

## What Are Counseling Groups?

Are groups a place for students to go to avoid class work? Are groups a place where students play and have fun? Are groups for students who are in trouble all the time? None of these statements are true. This is how one student described her experience in a counseling group: "Before I came into the group, I felt different from everyone else. Then I found out from the group that I am not alone, and I can do things about the way I feel and act."

**Counseling groups have the benefit of providing students with a place to belong.** Research has shown that the subject content of a group is not as critical as the feeling of belonging that students experience while in a group. In fact, one of the most influential factors in student's ability to "bounce back" from adversity is their ability to make connections and be a part of something bigger than themselves. Many people believe that students seek out gang affiliation because they are looking for a place to belong. Students who drop out of school often report that it was because they didn't feel a part of school. A counseling group is a positive belonging experience that can help students develop resiliency.

**Groups provide students with a way to normalize their feelings and experiences.** Research has shown, for example, that cancer patients who participated in a support group recovered quicker than those in a control group. Students learn from each other. Especially when dealing with painful issues, it is comforting to know you are not the only one, others have survived, and this is how they did it!

**Groups provide students with a safe, confidential and non-judgmental place to talk about their feelings.** Children of divorce, for example, often find it easier to talk to their peers about their feelings. Many children don't want to burden their parents with their feelings. They don't want Mom and Dad to worry about them. They know Mom and Dad are already upset and they don't want to burden them further. Or, they may be afraid someone may try to "fix" their problem, discount it, or blame someone else for it. Students also worry about hurting parents feelings or causing further discord in the family if they are honest about their feelings.

**Students with peer problems have a wonderful opportunity to try new ways of interacting in a counseling group.** Groups are a place to experiment with new behaviors. The

group structure enables students to work out conflicts in a safe way. The group also affords the counselor an opportunity to observe peer interactions and provide immediate feedback.

**Counseling groups are an efficient means of teaching students in a school situation.** Many students in need of individual help are experiencing similar problems at the same time. While these same students may not be able to benefit from instruction in a classroom or large group setting, they are often able to focus in a small group situation. The school counselor can service more students when working in a small group versus a large group.

Students are usually invited to participate in a counseling group after they have been referred to the counselor by a parent, teacher, other student, or themselves. The counselor usually works with the student individually before determining if a group placement would be appropriate, if a group is available, and the type of group that would be most beneficial. Parent permission is always given before a child participates in a counseling group. The types of groups offered have included: divorce support, anger management, social skills, loss/grief, stress management, alcohol and drug awareness, general support, and friendship groups. Students usually meet in a group for 30 minutes, once a week, for 6 or more weeks.

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