

A Psychoeducational Group for Adolescent Girls to Facilitate Egalitarian, Non-Abusive Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Violence in Israeli society has in recent years become more prevalent. Our Social and Welfare Services have been receiving more reports of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse within families and within Israeli society at large. In an attempt to address this problem, the authors selected eight girls, 14 to 15 years of age, to participate in a group to explore egalitarian relationships, with the goal of reducing the likelihood that members will enter a violent relationship. The group was part of a preventive intervention program for girls who were identified as being at high risk.

The participants met for a 12-session psychoeducational therapy group to discuss a range of different topics associated with egalitarian relationships and violence, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. After having completed the program, participants generally reported a high level of satisfaction. The girls mostly responded that participating in the group greatly enhanced their knowledge about egalitarian, non-abusive relationships, as well as their personal awareness of the implications of violent behavior.

Today's adolescents are tomorrow's adults. Accordingly, to build a stronger and healthier society, we must pay close atten-

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tion to educating the next generation. In recent years Israelis have been hearing more about violent behavior patterns that begin at very early ages. Acts of violence in Israel are becoming more prevalent, and Israeli social welfare services have been receiving more reports about physical, psychological, and sexual abuse among young people. In attempting to address this problem, we, as group facilitators, decided to focus on the topics of love and relationships with boys, subjects that seem to take central focus in young girls' thoughts and attention. As part of a preventive intervention program for girls at high risk, we constituted a psychoeducational adolescent group to deal with issues of egalitarian relationships, to raise participants' self-awareness of risky behavior patterns and dangerous situations related with pairing off and sexuality, and to discourage group members from participating in abusive relationships. We chose to work with girls who act out through dangerous sexual behaviors that put them at high risk of being hurt.

BACKGROUND

Adolescence

Adolescence is a developmental stage during which an individual progresses from childhood to adulthood. Custom and culture within Israeli society considers this developmental period to be between the ages of 11 and 19. During this period adolescents experience changes and transformations in development through self-examination and through experimenting with different behaviors which contribute to the development of a personal, independent identity. Adolescence can be viewed as a kind of psychological moratorium during which youngsters are free to experiment with different roles and relationships without making long-term commitments (Pazy, Sarna & Ron, 1988; Zeider, 1999). Changes during this developmental period take place in four central areas: physical, cognitive, emotional, and social (Golan, Lahav-Csantini, 1999).

Adolescence is widely thought to be a difficult period in life, both for adolescents and for the people around them. Scholars

and therapists alike recognize the complexity in treating adolescents, due to their emotional volatility and the increase of erotic and aggressive contents which characterize this period and tend to make adolescents hyper-sensitive and vulnerable (Blos, 1962; Freud, 1958; Nimmanahaeminda, 1997). According to Erikson (1959), adolescence is one of the critical periods in psychosocial development. It is characterized by a search for personal identity that can on occasion precipitate serious personality conflicts. The period is characterized by conflicts between the different intrapsychic structures and also within the ego itself. Unstable and capricious moods are commonplace in this period (Hopkins, 1994).

The emotional, physical, and social changes during the beginning stages of adolescence are often pressuring and problematic. They affect self-image and interpersonal relationships, especially among vulnerable girls who are prone to depression, eating disorders, or other behavioral problems. The dramatic cognitive and biological changes that take place during adolescence can be related to increasing feelings of psychological separation from parents, which increase anxiety and the adolescent's need for support from peer groups (Kirshner, 1994; Zeider, 1999). Accordingly, a central characteristic of this age group is the significant role peer groups play. The peer group serves as a kind of laboratory for experiencing relationships and social functioning. When development progresses constructively, adolescents gain confidence in their ability to function without parental or other adult guidance. This process is self-reinforcing. The dominance of the peer group can produce meaningful and positive changes in this age group (Cohen, 1996; Golan, Lahav-Csantini, 1999; Turel, Jolty, Zafrir & Schneiderman, 2002).

