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How (and Why) to Get Students TALKING

78 Ready-to-Use Group Discussions About Anxiety, Self-Esteem, Relationships, and More (Grades 6–12)

Jean Sunde Peterson, Ph.D.

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Updated Edition

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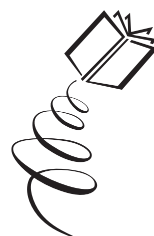

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Free Spirit Publishing
An imprint of Teacher Created Materials
9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100
Minneapolis, MN 55442
(612) 338-2068
help4kids@freespirit.com
freespirit.com

Dedication

To those who taught me about adolescent development—students and clients in many places, my siblings, and my children, Sonia and Nathan

Acknowledgments

This is a book about process—the process of development. The discussions within are primarily intended to help students make sense of their experiences during adolescence, certainly a complex life stage. However, development continues across the lifespan, and I have found that the topics in this book usually also resonate with adults, since many of the themes continue to be important.

I recognize that experiences and people continue to influence my own development. I have been educated by a multitude of individuals in my life. By example, my mother taught me that teaching is a worthy profession, and my father showed me that meaningful work may not feel like "work." Both demonstrated that community service is important for both self-development and progress and that process, not product, is where the fun is. A liberal arts education, a long and varied teaching career, and a multifaceted life have instructed me further. Nicholas Colangelo, Volker Thomas, and John Littrell steered me in important professional directions along the way, and I am grateful for the wisdom of longtime friends. My husband, Reuben, continues to provide unwavering and crucial support for projects like this one as we continue to develop together.

Important in eventually directing me toward counseling and group work with adolescents were school administrators who gave me autonomy and helpful guidance. They supported experimentation with teaching methods and content and encouraged my professional growth. I worked with several fine principals along the way, but I am particularly grateful for Jack Lauer and Fred Stephens in the Sioux Falls, South Dakota, area.

As I became acquainted with students, I grew more and more interested in adolescent development and, eventually, in counseling. My enduring friendship with college roommate Norma McLane Haan, who has had a long career as a therapist, has had a consulting dimension. I appreciated her guidance as I dealt with complex issues in the discussion groups that were an important part of a program I directed. She inspired me to pursue graduate work in counseling, which moved me into a new career.

Early in my teaching career, I began to regularly attend workshops, conferences, and in-service sessions dealing with social and emotional development. I took notes, added my thoughts to filed materials, consulted with mental health professionals, and read books. As an English teacher, I brought in community experts to help students understand context and themes in literature. When I coordinated a program for gifted students, I organized an ongoing weekly lecture series featuring medical, business, and mental health experts, as well as college and university speakers. Therefore, when I began to facilitate discussion groups, which eventually led to my first books, I had much to draw from. The background information for many of the sessions in this volume is based as much on the information, materials, and thoughts I accumulated during these experiences as on formal coursework and training.

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Preface

It has been many years since much of the material in this book was originally published in two volumes called *Talk with Teens About Self and Stress* and *Talk with Teens About Feelings, Family, Relationships, and the Future*. During this time, dramatic societal changes have occurred, yet the basic needs and concerns of teens remain. It has been said that adolescents express the pain of society, and I have seen evidence of that. All students are likely to experience confusion, pressures, and distractions, but many also lack a nurturing environment at home. Employment insecurity and low wage levels continue to affect families, family structures continue to change, and a mobile society means relocations and loss of support from extended family and trusted peers. If parental control depends on heavy-handed, harsh, or unpredictable discipline, adolescents may feel a low level of personal agency and be uncomfortable and fearful when around adults in authority. They may act out their tension in ways that preclude comfortable connection with significant adults in their lives. Currently, probably more than ever, adolescents need to be able to set healthy personal boundaries, and they need to develop skills in conflict resolution, including the ability to perceive others' intent accurately. They need to be able to communicate discreetly, directly, tactfully, and effectively. They need to consider the perspectives and well-being of peers. They need to self-reflect. Online social media and complex electronics have greatly changed the social landscape, as well as vulnerabilities related to them. This updated edition addresses many of these realities.

Facilitating more than 1,600 small-group sessions with adolescents has convinced me that all young people can benefit greatly from small-group discussion about growing up. All adolescents need opportunities to interact with peers in the presence of a nonjudgmental adult, to make connections, and to be known as unique, interesting individuals with special strengths. Adolescents at all ability levels, at all socioeconomic levels, and in all cultural and ethnic groups are challenged by universal developmental tasks. They experience these tasks in the context of cultural norms, economic and educational levels, and family structures. They all are probably more resilient than adults might think, but they need information, a safe place to ask basic or awkward questions, vocabulary and skills related to oral expression, and opportunities to develop social skills.

How (and Why) to Get Students Talking is an updated version of *Talk with Teens About What Matters to Them*, which was a combination and restructuring of three earlier volumes. Throughout these revisions and updates, new topics reflecting current issues have been added, and the sessions have been made easier to use. The content has remained appropriate for all adolescents, but more sessions have been geared toward middle school students and students at risk for poor educational outcomes. These changes are the result of my own continuing direct and indirect work with students. I included more suggestions for hands-on activities, but learned that physical activity sometimes detracts from developing oral skills and can exacerbate hyperactivity. Therefore, I have retained the emphasis on oral-expressive skills—skills important for future relationships and not attended to adequately in schools. Currently, ubiquitous electronics appear, too often, to have replaced nuanced face-to-face conversation with peers and family regardless of context, making an emphasis on oral communication even more important.

The base I drew from, and continue to draw from, is my own and my graduate students' experiences in schools with adolescents. This updated volume continues to focus on semistructured, development-oriented, prevention-oriented small-group work. Such groups can be facilitated by degreed counselors as well as by laypersons who have studied the introductory material and conscientiously adhere to the "semistructured, development-oriented, prevention-oriented" aspects of this approach. The introduction continues to offer rare guidance for this kind of group work.

Research studies attest to the effectiveness of this approach (see page 283). Michelle Lorimer and I studied the implementation of a small-group curriculum in a private middle school. Students and teacher-facilitators both gained confidence about discussing social and emotional concerns, and both believed the groups had a positive effect on the school. In a 2017 study of using this approach with culturally and internationally diverse middle and high school students in a residential summer program, young-adult counselors observed gains in their own confidence as facilitators, and 93 percent of the 101 campers interviewed spoke positively of their experience and reported gains in self-confidence and expressive language, more openness with peers, deep cross-cultural communication, social contact extending beyond group sessions, and insights about the universality of developmental challenges. Finally, the Peterson Proactive Developmental Attention Model, of which the approach detailed in this book is the most common application, was formally introduced in scholarly literature in 2018.

