

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Let's say you are going to conduct an 11-week group for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and that each group will be 90 minutes in length. You may wish to look at one of the WCSAP facilitator guides to see how we have structured group sessions.

Elements of a Group Session

We recommend that each group session contain the following elements:



GOAL OF SESSION: Align your session goal with the stages of group development. If you choose to add topics to a particular session, they should support the session goal.



CHECK-IN: During the Check-In, the group facilitators ask each participant in turn to respond briefly to a prompt. This is an opportunity to acknowledge each person and to set the framework and tone for the session. It is important that the facilitators emphasize that this activity is quick and establish the ground rule that other participants should not comment or interact during this phase of the group. This check-in sets up the expectation that each participant has something to contribute to the group.



HANDOUTS: Listing the handouts you plan to use, if any, will help you to prepare for the group session. Handouts can be used during the Learning and Discussion portion of the session or given to participants to supplement session content.



LEARNING AND DISCUSSION: Knowledge is power, and shared knowledge is an important aspect of psychoeducational support groups. By encouraging discussion, the facilitators can help participants to connect information to their own lives and situations. Group members are the true experts on their own concerns; Learning and Discussion provides the opportunity for survivors to integrate their experiences with a wider knowledge of the topic.



ACTIVITY: Activities may precede the Learning and Discussion portion of the group or may follow it. There may be more than one activity per session. Activities serve to build group cohesiveness, to engage group members in active learning, and to make the sessions more interesting and enjoyable.



SELF-CARE ACTIVITY: In our curriculum guides, we include special activities in some session agendas to emphasize the importance of self-care and to provide examples for participants. We recommend including some brief self-care activities designed to help survivors cope and care for themselves so they can better handle the challenges they face.



CHECK-OUT: Because participating in a group focused on sexual violence is difficult and challenging, participants need time to decompress prior to leaving the group each week. The Check-Out helps group members make the transition back to their everyday lives by providing positive, forward-looking suggestions for the coming week. The structure is similar to the Check-In, with a chance for each participant to make a brief comment in turn. This closing activity teaches realistic goal-setting and assists in managing the emotions that may be stirred up by the group.



RESOURCES: You may wish to list the resources you have used in developing each session for handy references as you modify the curriculum or share the curriculum with other facilitators.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR FACILITATORS: In the WCSAP facilitator guides, each session outline contains information to assist facilitators in presenting the information appropriately, handling the group dynamics, and understanding the process of group development. If you are developing your own curriculum, you may want to include notes regarding these issues. You can generate ideas in conversations with your co-facilitator or supervisor, or you may have some considerations you wish to add after you run a group session.

Develop goal and objectives for the group and each group session

1 **Goal:** To increase participants' coping abilities and understanding of their response to victimization and the related impact on their lives.

Objective: To provide group members with a safe, open atmosphere for discussion and activity to facilitate understanding of sexual victimization and the healing process.

Brainstorm topics relevant to the target population

2 Some sample topics for an Adult Survivor group may include:

- Sexual Abuse 101
- Fear
- Anger
- Guilt and Shame
- Handling triggers and flashbacks
- Intimacy
- Sexuality
- Relationships
- Assertiveness and Boundaries
- Trust
- Building support systems
- Impact of abuse on children
- Talking with children about abuse
- Sadness and grief
- Healthy coping strategies
- Self-esteem, self-confidence and body image

Arrange topics into weekly segments that are logical for the safety and natural flow of the group.

3

For example, you would not start the group out with the topic of sexuality, as that topic may be difficult to discuss until the group members feel more comfortable with the other members, you, and the group process.

Week 1: Opening – Introductions of members, introduction to group format, development and discussion of ground rules, topic review, hopes and fears, pre-group evaluation.

Week 2: Sexual Abuse 101

Week 3: Coping Strategies

Week 4: Self-Esteem, Self-Confidence, and Body Image

Week 5: Trust

Week 6: Fear and Anger

Week 7: Sadness, Grief, and Shame

Week 8: Handling Triggers and Flashbacks

Week 9: Intimacy and Self-Care

Week 10: Sexuality and Relationships

Week 11: Closing – Saying goodbye, identifying additional supports, hopes and fears realized, taking stock of your progress, post-group evaluation.