In the last decade, adolescent behavior has been manifested by greater violence and corruption (Dies, 2000), as well as greater openness to issues of sexuality. The information adolescents receive in relation to sexual maturation is essential for their healthy development, and comes mainly from the various communication media. Recent studies show that adolescents who receive a thorough and comprehensive sexual education at an early age start having sexual relations at a later, more responsible stage

of development and are more likely to use contraceptives (Dies, 2000; Malekoff, 1997).

Group Work

Group work as a social work method is becoming increasingly popular in Israel, since it meets the criteria of economic efficiency on the one hand and proves, in many instances, to be more effective than individual work (Golan & Lahav-Csantini, 1999). Social workers believe that peer groups are important for the empowerment they provide to children, adolescents, and even adults who participate in them. They can provide mutual help, psychological support, and learning experiences within a peer group context (D'Haene, 1995). The group can become an environment in which the members can discuss issues that are taboo, while establishing a framework of reference to issues, shaping behavior in a psychologically and physically healthy and confident way (Malekoff, 1997).

Group work has proven to be a successful intervention for reducing deviant behavior among children and adolescents. It provides for situations and opportunities that change behavior, modifies mistaken perceptions of the self and of others, and removes or reduces psychological distractions. The peer group experience is critical for the normative development of children and adolescents; it provides children and adolescents an opportunity to express normal feelings and discuss conflicts in a carefully constructed environment (Johnson, Riester, Corbett, Buehler, Huffaker, Levich, & Pena, 1998).

Adolescent groups have a number of important characteristics which influence participants' therapeutic experience and provide opportunities to develop a sense of belonging within the group framework, to observe and modify one's own behavior, to define reality more clearly, and to arouse emotions and express them constructively. The group provides a source for social comparison and feedback and is an environment in which one can exercise new behaviors; serving as a social microcosm in which members can exchange information, interact socially, correct misinterpretations of particular interactions, imitate socially ap-

propriate behavior, and engage in mutual learning experiences (Elizur, Tiano, Muniz, & Neuman, 1995; Rosenwaser & Nathan, 1998).

The group provides a framework in which members can have a range of social experiences, enabling them to learn about their inner feelings, and the social world, by examining their behavior within the social context the group provides. Experiencing and examining, as well as observing other patterns of behavior and social coping, enable individuals to experience growth, development, and change (Rosenwaser & Nathan, 1998).

In adolescence, group dynamics have additional importance. During this stage of development, groups provide emotional support and a place for experiencing and experimenting with new identities, a place for developing social skills and for being psychologically independent of the family, while still within a supportive environment (Hopkins, 1994). It is natural for an adolescent girl to participate in a peer group, which supports her crystallizing identity and shapes her sense of self. Group participation helps adolescent girls gain perspective and understand new, unfamiliar experiences, which they may not want their parents to know about (Kirshner, 1994).

The considerations outlined above motivated us to establish a group for adolescent girls to help them deal with issues associated with relationships to boys. We chose a psychoeducational group format in which there is a reciprocal influence between the process and the content. The content proposed by the leader provides stimulus for interaction among group members, while this interaction provides stimulus for further content provided by the leader. The leader's role is to "switch" between content and group process, to combine, focus, add to, occasionally teach new content, to help implement skills, and sometimes to reflect on and process the going abouts for the group.

The overarching goals for the group were conceptualized as: 1) helping the girls develop awareness of dangerous behavior patterns in the context of conflict and sexuality (i.e., associations with harmful partners, age-inappropriate sexual behavior, the incidence of sexually transmissible diseases, unplanned and unwanted pregnancy at a young age, and prostitution), 2) imparting relevant knowledge and information about dating relationships

and sexuality, and 3) establishing a healthy peer group support structure. More specific goals consisted of: 1) recognizing and learning about issues of sexuality and violence in adolescence (e.g., using contraceptives, sexual development), 2) strengthening self-esteem and assertiveness, 3) facilitating development of new social connections that can serve as sources of influence and support in different types of situations, 4) establishing an association (and trust) with a social welfare social worker, 5) establishing a basis for the girls' continued participation in other girls' club activities, and 6) forming a positive experience in the girls as they experiment with group dynamics

Establishing the Group

The group was composed of participants from a local girls club. The club is open for girls in distress (ranging in age from 13 to 18 years) from anywhere in the town of Karmiel, for two hours daily. Different activities take place in the club based on the community's needs. These include creative and leisure activities under the instruction of a "matron," as well as workshops instructed by professionals in fields relevant to adolescents (e.g., self-awareness, drug addiction, sexual assault).

