

# The ALF Group: A Model of Group Therapy With Children

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article, the authors present a model for group work with children in which role characterization, specifically the character of Alf, whose name is an acronym for acceptance, love, and family, is used. The group work was conducted with children experiencing the separation or divorce of their parents. The structure and process of the ALF model is described.

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CHILDREN FORM A GREATER part of the case load of today's psychotherapist whether or not that therapist has been trained to work with children. Parents are using therapy to assist their children through a variety of concerns that are present to a significant degree in our current society. In our clinics, we see children who are victims of child sexual abuse and physical violence in their families, who are responding to the separation or divorce of their parents, who are resolving the grief that results from the death of significant family members, and who are responding to more general issues of family stress and dysfunction that cause children to act out.

We believe that therapy with children between the ages of 5 and 10 can provide them with a corrective or re-educative process that will enable them to develop new strategies or replace ineffective ones, permitting them to cope better with life. Child therapy is designed to promote the child's cognitive understanding at the developmental level of that specific child (Piaget, 1969). It also helps the child identify feelings and find appropriate means for expressing them. Finally, it is designed to change behavior in the direction of enhanced coping and skill mastery.

We have noticed that, where possible, group therapy for dealing with the problems of children is the therapy of choice. We have found, like Ohlsen (1977), that in groups, children learn to help each other and become increasingly open and authentic regarding their inner and outer experiences. George Gazda (1973) has stressed the importance of recogniz-

ing the developmental tasks of children within each age group and designing the process to address these developmental stages. He sees group procedures on a continuum with preventive groups on one end and remedial groups at the other. Thompson and Rudolph (1983) identify four basic categories of groups into which children could be divided for counseling purposes. The first they title the "common-problems group," consisting of children who are dealing with the same difficulty, such as loss, divorce, or school problems. The second is the "case-centered group," composed of children who are each working on a specific problem. Within the group, the children bring different resources, thus aiding each other in the growth and change process. The third is the "human-potential group" through which children can develop the positive traits and strengths that lie dormant within them. The final type is the "skill-development group" designed to enhance the various skills that enable a child to cope better, for example, communication skills and ability to handle aggression.

### **Facilitating**

It is our belief that therapists who work with children's groups need some special human qualities and facilitation skills. We think it is basic to good therapy ethics that facilitators actually like children and enjoy working with them. Facilitators need to be able to tap into their playful childlike qualities when that is appropriate in the group, and need a good understanding of child development as it relates to cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels of functioning. A systems background further enhances therapists' knowledge of dynamics so that they always understand the child in the larger context of his or her life.

In terms of skills, we believe that it is important to have a basic knowledge of group counseling and dynamics, to be comfortable with action methods within the group process, and to have a repertoire of "starters" or warm-up exercises to facilitate the group sociometry. We further feel that the therapist needs to be highly creative and spontaneous to meet the various contingencies that emerge with children in groups.

We recommend a cotherapy model in working with children in group and prefer to have the cotherapy team composed of a male and a female. For children, this model is both representative of and enables them to work through issues related to both parents, whether or not those parents are present in their lives. In our "characterization" model, the use of co-therapists further permits one therapist to be in the "character role" while the other is playing the "straight person."

### **Characterization Model**

A number of years ago when Big Bird was the hit of young children's television viewing, one of us (CAG) decided that children readily respond to nonhuman characters who have authentic human qualities. The children on the TV program "Sesame Street" seemed eager to share their inner experiences, both thoughts and feelings, with Big Bird. As an experiment, children with severe behavioral problems participated in a group experience with one of the two therapists acting as Big Bird. The goals set for the group were obtained much more rapidly and successfully than were those set for the regular groups in which both leaders remained their own persons. Later, groups were conducted while one therapist was in clown costume, and those groups also achieved success. A therapist in character can say and do things that the children will listen to and respond to and experiment with that they would not do if directed by a therapist not in character.

### **ALF Model for Children of Separation/Divorce**

In the remainder of this article, we will focus on the ALF (acceptance, love, family) model, a group procedure for working with children affected by separation or divorce. Alf is one of the most popular characters currently on TV, with high viewer ratings and a number of promotional items in stores—toys, clothes, games. Almost every child is fascinated with Alf. Therefore, in our group one therapist works with the group in the costume of Alf, while the other therapist functions as Alf's foil or straight person. The purpose of the group is to help children cope more adequately with the separation and divorce of their parents.

A review of the literature related to the children of divorce (Longfellow, 1979; Wallerstein, 1983, 1984) indicates that children generally have a difficult time coping with losses and transitions resulting from marital breakdown. Frequently, children of divorced parents will act out as a means of trying to reunite their parents. They may also develop a pattern of emotional withdrawal as a means of gaining attention and provoking a parental connection. Beyond this, a range of symptoms has been reported such as phobias, learning problems, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, and regression to earlier stages of development and their appropriate behaviors.

As specific goals, the ALF group endeavored to

1. encourage the children to express their feelings regarding the parental separation;

2. use a group context for mutual support and learning;
3. use both skill development and case-centered foci when working with a common-problem group;
4. use art, drama, play therapy, and other media to accomplish the expression of feelings and to gain cognitive mastery at appropriate developmental levels; and
5. have the character of Alf be a symbol of the group.

Alf was chosen as a symbol because most children know and love the character. Alf is a being from outer space who arrives on earth and is adopted by a family. He is furry in appearance, has a big wart on his nose, and continually says "no problem" to any difficulty. He would become the teacher, nurturer, supporter of feelings, and model of skill development as the group evolved. His name, too, symbolized our hope for what we wanted to accomplish with the children—accepting love in the family. For these children, their main task was the acceptance of the fact that their families loved them even though there was a change in the family organization as a result of their parents' separation.

