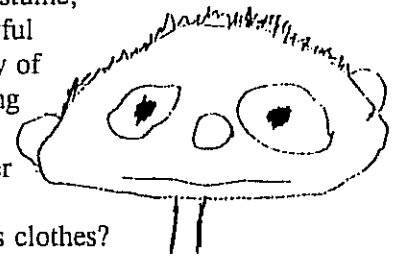
age of my clients, I find myself more and more comfortable laughing and playing along with the kids in group, slowly letting go of my expectations of a perfect, orderly group.

Andrew Peters, Program Director

A Fun Place? Why Not?

Who would ever imagine that a kids' bereavement group could look like a place where kids are having fun? And if bereaved kids are having fun in such a group, how could any real grief work be going on? A peek into my bereavement group for 6 to 11 year olds might help in answering these questions.

We met on the Monday after Halloween. The members, dressed in costume, came to group in a playful mood. There was plenty of candy and lots of horsing around. During the celebration, one member asked another, "Why are you wearing nurse's clothes? Did you think you could operate on your Mom?" Another pair, brother and sister, wore outfits that I later learned were different than the one's they wore on Halloween Day. One wore a hockey



outfit representing her dad's favorite team. She carried her dad's cherished hockey stick. The other came dressed as a firefighter, his dad's profession. Where else could kids, within a natural context of play and fun find such a pure and easy way to express their losses and non-verbally commemorate their loved ones?

Michelle Laser, Coordinator of Group Work Services

Let Them Eat Cake

(And Throw Sponges)

Group worker: "Could you just stop throwing the sponges at each other?!"

Group member: "But Maureen, we're not hurting anyone, we just want to throw the sponges."

What does a group worker do with this? As a beginning worker at a community youth agency I was perplexed. My impulse was to tell them, "Because you can't throw sponges here, it's just not what kids should be doing, it's not productive." Fortunately I held my tongue

It was through this group that I learned how powerful group work with adolescents is. Working in an agency that was group work friendly, a light bulb went off in my head. I finally got what adolescents want? They want a place where they can be themselves, the unconditional support of an adult who will not judge them, and a place where they can feel a sense of belonging, freedom, and relief from this often turbulent time in their lives. This may include sponge throwing, singing, wrestling, and dancing.

Group work is very much like a recipe, a measure of flexibility mixed with a genuine caring for kids goes a long way to helping them become emotionally and physically healthy and happy adults. So, let them

throw sponges at each other. Your colleagues and peers who don't understand group work will provide you with an assortment of frowns and puzzled looks, but if you stick with it you'll gain a deeper understanding of how vitally important a good group is for a teenager.

*Maureen O'Connor,
Street Outreach Worker*

Red in the Face But Still Hooked

There was a time when just the thought of working with a group horrified me. I felt so much more in control when I dealt with my students one-on-one. However it wasn't until I got involved with the Long Island Institute for Group Work with Children and Youth that I realized that

successful group work means gradually relinquishing control to the group members. The leader's job is not to control the group. However, that doesn't mean group work should be a free-for-all. Providing direction is not the same thing as micromanaging and hovering.

Group work has become my favorite form of counseling. I find that kids open up more easily in a group. It's so great when they say what's on their mind, but sometimes it is unsettling. For instance, recently I was with a group of 14 year old boys and the subject was sex. I could feel the blood rushing to my face listening to their language and the crass manner they used to refer to their perceptions of girls. "Were they trying to rattle me?," I silently wondered. Or did they see me their trusted counselor as asexual and someone who would be unlikely to respond to anything related to sex? In any case, as

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From Thrown for a Loop to Full Circle

I began my group work experience as a first year graduate student facilitating a support group for freshmen in a public high school in New York City. As I recall, two of the members started picking on a third. Being inexperienced I wasn't sure what to do, how to help. Should I confront the bullies in the group?, should I speak with them privately?, should I speak with the youth who is being picked on?, or should I just let things blow over?"

By the time I checked with my supervisor and decided on what to do, the victim left the group. I felt so disappointed and ineffectual (and still feel so at times). I also realized that this was just the beginning of my interest in group work with adolescents. Since that time I have worked with many groups. As the Youth Coordinator for the Town of Huntington Youth Bureau, I also supervise staff and train new workers.

I feel fortunate to have the chance to help others understand group work and support their efforts. My goal is to help others feel less intimidated and more confident when faced with an uncomfortable group situation like the one that threw me not too many years ago.

Stacey Levin, Youth Programs Coordinator

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they gradually settled down I relaxed and we had some great discussions about relationships. We explored how girls like to be treated and how they, the boys, would like to be treated by girls. They looked at the issues from so many different and fascinating angles. In the end I felt that we accomplished so much more as a group than I could have one-on-one.