If the guidelines and admonitions explained in the thorough introduction are followed conscientiously, you are likely to see the benefits.

I remain open to suggestions for new topics and for new ways to address "old" topics. You can email me at help4kids@freespirit.com.

Jean Sunde Peterson

Introduction

About This Book

Description and Benefits

How (and Why) to Get Students Talking helps adolescents to "just talk"—to share feelings and concerns with supportive peers and an attentive adult. These guided discussions have evolved over many years of working with students and listening to them.

I have facilitated hundreds of small-group sessions with adolescents, with many of the discussion series lasting a semester or full school term. Most have been in various kinds of schools, such as public and private schools for the general population, alternative schools for students at risk for poor personal and educational outcomes, and schools for high-ability students. However, some single-session and short-term groups have been in residential and outpatient treatment facilities, community centers, YMCAs and YWCAs, and faith-based settings. The suggestions, activities, and written exercises in this book, as well as the semistructured-but-flexible format, have been thoroughly tested. You can use these materials with confidence.

I have witnessed the benefits of guided discussions for individuals of many ages, ability levels, cultural backgrounds, and family circumstances. Such groups can accomplish the following:

- produce inspiring outcomes in both well-adjusted students and those with significant risk factors, including when these students are mixed in groups
- help students lower stress levels, normalize "weird" thoughts, and sort out personal conflict
- give students who are cynical and negative about school an experience that makes it "not so bad"
- help group members learn to anticipate problems and find support for problem-solving
- help them become comfortable with others and allow their "real selves" to show and be validated
- serve a preventive function by improving self-esteem and social ease
- allow educators and counselors to make the most of their time, since the sessions give them an opportunity to interact about social and emotional development with several students at the same time
- allow helping professionals to facilitate interaction about social deficits and disadvantages that, arguably, are at the root of many of the concerns that come to the attention of counselors—such as depression, bullying, and other social aggression—or that drive school violence

A Note from the Author About This Update

For this updated and retitled edition, I have refreshed the content to better support you in your work with groups of adolescents. The updated introduction offers best practices for group leaders, and new sessions address issues of adolescents in today's world. Updated sessions reflect current language and information and include more specific recommendations for noncounseling professionals leading discussion groups.

Genesis

For twenty-five years, I was a teacher in public schools. For nineteen of those years, I taught English literature, language, and writing to middle and high school students in Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Germany. My years in the classroom tuned me in to the social and emotional worlds of adolescents. When they wrote essays, interacted with me during yearbook meetings, worked with me in club activities, and lingered after class, they taught me about adolescent development.

I learned that they had common concerns, but with idiosyncratic dimensions and complexities. I also saw that my students wanted to *be known*—to be recognized for their individual worth and for their uniqueness. They readily accepted my invitation to respond in writing to the literature we were reading. In fact, we did not discuss literature much orally; instead they wrote in journals about what they were reading, and I responded in the margins. We used class time for acquiring vocabulary and background information so students could understand the contexts of what they were reading.

There were many reasons for this teaching approach, and some of them relate to the discussion groups I later developed. Namely, students need information, and they need to develop skills. I wanted my students to learn to express themselves on paper and to become self-reflective, independent thinkers. I wanted to hear from everyone equally, not just from the highly verbal and assertive. I used an interactive approach to foster immersion in learning, employing hands-on classroom activities, media and community resources, vocabulary-in-context exercises, and classroom dialogue. We learned together, and the students became more and more comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. Some of these strategies are similar to those I recommend for the development-oriented discussion groups that are the focus here.

Some students stayed after class to talk about difficult personal matters. Experiences like these are not uncommon

for teachers. Adolescents are hungry for acknowledgment and nonjudgmental listening. Through these interactions, I learned that there were many important things students did not discuss with their peers, and some students likewise did not have a comfortable enough relationship with a parent to ask tough questions or express concerns or anxiety.

My students were typical. They fought with siblings, had "crushes" and breakups, and were scared about the future. Some struggled with the hypocrisy of the adults around them and the sad state of the world as they saw it. They responded to these and other issues with sadness, problematic behaviors, frustration, irritability, lack of motivation for schoolwork, and sometimes depression. They had difficulty managing their complex, fragmented lives. Sometimes they felt like exploding from tension. They needed someone to talk with. They needed affirmation. They needed to have their feelings and experiences validated.

Eventually, in another high school, I considered creating an extensive small-group program for students. Group work had never been done there. I thought back to the adolescents in my classes who had let me know them. I certainly had seen a need for support and attentive listening.

The discussion groups did not catch on immediately, but by midyear, after more than one carefully crafted invitation, I had three groups, with eight to ten students each. The following year there were six groups, and then ten the next, with two groups per day during a two-period lunch schedule. Usually once each year I invited an administrator, a student teacher, or someone from another district to observe the groups—in order to acquaint others with this proactive approach to working with teens. Group members were eager to demonstrate their group. I was careful to choose a topic for those sessions that would not require a great level of trust and would not compromise privacy (for example, "What do you wish teachers and administrators understood about teens these days?"). Almost invariably, observers commented that they had never suspected that students had so much to deal with.

The students faithfully attended the group meetings, even though attendance was voluntary. Group members bonded through steady, undramatic weekly contact, and when there was a personal or institutional crisis, the groups were a ready support system. The students taught me, they taught each other, and they learned about themselves. The topics were not particularly heavy, but they resonated. The students responded. They relaxed and "just talked." This book includes many of the session topics I used with those groups.

In other locations, I continued to form middle and high school groups with various populations. Concurrently, I finished degrees in counseling and counselor education, became a licensed mental health counselor, began university-level teaching and research, and worked part-time in one or more venues, including private practice, school counseling, a mental health agency, alternative teen facilities, and substance abuse treatment centers. For several years, I directed a program in which my graduate students and I facilitated as many as twenty weekly groups in various kinds of schools, with students in grades five to twelve, most of whom were in challenging circumstances at home or at school. In addition, the interns I supervised were regularly involved in group work. These direct and indirect experiences all informed me about group work—and about adolescents.

Purpose

The purpose of the guided discussions in this book is to support the social and emotional development of adolescents. Whether in small- or large-group discussion, students become increasingly self-aware, and that in turn helps them make better choices, be better problem-solvers, and deal more effectively with their various relationships. They learn to self-affirm their complexity and make sense of their emotions and behavior, and they feel more in control of their lives.