The ALF groups for children were divided into eight sessions, with each having a specific focus. The themes for the meetings were as follows:

- Session 1: Introduction of rules and Alf as cotherapist
- Session 2: Meaning of words such as separation, divorce, blended family, blaming
- Session 3: Feelings focus: loss, grief, sadness, anger, etc.
- Session 4: Denying separation (pretending)
- Session 5: Sadness (depression)
- Session 6: Anger and its expression
- Session 7: Acceptance
- Session 8: Termination and appreciation

The rules established within the group were minimal but very important for maintaining a structure and a hierarchy of authority. The rules were simply stated: do not hurt others; do not hurt yourself; do not damage the room or toys; and do not leave the room.

When we do a common-problems group with cotherapists, we work with seven to eight children. The ages range from 6 to 9, and often during activities, we divide the group into younger and older children, with a therapist working with each group. Often the groups will contain siblings because it makes more sense for a parent to bring both children to the office at the same time. The children, although they are different ages, usually have similar problems.

### Process of Sessions

Usually in the first session, the children express their anxiety by high levels of activity. This may be acted out in negative ways if it is not channeled into some starter activity. Alf, in costume, introduces the group to a series of active exchanges that gradually taper down to more structured and quiet forms. This allows Alf to do some teaching about the function of the group and how it relates to the situation of parental separation.

The second session is devoted to looking at some of the words that are used by adults and children at the time of separation. Four key words are identified: separation, divorce, blended family, and blaming. The children are asked to define what these words mean. Many are vague and have only partial understanding of the words. The words are then acted out by using the group or Alf and the cotherapist. The children describe their feelings about the words. When one child said that the words "make me sad," it provided a context for enacting the fact that separation does not have to mean abandonment.

Denial and anger are the predominant feelings of children who are experiencing the separation of their parents. The third session deals with these emotions in the context of Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The children are asked to draw a picture showing how they feel about the separation. After the children tell their stories and show their pictures, Alf and the cotherapist, Jennifer, choose a feeling and enact it in a way that would involve the various members of the group in a demonstration of a feeling. For example, denial was demonstrated with Alf pretending that he was happy and satisfied while Jennifer was telling him that he could not have any of her candy. The pretending was exaggerated so that it was obvious to the children. When they have processed what was happening and when they identify it as "denial," no matter what the words, the leaders relate it to the children's own parental separation context.

Sessions four through seven continue in this vein. Various feelings are explored, and skills to handle each one appropriately are developed. A lot of sculpting of the families is done, using members of the group to represent each family member of a particular child. The leaders then demonstrate that, although the family may now be organized differently, all the cast of characters remain. The child thus comes to see that both parents are still available. Further, the child is assured that grandparents will not be lost. The child gains a visual picture of his or her life process. Often, the leaders demonstrate the movement back and forth between families and what is special and different in each context.

In the final session, Alf and Jennifer begin by talking about Alf's eventual return to his own planet. They mention what they appreciate about each other and remember the experiences that they have shared. This duet is then expanded to include the group and each child is asked to tell what he or she has appreciated about various members of the group and about Jennifer and Alf.

The closure of the group is related to the changes that any separation brings about. In this discussion of changes, the children talk about the changes that are the result of their parents' separation. The children are reassured that they have learned how to use all the benefits of ALF (accepting and being accepted, loving, and appreciating one's family) to make their current life situation more acceptable and happy. Each child is given a little Alf sticker, attached to a handmade, symbolic gift. For instance, one child who wanted to know what the future would bring and who loved airplanes was given a decorated paper airplane with two seats. Alf (in sticker form) was in one seat, and a drawing of the child was in the pilot seat. He was told that the airplane represented his ability to move quickly from place to place. For this child, the airplane also represented his need to get a good overview so that he could feel more comfortably in charge of what was happening to him in relation to his family. A specialized gift was given each child because the therapist hoped that it would enable him or her to retain the ALF experience even when the group was not in process. The gift also represented an inner quality that each child had worked on while in the group.

### Conclusion

This group had less difficulty meeting its goals than did the "noncharacterization" groups. The group was not set up in a controlled experiment, but we plan to do this in the future. Both of us have conducted groups for children when we did not dress in character, and we found such groups generally more difficult to manage, less apt to achieve goals in a short time frame, and much less fun to conduct. A parents' meeting was held at the start and at the end of the group, and parents confirmed that the children appeared more relaxed, that specific symptoms had, for the most part, disappeared, and that the child was more openly expressing his or her experience to both parents.

The use of a therapist in character results in a more child-centered focus for the group therapy. For instance, Alf could teach ideas to the children to enhance their cognitive understanding in a way that a therapist not in character could not do. The Alf character can hold the children's attention for a very long time. Alf can snuggle and nurture a child,

when appropriate, in a manner that does not compete with the significant individuals in the child's life. Alf can encourage the child to sit on mom's lap and cry just as he is doing with Alf. Alf can talk about himself as a child so that the child can identify with him, whereas, out of costume, the therapist is not a child but an adult. Thus, Alf can use the child experiences to model for the children in the group. Alf can "act out" in appropriate ways and thus channel energy positively.

As a fantasy figure, Alf helps the children learn to pretend and develop their creative potential. They are thus able to gain new perspectives for examining their life context. New views provide alternative means for problem solving. This process can thus move the child from a place of being "stuck" to one in which he or she can use inner resources to manage in a more creative fashion difficult situations in living. It is highly satisfying to a child therapist to see children helping each other to grow and change, facing adversity without denial, and realizing that they have the inner resources to manage. Thus, with Alf, the child can reach a point where he or she approaches a barrier and sees it as "no problem."

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