I am hooked on groups!
*Carol Sutker,
School Guidance
Counselor*

Wake Up Professors & Bosses

Children are a neglected group in society. They lack status and power. In many ways I believe that group work with children and youth suffers the same underdog status. Institutions of higher education are not preparing professionals to do this very crucial work. Ironically, when these same professionals enter the workforce they often find themselves responsible for working with children in group settings.

Too often education is geared towards work with adults in groups. Students are expected to translate this into work with children. This is an unrealistic expectation. The work is very different. Group leaders need to understand child and adolescent development, develop a tolerance for chaos and

ambiguity, and have the informed support of supervisors. Without this, workers feel lost, isolated, and ultimately turned off to group work with kids.

How many potentially great group workers have been lost by not receiving the support needed to grow with their groups? I urge institutions of higher education to incorporate this content, group work with children and youth, into their curricula. Additionally, I urge agency directors to provide good supervision and access to group work training and support outside of your agency.

We must make a commitment to change the status of this work within our professions. It will only happen when we make it happen!

*Cynthia Cavallo,
Executive Director*

Eggs on the Fly, By and Bye

Every May all of the groups that I work with in a middle school end. It's always a bittersweet time of year. I am relieved that the stress of meeting with young adolescents on a regular basis is coming to an end. Equally powerful is the sadness I feel that I won't be a part of their lives anymore. I am always surprised how deeply I care about each and every group.

During the ending phase of the group the intensity of students' feelings is impressive but not always obvious by the way they act. They've said things like, "We really didn't do anything here!" or "This was a lousy group, not like the one Mr. S ran last year." Often no group member has anything to say about the ending - no thoughts, feelings, or memories. When this happens I immediately wonder what we have been doing in group for the past eight months and why no one can remember anything about the experience.

Sometimes during group endings in the middle school I think about when I used to work at a residential school for girls. On my last day there all of the girls in my group threw raw eggs and other food at me. Fearful that I would be hurt I locked myself in a room. I was convinced that they hated me. It wasn't until sometime later that I realized that they really cared deeply and were hurt that I was leaving them.

Endings are often painful and difficult, yet also wonderful and rich. Whether expressed through, silence, tears, hugs, or flying eggs, group endings reflect the power and importance of people's connections to one another.

Joanne Ditchik-Stutz, Middle School Social Worker

Different Strokes for Little Folks

Working with immigrant youth I've learned the importance of understanding other cultures. Cultural values

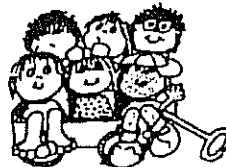
provide children with a view of the world that influences their sense of reality, where and how they fit in to their surroundings.

In a group of Haitian and Hispanic children, all immigrants who were referred for behavioral problems by their ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher, I learned that the Haitian students thought the Hispanics were favored by the teacher and the Hispanic students thought that the Haitians enjoyed special privileges. Students

from both groups perceived the teacher to be controlling and distant. For the Haitian students there was the additional problem of having moved from a country where three hour lunch breaks are customary. This is quite a contrast to the half hour lunches of their adopted homeland. This increased their restlessness and impatience. And of course there is the language barrier.

The group became a place to sort some of this out, explore and express culturally imbedded perceptions, share experiences, understand differences, reality test, and become more well oriented to the new situation. The kids started looking out for one another. The Hispanics tried to learn some Creole words and the Haitians tried to learn some

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Spanish. As a group project they wrote a collective letter to their ESL teacher, affirming what they were learning in the group and making a commitment to improve their classroom effort.

A little mutual aid goes a long way, no matter where you're from.

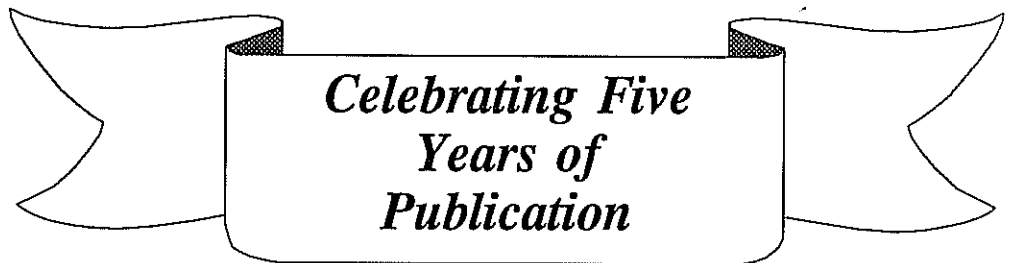
*Roseline Felix,
Elementary School
Social Worker*

**Report from the
HUH?!? Staff to
Our Readers**

During the past years, the **HUH?!?** staff has been delighted to respond to our ever-expanding subscription base. Our regional professionals here on Long Island have supported the newsletter from the very beginning and now that support has expanded far beyond our New York Metropolitan Area home to extend across the nation and into Canada. From north to south and east to west, we have seen a new interest in group work training and information.