This support is a result of encouraging group members to express themselves. Most students need practice putting concerns and feelings into words. As much as some of them talk socially, they may not be skilled at communicating feelings clearly, genuinely, and effectively. That skills gap is not new, but electronic communication may currently be further limiting oral, face-to-face expression. Learning to talk about what is important to them and to listen attentively to others can enhance students' current and future relationships. Adolescence is a good time to learn these skills. Small groups, if trust and comfort develop, offer three important opportunities that may be lacking elsewhere:

- a noncompetitive environment where no grades are given
- a social context where everyone is fairly equal, since there is a relative absence of hierarchy when the focus is on social and emotional development
- a safe place to talk with peers about the experience of adolescence

According to the feedback groups and trainees have given me, the topics included in this book are often not otherwise discussed with peers, siblings, or parents. In end-of-year written assessments, students told me that they were grateful for guidance in important areas of their lives and for having a safe, supportive environment in which to talk about concerns. Many indicated that their group helped them feel connected to others, deal with stressors, and realize they were not alone in dealing with the challenges of growing up.

Fundamentally, group members gain social skills through group interaction. Often, social discomfort contributes to, and is exacerbated by, poor functioning in school. In terms of school accountability, small-group work may be viewed as a strategy for improving student learning. When considering aggression and violence against school peers, students' learning what they and others have in common, learning to listen, gaining experience in initiating and responding respectfully within conversation, and

becoming aware of peers' concerns can improve social ease, self-esteem, and perceptions of others. Becoming acquainted with even just six to eight peers in a small group can help students feel more connected and comfortable in school, thereby avoiding negative academic and personal outcomes.

The format of this book is not designed to teach specific group skills or to acquaint adolescents with the vocabulary of group process. However, many such skills and some aspects of group dynamics will likely develop and become familiar. With guided group discussion, process is more important than product, and one goal is to enhance the skill of articulating social and emotional concerns. The focus, objectives, and suggestions for content and closure contained in each session provide a framework for good, solid, invigorating group experiences.

It is important to understand that the purpose of these discussions is not to "fix" group members. Even though the questions are designed to provoke reflection and introspection, the emphasis is always on articulating feelings and thoughts in the presence of others who listen and care. These groups are not meant to be therapy groups. Yes, group work in any form has potential therapeutic value, and some noticeable changes in attitude and behavior often occur in the kinds of groups promoted here. However, even when it appears that these changes occur because of the response and support of a group, other factors, such as changes at home, the healing effect of time, or developmental leaps, may also have contributed. Nevertheless, a group might be crucial in helping a student navigate a difficult year. It is important to note here that mental health professionals can use many of these sessions and activity sheets in group and family work to foster communication and personal growth.

As is the case whenever adults stand firmly and supportively beside adolescents, establish trust, and participate in students' complex lives, you will serve your group best by listening actively, with the focus fully on them, and offering your nonjudgmental presence as they find their own direction.

Meeting ASCA Standards

The national standards for school counseling programs, developed by the American School Counselor Association, focus on academic, career, and social-emotional development. The focused discussions outlined in *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* address standards in each of these three areas, with particular attention to specific elements.

In relation to academic development, various foci help students develop positive attitudes toward school, toward teachers and administrators, and toward learning. Group members become more aware of their learning preferences. Topics related to postsecondary options help students think about the future, and group activities help them connect school to the world of work and to life in community with others.

Related to career development, almost all discussion topics are intended to enhance self-awareness, including of personal strengths and interests. A basic premise of the book is that bringing teens together in small groups helps them make comfortable interpersonal connections—through listening and responding, supporting and being supported, and appropriately expressing feelings and opinions. They break down cultural and socioeconomic stereotypes and learn about the perspectives of others. Interpersonal skills and sensitivity to others will enhance working relationships in the future. In addition, several sessions focus on the world of work and postsecondary education. Group members reflect on the work attitudes modeled by significant adults in their lives and are encouraged to imagine themselves in future work contexts. They also learn about postsecondary educational settings and are able to ask questions and receive important information. Group facilitators are provided suggestions for organizing career-oriented experiences outside of school as well.

Most important, this book focuses on social-emotional development—on simply "growing up." Session topics encourage self-reflection about identity, feelings, and peer, family, and community relationships. Members develop skills in a social microcosm, interacting with peers and with a nonjudgmental adult, potentially enhancing their lives in the present and after the school years. In addition, group members learn about emotional and physical vulnerabilities related to technology, high-risk social situations, relationships, and stress, and they consider ways to be social without putting themselves at risk.

Assumptions

The format and content of *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* reflect the following assumptions, which you may want to keep in mind as you lead your own group.

1. All adolescents have a desire to be heard, listened to, taken seriously, and respected.
2. Some who are quiet, shy, easily intimidated, or untrusting often do not spontaneously offer comments, but they, too, want to be recognized and understood as unique individuals.
3. All adolescents need support, no matter how strong and successful they seem.
4. All feel stressed at times. Some feel stressed most or even all of the time.
5. All are sensitive to family tension. Some are trying hard to keep their families afloat or intact, perhaps even using problematic behavior to keep their parents focused, involved, and together.
6. All adolescents feel angry at times.
7. All feel socially inept and uncomfortable at times.
8. All worry about the future at times.
9. All, no matter how smooth and self-confident they appear, need practice talking about feelings.
10. Everyone wears a facade at times.

The Nuts and Bolts of Group Work

Group Members

The guided discussion sessions in *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* are appropriate for the entire age range of adolescents, including a number of special populations (for example, students new to school, at risk for poor personal and educational outcomes, diagnosed with mental health disorders, or lacking appropriate social skills) and students with a wide range of ability levels, including high ability. However, especially when groups include preteens, topics should be selected according to students' developmental level. Adjustments in vocabulary, session length, and content can be made as needed. A few topics might be best suited for older teens, but being selective with the suggestions in these discussions may make them appropriate for younger teens as well. Behavioral concerns and parental cautions vary from community to community and should guide topic selection. Because it is important that older adolescents not feel "talked down to," the language used in the suggested questions and activity sheets is generally and intentionally "up."

Ideally, group membership does not change after the group begins. Each time someone is added, a group must focus again on developing trust. Group dynamics also change, of course, when a member leaves. Group organizers need to consider school attendance patterns for the target population when determining group size, since only two regular attendees, for example, in a group of five is not optimal.

Group Settings

The session structure of *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* is appropriate for both small-group and whole-classroom or other large-group discussion. Groups with a developmental emphasis can be formed in a wide variety of settings:

- school counseling and advisory groups
- regular classrooms
- athletic and academic teams
- music groups
- school clubs
- youth service organizations
- leadership programs
- faith-based settings and youth groups
- peer counseling groups
- family therapy groups
- treatment facilities
- retreats
- at-home discussions involving parents and adolescents
- homeschool events or series

Because the topics are developmental in emphasis and often applicable throughout the lifespan, some sessions are appropriate for women's groups, men's groups, and adult support groups. I have often used them in teacher workshops focused on listening and responding skills, with personal benefits apparent beyond the skills training. In addition, because drug use can arrest social and emotional development, and because addiction does not preclude a need to connect with others, most sessions can be useful in centers focusing on substance abuse.