One of the needs club members had identified referred to pairing off, love, and violent relationships. Girls of this age group tend to be preoccupied with issues of dating and relationships with boys: the first kiss, whether to have sexual relations, social pressures, and the risks of unhealthy behavior. During the previous year, a few cases of rape and sexual harassment had been reported among adolescents in Karmiel.

We decided to develop a group for girls aged 14-15 because they are thought to be the most vulnerable. The group was designed to focus on preparation for egalitarian relationships. Preparation included a discussion with the girls who volunteered to participate in order to identify their social needs and orient them to the group's primary objectives and goals. We floated the idea of the group throughout the girls club in an attempt to recruit participants by presenting the group goals and describing the planned topics to club members and school counselors. Of

all the girls presented with the idea of the group, 15 expressed interest in the program.

We conducted personal interviews with each candidate who expressed interest and readiness to participate, either in the club or in their schools. The group leader collected background information from the candidates and explored their expectations. The goal was to attract specific girls to establish a personal relationship with the group leader, to establish a primary commitment to the group, and to encourage the girls to raise ideas and topics of their own that the group would address.

Of fifteen individual interviews conducted, eight girls expressed a willingness and commitment to participate. Most of them had experienced or had witnessed "unhealthy" or violent relationships. The girls who refused or were not found fit to join the group claimed they already had knowledge and experience in the field, or that they were not willing/able to commit to group sessions, or alternately would rather avoid the cooperation and exposure involved. Some had little credence in the process of group therapy or any other form of treatment.

We established a framework of twelve meetings. The meetings were scheduled for 90 minutes, once a week, at a mutually agreed upon time. The group met at the girls club.

SCHEDULE OF GROUP MEETINGS

First Meeting

Subject: Becoming acquainted, getting to know each other.

Goals: Establishing an open, accepting social atmosphere, and setting the stage for more intimate acquaintance.

Procedure: The leader offered a general explanation of the program, its nature and goals. Participants were asked to tell something about themselves, followed by a getting-to-know-each-other-game. Group members worked in pairs to discuss different issues related to adolescence, and then presented them to the whole group. We formulated a group contract or a group pact, regarding the work of the group.

Observations and analysis: During the process of forming a group "pact," we were able to alert the girls' attention to some problematic interpersonal relationship behavior, as demonstrated by their interruption of each other's speech, inattentiveness, speaking simultaneously. The girls frequently got up from their seats, sent cell phone messages, and asked to step outside to smoke cigarettes. At this stage, the leader attempted to reinforce group boundaries, rules, and framework for the proceeding of the meetings. Together with the girls, we defined speech and conduct norms while putting special emphasis on the discreet and confidential nature of the group. At the end of the first meeting, there seemed to be an open, pleasant, and relaxed atmosphere created and a group "contract" or pact was formulated.

Second Meeting

Subject: What does adolescence mean?

Goals: For the girls to better understand the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual processes that take place in adolescence.

Procedure: The group discussed the concept of age and maturation through drawings. They discussed the difficulties that characterize this age, and then filled out questionnaires that inquired about their knowledge about sex. They then proceeded to discuss sexual issues.

Observations and analysis: In this meeting, we observed the girls' "battle" for stage and attention as well as their continuous testing and probing the boundaries of our authority, while deliberately attempting to breach the framework of the defined pact. The leader reminded the girls of the rules and working norms defined in the previous meeting. She did this by explaining why these rules were imposed on the group from the get-go, attempting to convey the importance of sticking by them. By the end of the meeting, the girls had acquired more knowledge about adolescence and about sexual development.

