Book Review


Many people would agree that adolescence is at best a rocky road filled with many challenges. Drs. Waterman and Walker have realized this truth and, thus, they have studied and developed the SPARK curriculum for students over 7 years. Their book shows you step-by-step how to establish and conduct a group in the schools with at-risk adolescents focusing on the sensitive and serious issues they may or will likely face in our world today. A preventative, proactive approach with children and adolescents who are at-risk for a number of disadvantages needs to be at the crux of education in our schools. So often, our jobs in helping professions are based on putting the pieces of children’s lives back together after the fact instead of reaching them before the problem occurs. The authors have realized this discrepancy and developed a proactive approach to helping at-risk preadolescents and adolescents face various life challenges with the skills, courage, and support from peers and adults that may be crucial to their resiliency to overcome these obstacles.

As the authors explain, “the SPARK curriculum combines a group process model aimed at developing interpersonal skills and a psychoeducational model focused on building competence by development of specific skills needed by all youth, especially those at high risk (p. 19).” The term for the curriculum, SPARK, is used by the authors as an attempt to literally “spark” growth in adolescents, be it educational, behavioral, and/or emotional, through a group format. The SPARK curriculum was developed with the intent of using it in the school system, which is where adolescents will most likely confront some serious adolescent issues. However, the authors also highlight the versatility of this program in that it can be implemented in other settings as well. The SPARK curriculum includes seven modules or topic areas that the authors believe parallel some of issues our adolescents are faced with today.

The book is divided into three chapters as well as a series of appendices providing materials needed to run a group. In Chapter 1, “Guidelines for Setting Up and Leading Groups,” the authors take us through the basics of getting a SPARK
counseling group started and structured. Specifically, the goals of the program, how to select the adolescent group members, and what types of people should be selected as group leaders, are all detailed. The authors specify a suggested construction of the group in terms of size, target students, and grade level of those students. Another important consideration detailed in the chapter is who the group leaders should be, based on their knowledge, liking, and understanding of adolescents. In addition, an overview of counseling techniques specific for groups, as well as how to handle dilemmas in a group situation, such as the disclosing of sensitive information by the students, is included in this chapter. This chapter really helps lay the foundation for a group situation as it includes many of the issues that can arise during any group meeting. So many times, a group curriculum is presented without the bases that need to be covered before the group even starts. Thus, once again, the SPARK curriculum is based on an organized and proactive way to run a group.

Chapter 2, “The SPARK Curriculum,” is the heart of this book. This chapter details each of the seven modules, the sessions with each, as well as the numerous planned activities and materials needed for each session. The authors make following the sessions simple by the organized format right down to a script the group leader can follow. Again, the program is developed to last the duration of a typical school semester (15 weeks) with a weekly meeting of approximately one hour. Thus, those planning the group are able to have some consistency with meeting times. The authors state that the first module, Trust Building and Communication Skills, which includes three sessions, was selected as a starting point so that the youth in the group could learn about each other, begin to develop a sense of trust in the group, and emphasize a supportive atmosphere. In addition, the group is able to develop group rules and consequences. It is important that the members feel comfortable with each other before delving into serious issues. Thus, the authors have shown that gaining rapport and sense of boundaries is as important in a group as it is in an individual counseling session.

Anger Management and Problem-Solving Skills is the focus of the second module and the information and skills gained in this module are reinforced throughout the remaining program modules. The authors note that, “the other [additional] modules were selected because they represent areas of significant concern for ‘at-risk’ youth (p. 19).” The remaining five modules include: Ethnic Identity and Anti-Prejudice, Educational Aspirations, Peer Pressure and Gangs, Exposure to Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Reactions, and Family Relationships. All modules focus on the competency skills needed to deal with and approach a variety of issues that may arise in each category. Thus, module two becomes central to approaching and using problem-solving skills to deal with the topics and situations in the remaining modules.

The layout of Chapter 2 is extremely well organized and includes the goals of each module, an overview of the sessions in each module, and a detailed list of activities, materials, and content for each session. Thus, the format of the book makes