Length of Meetings

Ideal meeting length varies depending on group members' ability level and behavior. Students who are hyperactive and distractible, who do not enjoy verbal activity, or who have low cognitive ability may do well with thirty-minute meetings in grades six and seven. However, if hands-on activities are included, having adequate time is essential. Eighth graders and high school students usually appreciate a full class period, although thirty minutes also can suffice. Short meeting times work best for groups with only three or four members. I recommend that "lunch-bunch" groups be allowed to leave class a few minutes early, so that they can get their food before classes are dismissed and maximize the time available for discussion.

Small Groups

Group Size

For small-group work, ideal group size varies according to age level. For middle school students, a group size of five to seven seems to work best, given the usual length of class periods and students' ability to articulate thoughts, attain depth, and feel heard adequately. (If fifth grade is included in a middle school, I recommend four or five students per group.) I do not recommend more than eight, regardless of students' age or ability. These are general guidelines. My counseling students and I have experienced successful small-group discussion with as few as three students, who bonded well and developed trust after other members moved away. I have also had success with groups of ten high-functioning and articulate students in full-hour meetings, but that number can preclude close connections and adequate time for each member to feel heard and understood. The level of personal concerns might also be a factor when considering group size. Feeling heard is always important. When working with high-risk teens, I sometimes limit a group to six to ensure adequate time for individuals to talk and respond to others.

Meeting Location

For small-group work, I recommend a small room (instead of a classroom), especially for group members who have problems with attention or hyperactivity. Such a space is also more likely to be private and uninterrupted, have

fewer visual distractions than a classroom, and promote a sense of intimacy and safety. I also prefer to have a table to sit around, not only to contribute to comfort but also since many of the sessions involve brief writing.

Large Groups

How (and Why) to Get Students Talking can be useful in large-group settings as well, such as the regular classroom, community youth groups, and teams. Weekly discussions, or a daily series of discussions limited to a week or two, can be part of the curriculum in health, family and consumer sciences, life skills, social science, or language arts, among several possibilities. Discussion is particularly meaningful for adolescents when it deals with the self. Homeroom or advisory periods or community time, when designed to foster positive interaction in a school, can use an activity sheet or other discussion catalyst effectively if the time allowed is adequate (at least twenty minutes).

Group dynamics differ, of course, depending on whether a large group has thirty members or ten, but the focus and most of the strategies work with both sizes of groups. Since a discussion of an activity sheet can easily take an hour with a group of eight verbal students, adjustments must be made when activity sheets are used with larger groups. Classes can be divided into small groups (three to five members) for sharing, for example, with supervision and appropriate directions.

Group Composition

I have found that the best groups are often those where members do not know each other well outside of the group. Members seem to feel free to share, and they do not have to preface all comments with "Well, someone in here has heard me say this before, but . . ." On the other hand, I have had effective groups where most members knew each other well—and learned to know each other better. Even best friends may not typically discuss topics like those in this book.

Depending on the size of the student population you draw from, you may not have much choice about whom to group together. If some or all members of your group know each other well, it is important to move the group beyond the natural division of friends and nonfriends. Having a focus, with specific activities and written exercises, helps to ensure that students who are friends do not dominate or irritate the others with "inside humor." Encouraging members to change seating each time also can be helpful, although it is important to make this a group norm at the outset, since groups—especially middle school groups—may be resistant to it later.

Groups can break down barriers. In broad-population discussion groups, I prefer a balance between achievers and underachievers, members at risk and not at risk for poor outcomes, members highly involved and not-so-involved in other activities, and students of varied ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The mix indirectly challenges stereotypical thinking as group members discover common ground.

If, as a counselor, you form a group because members share a common concern or to have a specific purpose and agenda, you can still use these guided discussions with confidence, since they deal with common adolescent challenges. I offer two cautionary guidelines, however. Homogeneous grouping of students who struggle with depression, hyperactivity, substance abuse, disordered eating, or severe behavior problems, for example, potentially creates groups with too many "problems" and no positive peer models. Especially in schools, I believe it is unethical to group by pathology, since privacy (regarding having the "problem") is inherently compromised. Nonetheless, anyone can benefit from connection, support, and learning about self and others. *Discussion does not need to focus on the common major problem.* Struggling teens can benefit from the developmental emphasis and a chance to connect to peers.

If several groups are being formed at one time, distribution can be accomplished by initially compiling a list of all students who accept the invitation to participate and then sorting the list. Of course, recruitment needs to target those least likely to feel welcome. In some cases, the highest-functioning students may be the most reluctant to join, fearing that the groups are geared only to "problems" and that participation will somehow stigmatize them. However, underachieving students and those with other risk factors may think they are the only ones with stressors, vulnerabilities, fears, and problematic performance or attitudes. They can benefit from realizing that everyone has developmental concerns. All social groups have a great deal to learn from each other, and the group setting is an ideal environment for mutual learning.

Mixing genders is also good, even though it is not always possible and might not be advantageous or appropriate for certain topics. However, it is important for students with differing gender identities to learn about each other in a safe and nonjudgmental environment, outside of the regular classroom and apart from usual social settings. It is also important for all students to learn how to communicate with, and in the presence of, each other. Granted, students representing various gender identities may differ greatly in physical, social, and emotional maturity, particularly in middle school. Still, a late-maturing boy, for example, can gain from hearing about the concerns of the early-maturing girls he is around daily, and vice versa.

A discussion group can provide a chance to have contact with the other gender and with peers who do not identify exclusively with either gender. Regardless of whether teens are shy or highly social, a group can raise awareness of gender and gender-identity issues and enhance students' ability to function effectively in complex social relationships now and in the future, including in marriage and other partner relationships, in employment, and in corporate leadership.

On the other hand, same-gender grouping also has advantages and is particularly appropriate when the issues are gender-specific, especially troublesome and gender-related, or perceived by students to be unsafe for

discussion with more than one gender identity represented in the group. Same-gender groups can sometimes empower members in ways that mixed groups cannot. Gender homogeneity may be desirable in an addictions-recovery or sexual-trauma-recovery group in a treatment center, for example. Obviously, decisions about grouping depend on the goals and purpose of the group. I have had good success with same-gender groups in middle schools. The all-male small groups talked just as much and just as openly about social and emotional concerns as the all-female groups did. I also have had mixed results, possibly related to purpose, special population, or grade level, with mixed-gender small groups in middle schools. With high school groups, I routinely mix genders.