As each day brings in new subscriptions and mail we are all gratified that our efforts are bearing fruit. From the art and layout department to the subscriptions and financial departments, we would like to extend our thanks to our subscribers for your support and loyalty.

A toast to our readers from the **HUH?!?** staff on our Fifth Anniversary!



HUH?!?

*a newsletter about working
with children and youth in groups*

HUH?!? was born out of a small group experience. A group of practitioners who attended a workshop together revealed the isolation that they felt in working with young people in groups. They agreed to form a supervision group. Soon thereafter, they decided to move from support and education to advocacy by spreading the word. They formed a second group called the Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children and Youth .

The mission of the institute is to promote and enhance effective group work practice with children and youth through advocacy, education, and collegial support. One of the group's first goals was to create a newsletter.

To support the continuation and growth of this newsletter, devoted to group work practice with children and youth, please feel free to write to us with your suggestions, questions, comments, and ideas for articles.

Too many aspiring group workers have bailed out of their work with young people due to poor education and training as well as lack of adequate group work supervision in the field. Young people need adults who can hang in there and not abandon hope. **HUH?!?** can be a constant reminder that you are not alone and that together we can change things by rebuilding a culture of competent group work practice for children and youth.

Some special monthly features in **HUH?!?** are *Looking Back ... A Reminiscence*, a continuing series featuring recollections from group workers. *From the Steering Committee, Tips For...*, *Book Briefs*, and *Events and Resources* are other monthly features with information that is vital for all group workers.

Subscribe to **HUH?!?** today and support group work with children and youth.

Please make your \$5.00 check payable and mail it to: The Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children & Youth; North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center; Attn: Jane E. Yazdpour; 480 Old Westbury Rd.; Roslyn Heights, NY 11577-2215

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 **Call for Papers** 

**22nd Annual International Symposium of the
Association for the Advancement of
Social Work with Groups**
*Social Justice through Personal,
Community, and Societal Change*

October 19 - 22, 2000 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Papers are 45 minute presentations; Workshops are 90 minute experiential presentations; Posters are visual presentations displayed during the symposium.

For more information contact: Ellen Sue Mesbur or Nancy Sullivan;
Phone 416-979-5000 E.S.Mesbur ext. 6219 · N.Sullivan ext. 6229. Email
<emesbur@acs.ryerson.ca> or <navillus@interlog.com>. Symposium 2000
Web site: <http://dominic.barry.edu/~kelly/aaswg/symposia/toronto.html>

**Long Island Institute for Group Work
with Children & Youth
Steering Committee**

Chairpersons: Joanne Ditchik-Stutz (Nassau County);
Cynthia Cavallo (Suffolk County).
Coord. of Group Work Services: Michelle Laser.
Steering Committee: Aimee Colton; Roseline Felix;
Stacey Levin; Maureen O'Connor; Catherine
Papell; Andrew Peters; Carol Sutker.
Project Coordinator: Andrew Malekoff.

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: Coalition on Child Abuse & Neglect, Garden City; Youth Directions and Alternatives, E.Northport; Herricks School District, Albertson; Sanctuary Project, Huntington; Plainedge School District; L.I. Chapter/Assoc. for Advancement of Social Work With Groups; L.I.Crisis Center, Bellmore; Schneider Children's Hospital, New Hyde Park; Temple Sinai of Roslyn. Copyright January 1, 2000/USA.

EVENTS & RESOURCES

⊗ **Special Workshop: *The Purposeful Use of Co-Leadership in Group Work* - March 31, 2000** From 9:00 AM to 12:00 Noon. Presented by the Long Island Institute for Group Work with Children & Youth of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center. Co-leadership is an advanced skill. More is not necessarily better when leading groups. Haphazard decisions to co-lead can be disastrous for both group members and group workers. This participatory workshop will explore the myths, benefits, and disadvantages of co-leadership. Please send your name, address, phone number, and professional discipline along with your \$40 check payable to: L.I.Institute for Group Work/NSC&FGC; 480 Old Westbury Rd.; Roslyn Heights, NY 11577-2215; Attn: Jane E. Yazdpour

⊗ **Group Work With Children & Youth Certificate Program:** Watch for dates for Spring-2000 from North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center; 480 Old Westbury Road; Roslyn Hgts., NY 11577-2215. Tuition for this two year, 60 hour certificate program is \$1,250. The program aims to build competence and confidence in the practice of group work with children and adolescents across settings and disciplines. Contact Jane E.Yazdpour at address above for registration information or call 516-626-1971 (Fax: 516-626-8043).

⊗ **Andrew Malekoff's** widely acclaimed, ***Group Work with Adolescents: Principles and Practice*** is available from the Guilford Press in paperback. To order call Guilford Publications Toll Free 1-800-365-7006; Fax: 212-966-6708; E-mail: info@guilford.com; Website (secure online ordering): <http://www.guilford.com>.