Notice that Week 1 and Week 11 are already covered with the opening and closing of group. That leaves you with 9 additional sessions to plan for.

Develop goal and method for reaching the goal for each session.

4 The methods for reaching the goals for each session are limitless. This is your time to get creative. You can use videos, film, handouts, journaling activities, discussion, trigger plans, feeling charts, art projects, or collages. You can do an activity using hoola hoops to demonstrate boundaries, have participants complete a sexual effects inventory, discuss self-nurturing activities, do self-affirmations, create a web of support using yarn, do trust exercises and relaxation techniques, and whatever else you come up with. There are literally thousands of activities that you can choose from. Just make sure that they match the topic, are age-appropriate to your target population, and allow everyone to participate. So go ahead and have some fun here!

It is a good idea to have a general blueprint for each session (using the session elements described above, such as Check-Ins and Learning and Discussion segments. Be sure to alternate activities with quieter elements, such as journaling, to keep each session lively and engaging and to appeal to different learning styles.

The brief session descriptions below are NOT a curriculum. They are simply ideas to show you the basic brainstorming process for curriculum development. See Appendix for a sample session curriculum.

Week 2: Sexual Abuse 101

Goal: To create an atmosphere where members begin to explore issues of sexual violence in a societal context.

Activity: Discussion of myths and facts and issues specific to gender socialization. Each participant writes down one impact of sexual assault and places anonymously into container. Facilitator picks a few to discuss. Perhaps this becomes the basis for future topics.

Week 3: Coping Skills

Goal: To create an environment where members can begin to identify positive and negative coping skills.

Activity: Collage art project using magazines of positive and negative coping skills used by each participant. Discuss.

Week 4: Self-Esteem, Self-Confidence, and Body Image

Goal: To create a safe environment where participants can identify issues of positive and negative self-talk and take steps toward moving toward self-esteem, self-confidence, and a positive body image.

Activity: Discussion of what the concepts of self-esteem, self-confidence, and positive body image mean. Participants to draw how they view their body image and develop one affirmation of acceptance.

Repeat process until all weeks are filled in.

- 5 You may want to assign a time frame for each element of the session, bearing in mind that you will need to be flexible and that it is difficult to guess how long an activity will take the first time you facilitate. If you are working with a co-facilitator, checking in with each other about time modifications will help keep you both on track.

Keep a binder

- 6 Keep a binder of good ideas, activities, handouts you find, exercises, etc. for your group. These ideas will be invaluable to you and you will notice that the possibilities are endless. Again, have fun and be creative. This is the exciting part. Good luck!



PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR GROUP FUNCTIONING

Guest Speakers

Programs differ in their approach to using guest speakers. Some facilitators find that inviting a “graduate” of a former group back to speak to group members can serve as a powerful beacon of hope. Inviting other agency staff members or community service providers may expose group members to helpful resources and keep the group lively. Others believe that guest speakers may compromise the sense of security that the group offers to participants. In any case, if guest speakers are invited, the group should know about this well in advance (preferably during the screening process, when the group topics are discussed, and then again during the prior session). Speakers should be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, and the group should be made aware of this. If a group member objects to being present when a speaker comes in, perhaps because they know the speaker socially, accommodations should be made.

Including Low-Literacy Participants

Some participants in your group may have limited literacy (which may or may not be because their native language is not English). Be straightforward during prescreening and ask potential group members to let you know if they are having trouble understanding any information. If you are aware that some individuals may have difficulty reading group materials, use the following strategies to encourage their participation:

- ▶ Orally review all written materials given to group members.
- ▶ Choose activities carefully, or modify activities that require reading and writing.
- ▶ Have participants “pair up” for certain activities, matching low-literacy members with others who are more proficient at reading and writing. Be sure to do this in a way that does not embarrass participants. Simply say, for example, “Let’s work in pairs for this part of the group. Bonnie and Jessica, will you work together? And Eliza and Maria?” (and so on until all pairs are formed).