Because the sessions are geared to social and emotional development, not to cognitive or academic concerns, having group members of approximately the same age is optimal. Sixth graders are developmentally different from and have different concerns than eighth graders, for instance, and even seventh and eighth graders may have difficulty connecting with each other about social and emotional concerns. Tenth-grade issues are usually different from eleventh-grade issues. Seniors are usually looking ahead in ways that younger students are not. Relationship issues differ along the age continuum, from grade level to grade level, and it is beneficial when students can communicate with others in their own age group about these concerns—even though group members' social experience and physical development might differ.

It is your responsibility, as a group facilitator, to ensure the physical and psychological safety of each group member. Behavior management may be a particular concern in some groups, as well as teasing and name-calling. When forming a group, I suggest some basic screening, since individuals who have great difficulty in all or most social situations (because of an emotional or behavioral disorder, for instance) may be not only disruptive, but also psychologically harmful to other group members.

Treatment centers for behavioral disorders are likely to use group work as part of a treatment plan for addressing severe problems. In schools, by contrast, even though ideally all students should have an opportunity to discuss development with peers, group leaders should keep in mind that severe behavioral problems are difficult to deal with in groups. Group goals may be difficult to achieve when a great amount of time is focused on behavior management and when impulsive, negative behavior and harshly critical statements are intended to harm either the group or individual members. However, I don't consider a group member's initially being unwilling to talk, or even being unwilling to sit within the group space, as being critical of others or as being severe negative behavior. Someone who is untrusting and uneasy with talking about development may need a few, or even several, meetings before interacting verbally. I typically use this nonjudgmental approach: "It's okay if you want to wait. When you're ready, just join in—even if it's a few weeks from now." Eventually, such situations are often resolved quietly.

I recommend providing teachers with a rationale for the group experience and a checklist and encouraging them to take social functioning in the classroom into consideration when recommending students. If group members cannot function at somewhat the same level, have significant problems controlling negative impulses, or are rude and disruptive, the group may not experience the benefits associated with depth of discussion about developmental concerns. Similarly, students who detest each other, or who have significant personality conflicts, should probably not be put into the same small group. A treatment center might be able to use group work to break down such barriers, but putting those students into a new and potentially intense situation like a small group in a school is not as defensible. If attendance is voluntary, other members may even choose not to attend.

Disruptive students deserve attention to developmental challenges, but if it takes nine or ten sessions to move beyond persistent disruptions, all other group members have then lost out on potential gains from an extremely rare opportunity. One suggestion is that if a group member has not settled down by the third or fourth meeting, perhaps that individual should not participate further. Facilitator and student should talk, one-on-one, about that possibility after the second meeting and then again if the decision has been made not to allow participation. Group members should have an opportunity to discuss their feelings about this loss at the next meeting, since they may have mixed feelings, including guilt.

Inviting Students to Join a Group

In a school, the best way to encourage students to join your group, if membership is voluntary, is to invite them personally. In any event, I recommend that you not call it a "counseling" group when describing it to prospective group members—even if you are indeed a counselor, but especially if you are not—since then there are extra liability concerns. In addition, some students are automatically turned off and turned away by the counseling label. Later on, if someone asks if it is a counseling group, explain that "counseling" basically means "talking and listening" with someone trained in that process. In that regard, if you are a trained counselor, your group could be called a counseling group. However, for recruitment purposes, "discussion group" is both accurate (because of the purpose) and appealing, without potentially negative stigma attached.

"Support group" is appropriate when there is a common, specific agenda or a shared problem area. However, if the group is largely preventive, with self-awareness and personal growth as goals, then "support" is probably too problem-oriented for many students. "Discussion group" is my preference.

In schools, I have contacted students individually to explain a proposed group, and I have gathered together a few students or full-size discussion groups to hear the plan.

In either case, you need to assure students that joining the group involves low risk, with potentially big benefits. The advantage of calling in the group as a whole is that students can see who else will be attending. On the other hand, some might decide against joining for that very reason, without giving the group a chance. When meeting with students individually, you might give them the names of a few prospective members—but *only if they ask* and only if it is possible to share names in advance. If a student wants to ensure that friends will be in a group, I prefer to say, simply, "I encourage you to come and be surprised. It's good to get to know new people, and sometimes it's even best *not* to know anyone else well at the outset. If you decide later that you are not comfortable with the group, you have the option of not continuing." If you decide to meet with all prospective members together, be prepared to do at least a typical, brief activity from the book (perhaps the "Warm-Up" on pages 21–22) to demonstrate what the group will be like.

Be sure to emphasize both the social and the emotional purposes of the group. Students respond well to the idea of meeting new people and getting to know current acquaintances and friends in new ways. They also can relate to the idea of talking about adolescent stress. In fact, I routinely mention stress as an example of the discussion topics. You can explain that, beyond pursuing general goals, the group will determine its own unique atmosphere. That much of an explanation usually suffices. If students want to know more, show them the table of contents for this book. The session titles are varied, and students usually find them interesting—and unexpected.

If you use this book with high school students, it helps to tell them that once you get to know them better through the group experience, you will be able to write more complete and accurate job, college, or scholarship recommendations for them. Explain that you also will be a better and more informed advocate for them if they ever need assistance.

How to Approach Students Who Have Significant Risk Factors

As a school counselor, you may wish to form a support group to serve students with a common concern. When a particular phenomenon, such as one of those listed below, is affecting several students concurrently, a counselor can utilize development-oriented sessions in this book, without necessarily addressing the common problem directly, to help those students stay connected to school and to supportive peers, a worthy purpose in itself. The problem may come up spontaneously, of course, and then the facilitator's professional expertise is crucial. Otherwise, staying focused on selected developmental topics can generally be beneficial.

- family disruption
- parental or student substance abuse
- school tragedy affecting several families
- family tragedy
- pregnancy
- sexual or other kinds of abuse
- victimization by bullies
- bereavement
- terminal illness in a family member
- potential for dropping out of school
- frequent family moves
- poverty
- parental military deployment
- being new in school

Bringing teens together to "talk about growing up" can offer support and connection during a difficult time without labeling the group. An informed layperson who carefully follows the topic-oriented, development-related discussion format of the sessions in this book can facilitate that kind of discussion. However, *only degreed counselors or other degreed helping professionals should facilitate groups focused on any of the first nine situations in the previous list* because of the need for special expertise and because of risk, including risk of retraumatizing. In addition, as mentioned earlier (see "Group Composition"), privacy is inherently compromised when the facilitator names the serious common concern as the reason for organizing the group. Privacy is a concern during any major life challenge, and school and mental health counselors, counseling and clinical psychologists, and social workers are guided by and trained with ethical codes related to privacy.

