

Building blocks for boys



Andrew Malekoff offers essential guidelines for working effectively with groups of boys

Since my earliest experience as a volunteer groupworker in 1973¹, I have developed, led, supervised, administered, taught and written about groupwork with children and young people. Although I have always been a community-based agency practitioner, I have also become, of necessity, an itinerant educator – someone who teaches on the go about groupwork with children and adolescents. This is an essential role, as our work is perpetually questioned by every adult who is in earshot of our groups, and particularly by those who appear to have forgotten that they were once themselves children.

Although I have not worked exclusively with boys throughout my career, in this article I will offer building blocks for practice with boys in groups, whether they are members of groups that are only composed of boys or participants in mixed groups.

As an itinerant educator, one of my most important lessons is that the road for group workers dealing with boys is congested with some who claim that the only worthwhile group is the one where members speak politely and insightfully. A tall order for rough-and-ready boys' groups. Arch-enemies of the noise police, groupworkers helping boys tend to be viewed as amateurs dabbling where deeper, more learned, and more individualised work is necessary.

Our work often looks as if it just crawled out of bed. Whatever it means to be politically correct in the human services, we are not. At our best, what we are is a legion of Detective Columbos – rumpled and befuddled, yet dogged and full of savvy.

Although boys are often rambunctious in groups, groupworkers need to tune in to the reality that boys need permission to have an internal world of feelings, peer and adult support to help them to express a full range of emotions, and models of manhood that exemplify emotional attachment. Boys also need to see that physical toughness and stoicism, as stand-alone attributes, are narrow indicators of male strength. They need to see that emotional courage is as genuine an item as physical courage, and that empathy is a source of strength and a foundation for lasting relationships.

In addition, boys need to know that the grown-ups who work with them in groups not only can tolerate the often fluctuating change-on-a-dime energy, but also can fully embrace, enjoy and celebrate it as well. Strengths-based groupwork is a powerful path for addressing these and other critical needs in boys' lives. The following are seven strengths-based building blocks² that I illustrate to show how they are brought to life to meet some of boys' essential needs.



1 Form groups based on members' felt needs and wants, not diagnoses

Groups must not be formed on the basis of a diagnosis or label but on the basis of the felt needs and wants that the group is being formed to address. Felt needs are different from ascribed labels. Never throw boys together into a group because of a diagnosis or label or exclude them for the same reason.

I am reminded of a colleague who insisted that groups are not appropriate for boys with the diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder. He was not a groupworker and tended to focus only on surface behaviour and not on either overt or underlying needs. With little to no groupwork experience, he failed to recognise that there are boys who are labelled as such who might have divergent needs that a group could help address. For example, they might benefit from a group aimed at building social skills, or targeted at addressing behavioural issues at home or school, or at reducing anxiety and developing learning skills to improve school performance. Or maybe a group could address a few needs that prospective group members might have in common. Need is where we begin in groupwork. Never form a group based on a label alone. Always recognise that boys with different diagnoses might have similar needs, and boys with similar diagnoses might have divergent needs.

It is important to understand that identifying need is but one significant component in group planning, perhaps the most neglected phase in group development. Other key elements of planning, along with need, are: defining group purpose, group composition, establishing group structure, determining group content, pre-group contact and agency/social context. Although all of these components are important, after establishing need, the key is to define the group's purpose. Purpose must be differentiated from content. Purpose is where we are headed in a group, while content is the means of getting there. A sound group purpose should be one that both groupworkers and members can articulate; one that offers directed implications for group content (for what the group will do to meet its goals); and one that is clear enough to know that it has been achieved as the group evaluates its progress. There is a detailed chapter on group planning in my book *Group Work with Adolescents: Principles and Practice*³ that contains many illustrations of each element of the planning model.

Once the group begins, it is important to never lose sight of the 'whole person' in each of the group members, despite whatever deficits might have led to their referral for counselling.

2 Structure groups to welcome the whole person, not just the troubled parts

Group workers must learn to structure groups to welcome the whole person and not just the troubled, hurt or broken parts. There is much talk these days about strengths and wellness. This is hardly a new and revolutionary concept. But it has been neglected for too long.

In a mixed group of boys and girls who had suffered familial losses, one of the members of the group was a 10-year-old boy, Jonah, who had much trouble sitting still. He stated that he was despised by people in authority at his school. He also had difficulty making friends. Another member of the group, a girl named Robin, had trouble with an early group assignment which was to bring something of personal importance to the group. Robin, thinking about her deceased dad, said, upon absorbing the assignment, 'I know what I would like to bring, but I would have to dig him up.' As groupworker, I took a deep breath and remained silent long enough for Jonah, who had been 'climbing the walls' in my office, to step up to Robin and say, 'You could bring a picture.' And with that, Robin, nine, removed a photo of her smiling dad from her pink plastic purse. The group members then gathered around Robin, in silent support of her grief and remembrance of her father. Sometimes groupworkers need to remember that silence is golden; strategically sitting back can allow the whole person in the group members to emerge, as was the case when Jonah made such a helpful intervention, despite his seeming inattentiveness and distractibility. It is moments like these that can be transformative and that contribute to group members making worthwhile contributions.