Third Meeting

Subject: The adolescent within general society.

Goals: For the girls to express and better understand adolescent girls' attitudes toward their peer group as well as their attitudes toward society in general.

Procedure: We held a simulation game illustrating the benefits of belonging to the peer group and the difficulties associated with rejection by the peer group. Situations which demonstrate social pressures that influence/press upon adolescent girls were discussed. Participants volunteered personal examples that illustrated the power of social pressure and its implications.

Observations and analysis: The participants seemed to have acquired a sense of a few different tools for coping with social pressures in the context of social conflicts and violence.

Fourth Meeting

Subject: Masculinity and femininity.

Goals: To help the girls develop awareness of gender differences, to rebut false beliefs, and to change attitudes which may lead to gender inequality.

Procedure: The group discussed gender roles in traditional and modern society. They then discussed women's and men's roles in conflicted relationships. We read and discussed a newspaper report about a woman who had experienced violent physical abuse from her partner from an early age.

Observations and analysis: A lively discussion ensued, which led to increased insight and apparent changes in attitude regarding gender roles and how they influence the establishment of non-egalitarian relationships.

In this meeting, we were able to observe the formation of different group roles among the girls. During the group discussion, a girl named Sima stood out, taking a "taciturn" role (Yalom & Leszcz, 2006) in the group. Fifteen years old, she is the only child of divorced parents whose father left when she was a baby and has not attempted to make contact since. Recently, Sima found a letter, dated about 3 years ago, in which her father greeted her for her birthday. Her mother had chosen not to pass the letter along to her so as to not hurt her feelings. After this incident, Sima remained under the impression that there was yet more information her mother was withholding from her. Sima has recently been involved in a 6 month relationship with a man four years her elder, who has been displaying instances of over-protectiveness

and verbal abuse toward her. Sima has been concealing this relationship from her mother. Due to all of this, Sima was at first distrustful and very tentative in the group setting. During the initial meetings, she refused to take an active role in discussions and in general kept quietly to herself. While the leader allowed her to choose silence, she later approached Sima personally, inviting her to actively participate in group discussion. The group too gave Sima feedback on the emotions her silence evoked in them.

However, the turning point for Sima came in the present meeting during the discussion of abusive relationships. All group members except Sima reacted vehemently, and her silence was so conspicuous that another group member offensively confronted her. After an intervention from the leader, the other girl refined her comment, and the girls gave Sima more positive feedback while encouraging her to take a more active role within the group. The leader then reiterated the discreet and confidential essence of the group. That was the point which seemed to initiate a change in Sima's demeanor. In later meetings, Sima shared more of her personal life with the group.

Fifth Meeting

Subject: Love and choosing a Partner.

Goals: To discuss the concept of love, and to identify preferred characteristics in the members' chosen partners.

Procedure: We had the group work with ("Ashiga") cards to identify preferred characteristics in potential partners. Each participant was asked to choose several cards which expressed the characteristics she wanted to find in her partner. Each participant presented her choices. A discussion was then held to rank and order their preferences, and to consider the available choices.

Observations and analysis: Preferred characteristics in potential partners were identified and defined. In addition, group members were encouraged to identify undesirable characteristics they wanted to avoid in choosing potential partners. While the girls were occupied with the cards, 15-year-old Ortal stood out. She seemed to have taken on the "scapegoat" role at times.

Ortal lives with both parents and two younger brothers. She reported that her parents were having domestic problems and that there was verbal and physical abuse between the two.

Ortal spoke frequently during sessions. She bombarded the group with profusion of detail and seemed to lack focus. She frequently interrupted other girls which resulted in the rest losing interest in what she was saying, at times even to the point of ignoring her.