Students may not be eager to join a group. If attendance is voluntary, I recommend that you first meet with the high-risk students individually. Explain that you will be leading a discussion group for students who are dealing with stress and you are inviting them to participate. If a student has difficulty with authority, is underachieving with high ability, or has been suspended from school more than once, for example, you don't need to mention those concerns. Instead, simply say that you are looking for interesting, complex students who can help to make a good group. Say that you are looking specifically for students who express their abilities in unusual ways, because you do not want a group that is afraid to challenge and think and you do not want students who always do only what is expected of them. Reframing characteristics usually considered troublesome in this positive way may surprise students and encourage them to participate.

However, no matter what a particular student's behavior might be, always present the group's purpose honestly: to provide an opportunity for students to talk about concerns that are important to adolescents. Be sincere, accepting, and supportive in your invitation. With students in distress, as with all prospective group members, take care not to frighten them away by sounding (or being) invasive or too personal. Give them time to warm up to the idea of interacting with others about growing up. Even traumatized teens

can benefit from *non*-therapy-oriented discussion groups that are not focused on "fixing." Many life situations are not "fixable," and uncomfortable feelings can be purposeful and associated with the long process of healing.

Sessions for Special Populations

How (and Why) to Get Students Talking is appropriate for primary prevention, in the form of focused, development-oriented discussion meant to prevent problems and enhance adolescent development. It is also appropriate for secondary prevention, for use by counselors when there appears to be potential for problems. For the latter, the sessions are appropriate and potentially beneficial for a variety of special populations in either homogeneous or heterogeneous groups:

- students at risk for poor academic outcomes
- students with behavior problems (including students on probation)
- students experiencing difficult family situations or transitions
- students having difficulty with adult authority
- teenage parents
- underachievers
- students labeled "gifted" who are at risk for stress-related disorders, severe underachievement, disordered eating, self-medication with substances, or depression
- students returning from treatment for substance abuse or an eating disorder
- students with poor social skills
- students new to a school
- students who have learning difficulties

Underachievers and students who have behavior problems, difficulty with authority, or poor social skills often are best served when group membership is mixed (that is, perhaps half of group members have at least average skills, behavior, or achievement).

Although the sessions are arranged in a purposeful progression for long-term series, they may certainly be rearranged to create a short-term program or to have a particular focus. Feel free to choose sessions that are most appropriate for your group.

Following are sessions that would be especially helpful for some special populations.

Individuals experiencing major family transitions can benefit from any session in the Stress section. They may also find affirmation and be able to express uncomfortable feelings in some sessions in the Identity section (for example, "Giving Ourselves Permission," "In Control, Out of Control"). Some of the family-oriented sessions in the Relationships section (for example, "With Parents, Guardians, and Other Caregivers," "Gifts from People Who Matter") may also be helpful, as well as some in the Feelings section (for example, "Disappointment," "Anger," "Fear, Worry, and Anxiety," "Coping with Change, Loss, and Transition," "When Parents Divorce," "Dealing with Holidays and Family Gatherings") and the Future section (for example, "When and If I'm a Parent").

Teens at risk for poor personal or educational outcomes might benefit from these sessions:

- "Stuck!"
- "Does the Stereotype Fit?"
- "Learning Styles"
- "What Defines Us?"
- "Risk-Taking"
- "In Control, Out of Control"
- "A Prisoner of Image"
- "Feeling Free"
- "Coping with Change, Loss, and Transition"
- "Sadness, Depression, and Dark Thoughts"
- "Encouragers and Discouragers"
- "Influencers"
- "Responding to Authority"
- "Getting Our Needs Met"

Group members who are feeling sad or depressed often find some of the sessions on stress to be helpful in addition to these:

- "Three Selves"
- "In Control, Out of Control"
- "Having Fun"
- "Being Alone versus Being Lonely"
- "It's Complicated"
- "Getting Our Needs Met"

Students returning from or currently in treatment for substance abuse or an eating disorder may also find these sessions helpful.

Leading the Sessions

Facilitators

Since these sessions are designed to be used in a variety of settings, group facilitators may be the following:

- school counselors
- teachers (including those who work with specific populations)
- leaders of youth groups or summer-camp activities
- counselors in community agencies, treatment centers, or private practice
- social workers

- probation officers and others involved with corrections
- coaches

Parents might use sessions for weekly family discussions, and homeschool organizations and groups can use them as catalysts for social interaction.

Are You Ready to Lead a Discussion Group?

Especially if you are not accustomed to dealing with group discussions in an informal setting, and even if you are, you may find the following suggestions and perspectives helpful:

- For teachers, the social-emotional dimension involves more personal risk-taking than the academic. Discussion related to social and emotional areas is much less "controllable" than academic, philosophical, intellectual, or debate-like discussion.
- Significant adults in students' lives might have focused more on behavior than on feelings, more on academics than on social-emotional needs, or more on performance than on personal development. Some adolescents are eager and immediately grateful for the emphasis on the social and emotional. Some might be uncomfortable with the developmental focus at first; some might even be frightened by it, especially those whose families guard privacy at extreme levels, or where emotional expression is discouraged. Regardless of response, your concentrated attention on social and emotional concerns will probably be a new experience for them. Discomfort may even generate problematic behavior initially.
- If you are careful to focus on social and emotional issues, there will be little opportunity for group members to play competitive, "one-up" verbal games. Social and emotional concerns are not likely to be debatable.
- Be prepared for a wide range of verbal ability, learning preferences, personalities, and behaviors in small groups. Consider the format for each session carefully in that regard.

You may also want to consider your own motives for establishing groups for students, as well as your sense of security around various personalities and behaviors. Consider these questions:

- Can you view adolescents as simply (and complexly) "developing"?
- Are your self-esteem and self-confidence strong enough to stay on firm footing in the midst of negative behavior?
- Can you stay poised and focused on the social and emotional, no matter what comes up?
- Can you deal with students simply as human beings with frailties, insecurities, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities, regardless of their behavior and/or school performance?
- Can you avoid needing to "put them in their place"?
- Can you accept their defenses, including bravado, and give them time to let themselves be socially and emotionally vulnerable?
- Can you recognize that they may not take risks socially, academically, and/or emotionally, and that they might benefit from encouragement to take appropriate risks in these areas?
- Can you look honestly at some of your own stereotypes or negative feelings that might interfere in your work with various student populations, and can you put them aside for the duration of the group experience?
- Can you let group members teach you about themselves without judging them?
- Can you avoid being too interested in ferreting out details about students' families and personal lives?
- If you are a teacher, can you move from an evaluative to a supportive role?
- Can you move out of an adult-expert position and accept that teens know themselves and their world better than you do—and that *you* need to learn from *them*?
- Can you enter their world respectfully?