Use of a programme and activities is the lifeblood of groupwork, whether a simple homework assignment or something more complex like developing a board game, as the follow vignette will illustrate.

3 Integrate verbal and non-verbal activities

Competent groupwork requires the use of verbal and non-verbal activities. Groupwork practitioners must learn to relax and abandon the strange belief that the only successful group is one that consists of people who sit still and speak politely and insightfully.

After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001, a group of school-aged boys was formed at my Agency⁴, the North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center on Long Island, New York. They were all boys whose dads died after the planes struck the buildings in which they worked. The boys were not much for talk and so the group worker suggested that they develop a board game together. It was an amalgam of a variety of well-known games such as charades and Pictionary. In addition, using clay, they sculpted their own game pieces to move along the board as the game was in progress. The game pieces were reminiscent of their relationships with their fathers. One was a soccer ball that reminded one of the boys of playing soccer with his dad. Another was an ice-cream cone that was a reminder of trips with dad for sweet treats. The game was successful in helping the boys to remember and identify, label and express feelings and memories. The groupworker told them that they could take the game pieces home each week. But they chose not to. One of them expressed the sentiments of the whole group when he said, 'We want to leave them here, because this is where we play with our dads.'

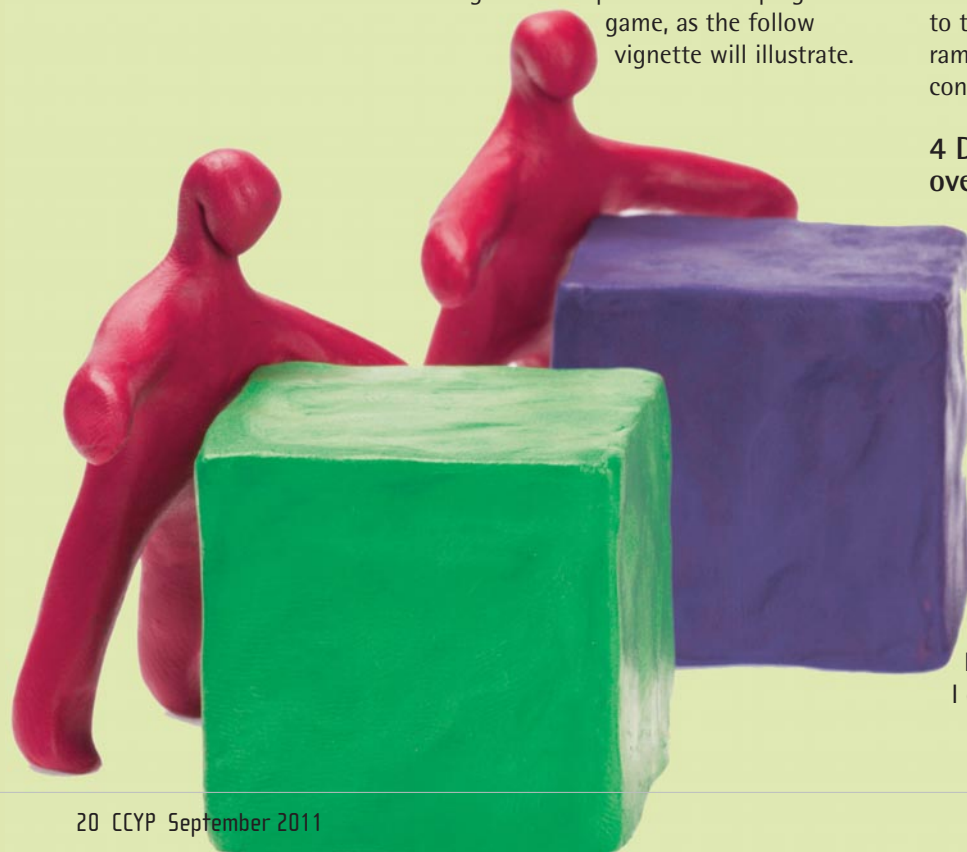
Allowing a group to develop its own game, suggests, in turn, that the groupworker also understands the importance of turning power over to the group members. For many adults this seems counterintuitive and, consequently, they are hesitant to try. Nevertheless, good groupwork, even with rambunctious boys, necessitates turning over control to the members.

4 Decentralise authority and turn control over to group members

Groupworkers need to understand that losing control is not where you want to get away from, it's where you want to get to. What this means is that when control is turned over to the group and when the groupworker gives up his or her centrality in the group, mutual aid can follow and members can then find expression for what they have to offer.