Including Support Persons for Participants with Disabilities

If a participant needs to have a support person with them at the group due to disability, the support person should be included in prescreening meetings and should document their pledge of confidentiality along with the other group members during the first session of group. If practical, a support person should be encouraged to find a comfortable spot outside of the group room.

There are some considerations based on the relationship between the person with the disability and the person who is supporting them. If the support person is a friend, partner, or family member, talk to the potential group member privately about their feelings regarding the person being in the group with them. This will help ensure that the person with a disability is not experiencing any abuse or exploitation from the support person, as well as checking whether the potential group member will feel inhibited because of the accompanying individual.

SAMPLE SUPPORT GROUP SESSION CURRICULUM

This curriculum for a single support group session has been extracted from the WCSAP Parent Support Group Guide as an example of the elements of a support group curriculum. (Pages 106–111)

SESSION SIX – DIFFICULT CHILD BEHAVIORS AND PARENTING CHALLENGES



GOAL OF SESSION: To identify common behavioral responses to sexual abuse, and to increase parents' skills in handling these behaviors appropriately.

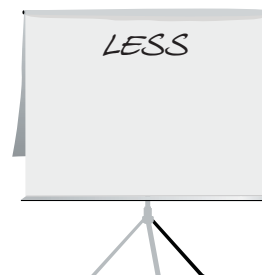
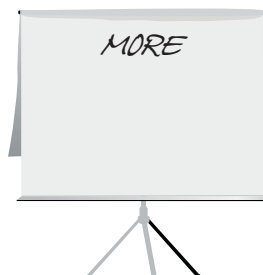


CHECK-IN: How did your "Grown-Ups' Night Out" last week go?



ACTIVITY: More or Less

1. Preparation: Have two pieces of poster board or flip chart paper. Label one "More" and the other one "Less." Gather several markers.
2. Ask parents to think of a specific behavior of their child that they would like to see more of, and a specific child behavior that they would like to see less of.
3. Give some examples to help them be specific: "Be more well-behaved" is too general. "Sit quietly at the table and eat until the whole meal is finished" is a more specific behavior description.
4. Ask each parent to write down one behavior in the "More" category and one in the "Less" category. These examples can be used later in the session when you are discussing how to encourage good behavior.





HANDOUTS

The Impact of Abuse on Children, pp. 3-4 in *Questions and Answers About Child Sexual Abuse: An Interview with Esther Deblinger, PhD.*

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/ChildSexualAbuse_QA.pdf

Signs That a Child or Teen May Be At-Risk to Harm Another Child

Stop it Now!

http://www.stopitnow.org/signs_child_adolescent_risk_harm_child

Sexual Behavior and Children: When Is It a Problem and What to Do About It

Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress

http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/infobrochures/sexual_behavior.pdf

I Broke The Rules and All I Got Was Hollered At

The Parent Coach

<http://www.parentcoachplan.com/assertive.php>



LEARNING AND DISCUSSION

Using the handout, *The Impact of Abuse on Children*, define and explain these concepts:

- ♦ Trauma
- ♦ Hyperarousal, or “jumpiness”
- ♦ Re-experiencing, or re-living the trauma
- ♦ Avoidance (including trauma triggers)
- ♦ If you choose to include the “question and answer” about long-term impacts of sexual abuse, be sure to explain that with appropriate help, the outlook is much brighter for children. The tone of this section is a bit bleak and may upset parents.

Describe common behavioral reactions, tailoring your information to the age levels of the children you are discussing. For example, if all the parents in your group have children under the age of eight, you won’t want to focus on teenage behaviors. Be sure to let parents know that some children show no behavioral changes. They may be dealing with their feelings internally, or their coping skills may be effective in alleviating behavioral changes. Every child will handle the aftermath of abuse differently.

Fear-related Behaviors

These behaviors may include clinginess, a reluctance to do things independently (such as go outside and play or sleep alone in a bedroom), expressing worry about the abuser coming back to hurt the child or other people, or nightmares. Parents need to acknowledge realistic fears (such as worry about the abuser who is still at large) and tell the child what they are doing to protect him or her. For other fears, parents should gently but firmly help the child move away from the avoidance behavior one step at a time. Help parents to understand that avoidance can become a habit; parents shouldn’t force kids to do something that terrifies them, but should support them in approaching the feared situation.