If you can answer all or most of these questions in the affirmative, don't worry. You're ready to take on a roomful or small group of adolescents. If your answers were mostly negative or unsure, perhaps you should consider other ways to work with students or should (if you are not a counselor) consider co-facilitating a group with a counselor, at least initially. Such co-facilitation may help you develop listening and responding skills and move toward a nonjudgmental posture.

General Guidelines for Group Facilitators

The following general guidelines are designed to help you lead successful and meaningful discussion groups. You may want to review them from time to time over the life of a group.

1. Be prepared to learn how to lead a group by doing it. Let the group know that this is your attitude. If you are a trained counselor, you may need to become comfortable with *focused, semistructured* discussion intended to facilitate connection, not to "do therapy." In addition, even if you lead groups regularly, reviewing basic tenets of group work can be beneficial. If you are *not* a trained counselor and are not able to co-facilitate a group with a counselor,

you might ask a counselor for information about group process and about listening and responding. However, if you study this introductory material, keep the guidelines in mind, and use the questions provided, you will likely behave appropriately.

2. Don't think you have to be an expert on every topic. Tell the group at the outset that you want to learn with them and from them, and that you want them to learn from each other. Most of the content will come from them. It is usually better to be "one-down" (unknowing) than "one-up" (expert) in relationships with adolescents. They will respond to that approach. For most sessions, having information is not the key to success. Trust your adult wisdom, since that is one thing you have that group members do not. It will serve you well. But recognize that your job is largely to facilitate discussion, not to teach and not to "fix" or change kids.

3. Monitor group interaction and work toward contribution from all members without making it an issue. Remember that quiet individuals can gain a great deal just by listening and observing. You can encourage everyone to participate, yet not insist on that. Sharing about written exercises and activity sheets provides quiet group members a comfortable opening. Even uttering a simple phrase from a sheet can feel huge for a shy person and may represent significant risk-taking.

4. Keep the session focus in mind, but be flexible about direction. Your group may lead you in new directions that are as worthwhile as the stated focus and suggestions. However, if they veer too far off track, especially with only one or two students dominating, use the focus as an excuse to rein in the group.

5. It is probably best to go into each session with two related sessions in mind, since the one you have planned might not generate as much response as expected. You can always unobtrusively guide the group into the second direction. However, try several of the suggestions before dropping a topic. It might simply require some "baking time." Ask questions confidently, leaning slightly forward, with your face expectant.

6. Be willing to model how to do an activity, *even though that is usually not necessary.* The activity sheets are fairly self-explanatory, but on rare occasions you may need to demonstrate a response. If you are not willing to self-disclose, your group may wonder why they should be expected to reveal their thoughts and feelings. However, your doing only one small, discreet, carefully selected self-disclosure early in the life of a group may suffice for an entire series of meetings. Your modeling should be only to clarify something in an unfamiliar activity. Too much from you, too often, can actually inhibit group response. Attention should be focused on group members, not on you. The group is for students' benefit, not yours.

7. Every now and then, especially after the group has established a rhythm (perhaps after five or six meetings), ask group members how they are feeling about the group. Is there anything they would like to do differently or change? Are they comfortable sharing their feelings and concerns? What has been helpful? Have they noticed any problems that need addressing, such as discussions being dominated by a few members, not enough flexibility in direction, a personality conflict within the group, or too much leader direction? Processing group dynamics provides an important opportunity for members to practice tact in addressing group issues.

   Incorporate members' suggestions that fit the overall purpose of the group. If you do not yet feel comfortable as a facilitator, and if students are being negatively critical, tell them you are still learning about groups, and they are as well. Be aware that some students may press for "no focus" for a long time. You may want to review the rationale for focus outlined on page 13 prior to your first request for feedback. *Depending on group composition, you may also choose to delay questions about format until the benefits have become fairly clear.* Or simply be prepared to explain the purpose of the format while emphasizing that the format is flexible. Support the group and give guidance as they make progress in overcoming group challenges. Above all, try to be secure in using the focus. If you seem unsure and ask too frequently about the format, you may experience mutiny, especially if there has not been sufficient time for the group to bond and appreciate the benefits of some structure. I often ask for feedback midway and also late in the life of a group, otherwise relying on students' level of cooperation to inform me sufficiently about how the group is functioning. If lack of cooperation is a problem, I process that (see #9 below).

8. If group energy consistently or increasingly lags, discuss that in the group. Let the members help you figure out how to energize the discussions and/or deal with group inhibitions. However, *do not readily reject the idea of maintaining a focus for each session*. Perhaps you need to alter your questioning style (see page 16) or more deftly follow some directions that come up spontaneously. Or perhaps you need to be more selective when choosing your topics. The written exercises and activity sheets often encourage sharing. Being creative, especially in incorporating physical movement into the activities, might help to engage some group members. Matching activities to your group's preferred learning style and personalities can improve interaction.

9. Anything can be processed in the group—crying, interrupting, disclosing something unexpected,

being rude, being sad, belching, challenging the facilitator. That is, group members can discuss what just happened—in the present. A facilitator can say, "What was it like for you to challenge me just now?" or "How did the rest of you feel when she challenged me?" or "How are you feeling right now, after he disclosed that?" or "That comment was a surprise. How is it affecting us?" *Then wait for a response*. Processing what happens in a group gives members a chance to reflect on their own feelings and on the group's interaction and to learn skills in expressing emotions.

Making Adaptations for Your Group

Group facilitators often do not adapt the format to their particular groups as much as they should—and as much as I would expect. I encourage you to approach the topics creatively, responding to each unique group. At the very least, time constraints may mean that some written exercises need to be shortened. Depending on the group's level of cognitive development, context, and purposes, some vocabulary might need to be changed. In addition, some of the suggestions provided for each session might not fit your setting or your group's level of ability. In that case, ignore those or devise your own approach to the topic. You will need to examine the individual sessions to determine which ones might be most helpful, enjoyable, and appropriate for your group's developmental level. However, beware of underestimating group members' awareness of the world or need for information based on their age or ability. In addition, be aware of, and respect, community sensitivities. For example, parents and other members of the community might object to discussions related to sexual orientation, sexuality and sexual behavior, gender roles, gender identity, and family roles. Even discussions about depression, disordered eating, or cutting might not be deemed appropriate.

Ethical Behavior

Your ethical behavior as group leader is extremely important. Sharing confidential group information in the teachers' or agency lounge, with parents, or in the community is not only potentially hurtful, but may also ultimately destroy the possibility of any small-group activity in your school or other place of employment. Trust is quickly lost, and it is difficult and sometimes even impossible to reestablish.