In one memorable group of teenaged boys, all of whom had problems with impulse control and appropriately expressing anger, one of the members, John, stood on a chair with a lighter in his hand, explaining something to the others. Periodically he ignited the lighter and held it near to the sprinkler system. I decided not to intervene as he was explaining

Groupworkers need to understand that losing control is not where you want to get away from, it's where you want to get to



something to the others that he learned in his new role in his town's fire department. He had joined as a junior member of the volunteer fire department and was proud of his new status and what he had learned. I thought it was worth the risk to let him be. Many years later, John and I had a reunion of sorts. By then he was an adult in his 30s with his own family. One of the stories he told me was about his continuing role in the fire department. He was awarded several commendations for valour, in one case as the only person in the county who made two saves in one fire. Of course, I thought back to that day when he was standing on the chair with lighter in hand. I was glad that I turned control over to the group, trusting that they would respect John's new-found feeling of pride and not spoil the moment by setting off the sprinklers.

I have a video-tape clip of this group encounter that I use in training. It is one of the most controversial clips that I use and generates much discussion regarding whether or not I should have allowed John and the group to gravitate to the sprinkler system with a lighter in hand. What such conversations evoke in me is the importance of working closely with other relevant people (eg parents) in my group members' lives, as it is my job to demystify groupwork for them, to put into some kind of context the noise and activity level and the 'more than talking' that goes on in a good boys' group. So the fifth building block is...

5 Develop alliances with the relevant others of group members

Groupworkers involved with children and young people must understand that anxious and angry parents, teachers, and school administrators are not our enemies and that we must collaborate with them and form stable alliances with them, if we are to be successful with their children.

We must learn to embrace their frustration and anxiety rather than become defensive and rejecting. Alliances are needed with relevant others who are deeply invested in the plight of our group members. We must also be clear that, although our group members come to us with individual problems, they live in a greater environment that impacts on their lives and that they are capable of changing, if only in incremental ways. They need to learn that they can change the world, their world, with the proper support to do so. So we need to...

6 Maintain a dual focus on individual change and social reform

Practising sound groupwork requires a dual vision of individual change and social reform that enables group members to become active participants in community affairs, so that they might change the world one day where others have failed. A good group can be a great start for this kind of consciousness development and action among boys.

A favourite boys' group memory is one of a group that took social action. It was a group of teenage boys in a special school for young people with serious emotional disturbances. The boys in the group complained about the bathroom conditions in the school, and especially the fact that there were no doors on the bathroom stalls. Switching gears to this 'social reform' issue was a turning point in the group, one in which they could plan and rehearse how to make a difference, how to express that they were not being treated with the dignity they deserved. They were successful in their effort after presenting their concerns to the school principal. Some of them learned for the first time in their lives what it was to be empowered.

Good timing is always critical in making an intervention with a group, such as adopting a social reform agenda. A more mature group is likely to be successful in a social change effort. Understanding group development is necessary for a groupworker to succeed in such efforts, as the next section will describe in more detail.

7 Understand and respect group development as key to promoting change

A greater understanding of and respect for group development, amidst the noise and movement and excitement of a typical boys' group, can lead to a feeling of greater confidence in the groupworker – confidence to move ahead and to hang in there and not bail out, as too many an adult already has.

There are many models of group development that readers can access. Critical to all of them is that the group has a life that includes, to a greater or lesser degree, some variation of beginning, middle and ending phases. I have already referred to the planning phase of group development, which should not be overlooked. Roselle Kurland⁵ is a key figure who developed a model for planning in social work with groups. The Boston Model⁶, developed by Garland et al through work with pre-adolescent boys, and the Interactional Model⁷, developed by William Schwartz, are two important models for groupworkers to learn about when working with boys.

Tuning in to the phase of development enables groupworkers to consider options for how to intervene. In the beginning phase of group development, trust is the major issue to tune in to. Groupworkers should be attentive to the frame of reference that boys bring when they join a new group. For example, have they been involved in groups that have been uncomfortable, overly competitive, unprotected by adults and unfulfilling? Getting off to a good start by providing more active leadership in the beginning and establishing group norms and purpose along with the members goes a long way to establishing a sense of safety, helping members to lock horns with the reality of the group and helping them to move beyond their



Always recognise that boys with different diagnoses might have similar needs and boys with similar diagnoses might have divergent needs

ambivalence about whether to fully commit to the experience.

