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AN OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITY SELECTION ACCORDING TO STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

I. BEGINNINGS

In the Beginning stage of group development, the use of a safe, structured activity in which the leader takes an active role helps members become oriented to the group. The opportunity for experiencing immediate satisfaction and success encourages members to approach rather than avoid the new, unfamiliar situation. According to Middleman (1968), to "help the group get going in spite of itself," the leader should select activities which encompass: (1) a simplicity of skill demand; (2) the simultaneous involvement of all members with slight confusion and humor; and (3) a lack of structures that increase competition. In terms of Vinter's (1974) activity-setting dimensions, Beginnings activities should be low in prescriptiveness, high in controls provided by the worker, and high in provision for physical movement. Beginnings activities should require low minimum competence and should begin with a low provision for interactiveness (resembling parallel play) which progresses in increments to a higher level of interactiveness based on the changing mood in the group and members' increasing readiness to become involved with one another. Rewards should be abundant, widely distributed, and equally available to all members. Rewards might include intrinsic features of the activity such as: maximum freedom of movement, bodily self-expression, safe interaction with peers and enjoyment in the activity, as well as recognition and acceptance by the worker and other members of the group.

During the Beginning stage of group development, it is important that the leader help members develop an understanding of the connection between the activities selected and the purposes of the group. Activities selected should promote behaviors that the leader hopes to establish as group norms since it is through what the worker does verbally and non-verbally during this stage that norms do get established. Activities that help members get acquainted with one another and staff and which promote participation, cooperation, respect for self and others, and the contribution of members to the group experience can help shape the group process.

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AN OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITY SELECTION
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II. MIDDLES

Just when the group passes beyond the Beginning phase of its group life and moves into the Middle stage will vary according to each group's timing. However, emergence into this new phase is evident in a decrease in members' awkwardness and a "settling in" to the group experience. As members settle in to the routine, overcome their ambivalence, and begin to feel more comfortable, they become more emotionally invested in the group and its activities, making this an optimal time to individualize needs and engage the group and its members in changing their behavior (where necessary) and developing more skills. It is during this phase of group development that issues of status within the group emerge and that individual roles assumed by or ascribed to various group members (i.e., monopolizer, scapegoat, isolate) become more obvious. While it is challenging to manage and address the conflicts and issues that characterize this stage of the group's life, the very fact that conflicts arise signifies progress and is a sign of the development of a "sense of group". Throughout Middles, the growing history of shared experiences and struggles permits a lowering of individual defenses and promotes a growing intimacy between members, and between members and staff. These dynamics and the powerful feelings they evoke guide activity selection during the Middle stage of group development.

Given the "up and down" nature of functioning that characterizes Middles, it is difficult to describe a prototypical activity format that will appropriately address the wide variety of individual and group needs during this stage. In general, members are ready for more sophisticated functioning with each other. They are able to make greater use of verbal discussion instead of physical action to express feelings and resolve issues. With regard to Vinter's dimensions, Middles activities may challenge members with a higher level of minimum competence and a higher level of interactiveness. There is less need for physical movement. There is a need for high worker-initiated controls, rewards, and low prescriptiveness during times when the group is experiencing high anxiety, resistance, conflict between members, etc. At times when group cohesion is high, there is less need for worker-initiated controls and rewards, and greater demands may be made in the area of prescriptiveness and competence.

The "up and down" nature of Middles places a high demand on the group leader for careful assessment of the group and its members, thoughtful selection of activity, and creative modification of activity-setting dimensions. Activities can be designed to specifically address problematic roles and behaviors, as well as other dynamics of Middles described earlier. During this stage that comprises the bulk of the group experience, indigenous leadership should emerge, and the group-as-a-whole should be increasingly involved in decision-making, with greater responsibility in activity planning and evaluation.

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III. ENDINGS

During the Endings stage of group development, members need to be helped to leave the relationship with the group leader, with each other, and with the group. There is a need to consolidate gains and to complete work on projects. Members need to be helped to evaluate the group experience, to express feelings related to termination, to express feelings toward one another and the leader, and to internalize aspects of the group experience so that learning can be carried over into other experiences outside of the group.

In terms of Vinter's activity-setting dimensions, activities selected should emphasize high worker-initiated controls in order to provide members with stability as their investment in the group begins to wane. According to Ross and Bernstein (1976), the worker should again become the central supporting figure and should emphasize movement away from the group and toward other interests, groups, or the community in general. Prescriptiveness of the activities chosen should be low in light of the group's low tolerance for frustration. A high provision for physical movement may provide members with a release from anxiety and may offer a symbolic avenue for emotional expression. By de-emphasizing extrinsic rewards and lowering interactiveness, the group leader may help to decrease the members' attraction to the group and to increase motivation for seeking new relationships and experiences. Competitiveness demands should also be de-emphasized, and activities should require a low minimum competence level in order to help put closure on the experience; a high minimum competence level would only challenge the group to attempt further accomplishments.

During the Endings stage of group development, the repetition of an earlier experience or favorite activity can be especially effective in helping to fulfill members' needs to express deep feelings symbolically, to stabilize gains made, and to reminisce. Such repetition can also help members begin the process of reviewing and evaluating the group experience. According to Middleman (1982), appropriate Endings activities "should not leave the group keyed up, but rather should have a soft spirit--a quiet, reflective quality that suggests closeness and 'togetherness'. The best Ending activities are those that unite, that help the group to end as a group and to put a period, so to speak, on the experience."

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