If you plan to conduct groups in a school setting, but are not a counselor and are unfamiliar with ethical guidelines for counselors (including those specifically related to group work), get a copy of such guidelines from your school counselor or through the website of the American Counseling Association (www.counseling.org) or the American School Counselor Association (www.schoolcounselor.org) and read the guidelines carefully. Be aware that counselor training may have an entire course focused on ethics and professionalism. Be especially aware of your responsibilities regarding confidentiality. Familiarize yourself with situations in which confidentiality must be breached, such as when abuse or neglect is suspected or when someone is in danger or may be a danger to others. The "informed consent" aspect should be addressed by discussing purpose, format, content, confidentiality, and your responsibilities at the first meeting.

Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group. You can explain to your group the actions you will take to protect confidentiality, but you should emphasize that you can guarantee the behavior only of yourself, not of group members. The ethics of confidentiality and privacy apply regardless of whether a leader is a degreed counselor. However, since trust is so essential for comfortable group discussion, you should strongly encourage students not to share, outside of the group, what is said in the group. Tell group members that not keeping comments "inside the group" can destroy the group and even prevent *any* groups from existing in the school or organization in the future due to of lack of trust. Avoid the word *secrets*, however, since it may raise unwarranted concerns and because it may be frightening to students whose families remind them often about not sharing personal information. Any discussion about confidentiality should be matter of fact, not threatening and not overblown. You might remind a group, now and then, about respecting member and family privacy (for example, "How are we doing with respecting privacy after we leave this room each time?").

You may wish to address these issues in a letter to parents asking their permission for their children to attend the group. For a sample letter, which you may modify, see page 19. Please note that this letter is appropriate for groups not designed to address a specific problem area. Feel free to adapt it when necessary.

Group Members Who Are Quiet or Shy

Earnest (but nonstrident) efforts to ask students who are quiet or shy for at least one or two comments during each meeting can help them to feel included and gradually increase their willingness to talk. Although listening can be as valuable as speaking in finding commonalities and gaining self-awareness, it is important for reticent individuals to be heard by their peers, even if only at modest levels. The value of communicating with peers during meetings, in contrast to communicating with you, the facilitator, should not be underestimated. Group members' feedback has indicated, to me, that quiet members gain as much as, or more than, assertive members.

Groups can actually help to validate and support quiet personal styles through discussing personality differences in general and by overtly recognizing quiet members' listening and observation skills, which gregarious members may not have. Even small talk between a leader and a shy student while everyone is arriving may contribute to comfort and ease, which eventually might generate spontaneous comments. In addition, using the activity sheets gives

everyone, including shy members, a chance to have low-risk attention in the group and be heard.

Group Members Who Dominate

One strategy for dealing with verbal dominators is to revisit the group guidelines (page 20) as a group, with no one the target. Processing group discussions after the fact can also be used to raise awareness (for example, "How does it feel to be in the group at this point? How are we doing in making sure everyone gets a chance to talk and no one dominates?"). If you notice someone rolling eyes when a dominant group member talks, call attention to that (for example, "I was just noticing something nonverbal in the group—an expression on someone's face. [Name], would you be willing to share with the group what's on your mind? It might help us be a better group.").

Counseling Individual Group Members

I have found that when trust has been established among members and between members and facilitator, individuals with pressing needs sometimes, understandably and appropriately, seek consultation outside of the group if the facilitator is accessible. A trusted facilitator, sought out during a crisis, may indeed play a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of a group member.

If you will not be on the premises every day, it is important to tell the group, at least at the outset of the group series, about when you will be available. I do not recommend giving out your phone number or email, since it is easy for particularly dependent students, and those with poor boundaries, to abuse such access. On the other hand, it may be possible (though not easy) for you to model boundary-setting if the email or phone calls become invasive. Anyone can usually find contact information on the internet if persistent enough, of course—another reason for not giving it out to the group. I don't recommend that you participate with group members on social media, not only because oral communication is a focus of the discussion groups, but also because modeling good social and emotional boundaries is important. Keeping track of what is said, and by whom, becomes even more complex when social media are involved, and group members may be less discreet when not face to face. A small group can be a rare setting for getting acquainted in new ways. Moderation, good boundaries, and appropriate caution are all important here.

It is important to note that too much emphasis at group sessions on outside conferencing can turn off members who do not want to connect the groups to "counseling" and might also encourage some to steer their communication away from the group inappropriately in order to have a special relationship with the facilitator. Facilitators should certainly not refer to outside conversations in group meetings. In addition, if members complain about the group to the facilitator between sessions, they should be encouraged to bring their concerns to the group, putting responsibility on the group member and giving the group an opportunity to gain skills in resolving conflict.

Handling "Bombs"

Most students, including those in early middle school, are appropriately discreet in what they share in small- and large-group meetings, especially when the facilitator does not pry for private information. However, you can probably expect a few highly charged moments to occur along the way, such as when someone suddenly drops a "bomb" after deciding that the group is trustworthy.

What happens when something shocking is revealed, when someone cries, or when intense conflict erupts within the group? No one can predict these events, of course, since every group has unique dynamics, and groups are generally full of surprises. However, with some basic admonitions in mind, you will learn to trust your instincts. With time and experience, you will be able to anticipate—and perhaps avert—most crisis situations. If they occur, you can be prepared.

Have tissues handy for the student who cries, and simply convey a silent request to a group member to pass the box to the person who needs it. It is important that you affirm the emotion with a compassionate facial expression and perhaps a slight head nod and accept the tears with poise. In fact, your empathetic composure will model for group members that it is all right to cry and express emotions genuinely, that others do not have to rush in to "fix" the situation, and that it is important not to be hyperreactive to others' discomfort, since objectivity and the ability to help may then be lost. When appropriate, ask the individual what, if anything, is needed from the group. Overt support? Just listening? Nothing at the moment? It may be helpful to process an outburst after the fact, asking questions like, "How did it feel to have someone express emotion through crying?" or "Is there anything you would like to say to (name of student who cried)?" and perhaps then (to the student who cried), "What was it like for you to hear that?"

If a student makes a dramatic revelation, immediately put your hand out at arm's length, palm forward, and remind the group about the importance of confidentiality. You might say, "Let's pause a moment. It probably took courage for (name of student) to share that. She/he trusted you as a group. Remember, what was said should stay in the group. If you are tempted to share this information with someone outside of the group, bite your tongue. That's very important. We want to protect our group." Beware of exaggerated responses, both nonverbal and verbal, which can reinforce the idea that a particular revelation is "too much to handle." The sharer might, in fact, have been testing that belief.

If you work in a school and are not a counselor, you should consult with a school counselor or administrator to learn what to do in specific situations. For example, if a student makes a comment (or even just hints) about abuse or suicidal thoughts, you should know how to follow up (see the session "Sadness, Depression, and Dark Thoughts,"