In the middle phase of groupwork, after members have leapt in with both feet, a familial feel pervades the groups. With greater intimacy and cohesion comes the potential for more conflict. Some groupworkers want to avoid conflict at all costs. Nevertheless, conflict is where much of the work gets done. Conflict enables the group to grapple with real problems that arise in the here and now of the group. In one group of teenaged boys, one of the members came to the group after being injured in a fight. He was spitting up blood when he arrived. He chose to come to the group instead of getting medical treatment. He trusted the group, despite his protestations, to guide him and ultimately ensure that he would go to the emergency room. In a sense, the group, who he came to trust, was his first stop before the emergency room. He needed the reassurance of this intimate group of young men, once strangers to one another, to direct him to the care he needed. And the members of the group, not typically your 'warm and fuzzy' boys, rose to the occasion by recognising that he needed to take care of himself, and guided him to that end.

In a group of boys who were grieving the loss of a parent, naturally the ending phase was the most poignant. They were loosening their ties to one another, which reawakened the intense feelings associated with their familial loss. In the last few weeks of the group, the boys decorated rocks with memories of their lost loved ones. These were placed in a memorial garden designed for this purpose, a place where they could commemorate their loss and also ease themselves through the ending transition of the group.

Groupworkers need to understand the phases of group development in order to understand, in simple terms, if the group is grappling with beginning issues of trust, middle issues of intimacy or later issues of separation. Although this sounds simplistic, the reality is that it is much more complex, as the worker needs to be clear about how the phases of group development mirror critical issues in the boys' lives, and they must decide, accordingly, how directive or non-directive to be in their interventions with the group. They must be clear that similar behaviours in different phases of group development have different meaning to group members and, therefore, require different levels of intervention.

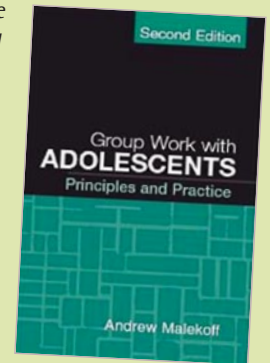
Conclusion

Groupworkers should always remember that boys need to be seen as whole people who need support and encouragement to give and receive a helping hand, experience and express emotions, and develop meaningful relationships. The seven building blocks for groupwork with boys offer a foundation for groupworkers to help boys to step off the narrow path of false masculinity and to take a step

forward in expressing a full range of emotions and developing caring, empathic relationships grounded in mutual support and respect. ■

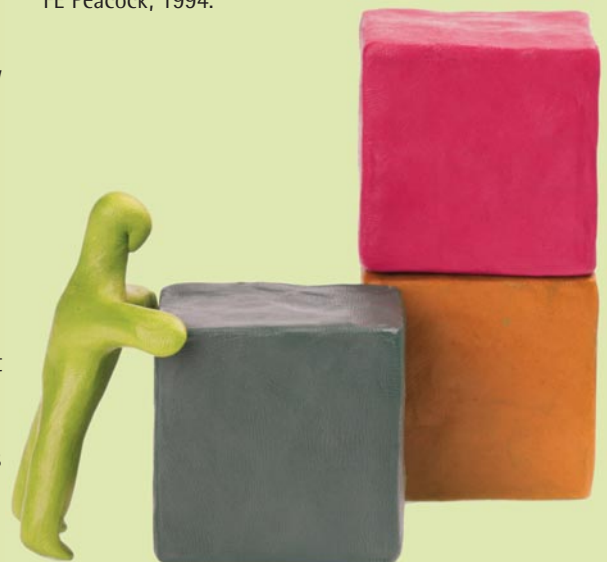
Andrew Malekoff is executive director of North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center in Roslyn Heights, New York. He is editor-in-chief of the journal Social Work with Groups and author of the textbook Group Work with Adolescents: Principles and Practice, published by Guilford Press, now in its second edition.

amalekoff@northshorechildguidance.org



References

- 1 Malekoff A. The power of group work with kids: a practitioner's reflection on strengths-based practice. *Families in Society*. 2001; 82(3):243-249.
- 2 Malekoff A. Strengths-based group work with children and adolescents. In: Garvin C, Gutierrez L, Galinsky M. (eds) *Handbook of social work with groups*. New York: Guilford Press; 2004.
- 3 Malekoff A. *Group work with adolescents: principles and practice*. 2nd edition. New York: Guilford Press; 2007.
- 4 Malekoff A. Transforming the trauma of September 11, 2001. In: Wise J, Bussey M. (eds) *Transforming trauma: an empowerment response*. Chapter 10. New York: Columbia University Press; 2007.
- 5 Northen H, Kurland R. *Social work with groups*. 3rd edition. New York: Columbia University Press; 2001.
- 6 Garland J, Jones H, Kolodny R. A model for stages of development in social work groups. In: Bernstein S. (ed) *Explorations in group work*. Boston: Milford House; 1973.
- 7 Schwartz W. *Social work with groups: the search for a method (1968-1972)*. In: Berman-Rossi T. (ed) *Social work: the collected writings of William Schwartz*. Itasca, IL: FE Peacock; 1994.



Similar behaviours in different phases of group development have different meaning to group members and require different levels of intervention