Group Therapy for Preschool Children: A Transdisciplinary School-Based Program

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ABSTRACT: Children under six and-a-half years are being seen in group therapy in on-site sessions at day care centers and nursery schools in New York. A general description of this program and the wide range of children it serves is provided, along with a brief discussion of the foundations upon which the modality is based. The transdisciplinary nature of the program is elaborated, with some highlighting of the contributions from the theory and practice of social work.

The course of treatment for two disadvantaged children from very different settings is detailed, with treatment vignettes which put in relief the uses that these individual children make of the group process. Finally, a discussion of the enabling agents of Therapeutic Nursery Group interventions is offered, emphasizing the rationale for technical aspects of work in groups with preschool children.

History, Description, and Goals of the Therapeutic Nursery Group Program

Estimates of the numbers of preschool children in need of special attention vary, but experts agree that not lower than 11.8% (Gould,
et al., 1981, p. 472) and as high as 30% (Population Study of A Day Care Center, 1967, noted in Report of the Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children, 1973, p. 80) of children enrolled in school have difficulties which warrant identification and mental health intervention (cf. National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, 1986 report). This paper describes a relatively economical program which assists children with a wide range of problems and diagnoses and is integrated within normal daycare and nursery settings. Over two thirds of parents agree to accept mental health assistance for their child and nearly all children come to treatment willingly.

The Child Development Center of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services began experimenting with small therapeutic nursery groups to treat children between the ages of three and six years, some 20 years ago, in the late 1960's. Through our Mental Health Consultation Program at several local day care centers, it had become evident that the families of many children who needed direct service were unable or unwilling to accept referrals to traditional outpatient facilities. Thus, the Therapeutic Nursery Group Program (TNG) was conceived as an outreach program to disadvantaged children within day care centers at which we had mental health consultation. If the children could not be brought to the program, we thought we could bring an innovative program to the children.

Currently we treat a total of 30 to 35 children a year in six centers. Children are seen for one or two school years depending on need and circumstances. Between two and five children are seen together by one therapist twice a week for about an hour at the center they attend. Occasionally, the children are also seen for one or a series of brief individual contacts, always in the context of their group sessions. In the last five years we have also established Therapeutic Nursery Groups in middle class nursery schools and within our own day care facility housed in a hotel for families made homeless by fire; individual case results have encouraged us to continue TNG work in these diverse settings.

TNG is a service identifying and reaching out to very young children in order to build emotional, social and cognitive strengths and prevent later school failure. Basic to all our work in groups with children is the building of relationships for each child, both with the therapist and with the other children. Even as we accept all of what a child brings, we see our task as helping children to harness and channel their energies so that they may organize inner and outer experience, differentiate, label and cope with their emotions, identify their own needs,