Sleep Disturbances

In addition to nightmares, kids and teens may have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep. If the abuse happened at home, a certain room may trigger traumatic memories for the child. Sometimes simply rearranging and redecorating a bedroom may help the child to sleep better.

Moodiness, Depression, or Irritability

Some mood problems are to be expected. While parents should be understanding, they should gently guide children to express their thoughts and feelings appropriately and set limits on aggressive or rude behaviors. If a child's moodiness or withdrawal persists, the parent should consider therapy. Also remind parents that sleep disturbances may be responsible for irritability.

Sexual Behavior Problems

Building on the discussion of healthy sexual development in Session Four, explain why sexual behavior problems may be a response to sexual abuse. Refer to the handouts to explain when sexual behavior rises to the level of serious concern. Also describe how children and teens may use behavior that seems "seductive" to relate to adults, because of the lessons learned from the abuser. This behavior should be curtailed firmly with kindness and without shaming the child. For example, a young child who tries to touch an adult's genitals should simply be told, "That is a private part of my body, and it is not okay to touch it."

Explain the basics of encouraging good behavior:

- ♦ "Catch your child being good" – pay more attention to positive behavior than negative behavior.
- ♦ Set clear limits and explain them in terms the child can understand.
- ♦ Empathize with the child's feelings, but continue to expect reasonable behavior (for example, don't let a child get away with avoiding chores because you feel bad about the abuse).
- ♦ Keep a good balance between acknowledging the abuse has happened and it hurts, and helping the child to work toward resuming as "normal" a life as possible.

Ask the group: *What are the parenting challenges you have experienced since your child disclosed the abuse? What are some ways you have coped with those challenges?*

Describe how therapy can help children, families, and parents. Address the stigma associated with seeking therapy.





SELF-CARE ACTIVITY: Quality Time with the Family

Have participants plan a fun family activity. It can involve just the parent and the child who has been abused, other family members, or the entire family. Give participants paper and pencil, and have them answer these questions:

- ♦ What activity will we do?
- ♦ Who will be involved in it?
- ♦ When will it be?
- ♦ How should we prepare, and who will do it?
- ♦ Will this be an activity that will be enjoyable for everyone involved?



CHECK-OUT: Briefly share your plan for your fun family activity.



RESOURCES

WCSAP recorded webinar: *Children with Sexual Behavior Problems*
<http://www.wcsap.org/children-sexual-behavior-problems-recording>

Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems by Richard Ferber

Healing the Harm Done: A Parent's Guide to Helping Your Child Overcome the Effects of Sexual Abuse by Jennifer Y. Levy-Peck

Online Tutorial:

Recognizing and Addressing Trauma in Infants, Young Children, and Their Families
 Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, Georgetown University

- ♦ This online training module is free, accessible for advocates, and takes less than an hour to complete.

Assertive Discipline for Parents by Lee and Marlene Canter



CONSIDERATIONS FOR FACILITATORS

- ▶ This can be a challenging session, and facilitators will need to be well prepared for participants' questions. Don't hesitate to say "I don't know" if a parent brings up a problem for which you don't have an answer. Be sure that you are familiar with local resources, such as an advocate with a great deal of expertise on parenting issues, or therapists who are skilled in dealing with abuse-related child behavior issues or assessing and treating sexual behavior problems.
- ▶ Parents will have some good ideas to share, but also remember that what works for one child or family may not be appropriate for another. You may have to gently remind the group to refrain from giving specific advice.
- ▶ It can be a huge relief for parents to hear that they are not bad or crazy because they are stressed out and may be irritable at times.
- ▶ The big message you want to give is that parents need to be firm but compassionate about difficult behaviors. Reasonable, age-appropriate expectations and discipline are helpful to all children and do not add to children's emotional burden.
- ▶ Help parents make the connection between their own levels of isolation and stress and their ability to cope with difficult behaviors from their kids. This is a great time to reiterate the importance of self-care and support.