Outside of the group, Ortal is socially rejected, does not get invited to social events, and frequently finds herself on her own. In the group, the others showed lack of patience and occasional annoyance with her while trying to quiet her. During this session, responses to her were particularly harsh and we could identify that she had become the scapegoat. The leader stopped the discourse in the middle of working with the therapeutic cards and attempted to help Ortal focus by commenting on her behavior's impact on the group dynamics. This was done to prompt her into restricting her speaking to the allotted time, while giving others a chance to speak without being interrupted. With later development of the group process, Ortal seemed to have learned to manage her department better. The group and the leader continued giving her feedback whenever she resorted to her old patterns. In this way, their anger toward her quelled and the group started to pay attention to her when she spoke.

Sixth Meeting

Subject: Communicating and coping in social conflict situations and dealing with violent behavior.

Goals: To understand the basis of social conflicts and violent behavior and learn how to avoid them and/or acquire the tools needed to deal with them.

Procedure: The leader read clinical examples of defective communication which resulted in social conflicts and violent behavior. Group members then analyzed the situations presented in the examples. They discussed the effects of defective communications, warning signs of violent behavior, and methods for dealing with violence. The leader then handed out a sheet that listed warning signs of social conflict and violent behavior. The group reviewed each section and discussed appropriate responses. The members then intro-

duced real life examples and examples from their personal experiences, discussing how such situations might be dealt with.

Observations and analysis: The members seemed better able to recognize and understand healthy communication patterns in situations of personal and social conflict, to recognize warning signs of violent behavior, and to develop techniques for dealing with them.

With the progression of the work group, we could identify the forming of ties and stronger involvement among the group members with the development of greater cohesion. The girls assumed more responsibility toward achieving the defined goal and maintaining the group framework. For example, when one of the girls came in late, the rest criticized her for it and demanded she arrive on time. During the discussion about warning signs of a violent relationship, we detected an increased sense of openness, trust, and belonging within the group. The leader paid special attention to examples from the girls' personal experience while attempting to address their difficulties, problems and fears.

Seventh Meeting

Subject: Adolescents' sexual rights.

Goals: To exchange information, discuss and modify stereotypes regarding adolescents' sexual rights.

Procedure: The leader distributed a questionnaire that inquired about awareness of adolescents' sexual rights. We discussed every section of the questionnaire. The leader then distributed a "girl's rights" sheet. She explained how girls should behave when someone violated these rights. A girl, who had experienced sexual harassment from her partner, read her personal testimony and the group discussed it.

Observations and analysis: The participants seemed able to understand the information about their sexual rights and to engage in discussion about how to behave when those rights are violated. In this session, a framework of acceptance became eminent in the girls' demeanor and discourse. The girls seemed to better trust each other and the leader.

Sima, who previously had not taken an active part in the group discussion, shared an experience about when her boyfriend pestered her into having intercourse for her first time. He had threatened to tell her mother about their relationship unless she consented. This

time, the girls addressed Sima's story, and there was less need for the leader to redirect the discussion than before. The girls displayed some intolerant attitudes toward Sima's conduct, and for a while the group regressed to rather blatant, negative judgmental feedback. One girl confronted Sima about her permissive persona and her provocative clothing. The leader encouraged the girls to formulate their feedback in a less admonitory and critical manner. In this way the group practiced more functional communication patterns and more effective feedback. For Sima, this served as an aid to counter the existing pattern between her mother and herself.

Eighth Meeting

Subject: Imparting information about sex (e.g., contraceptives, risks).

Goals: To raise the girls' awareness of the subject and present information regarding the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and the unwanted pregnancies that may result from unprotected sexual intercourse.

Procedure: A female family physician who works for a community adolescent and family counseling service joined the group for this meeting. She passed out information about sexual intercourse and emphasized the importance of using contraceptives. She also discussed sexually transmitted diseases, different contraceptive methods, and ways of getting pregnant. She answered the participants' questions and facilitated a comprehensive discussion.

Observations and analysis: The physician enriched the girls' knowledge about having sexual relationships as well as informed them of the dangers and risks involved in doing so. One of the therapeutic factors described by Yalom (2006) as a change agent is impartation of information. In this age of tele/cyber media, youths are sometimes exposed to distorted and inaccurate information about sex. During the discussion about contraceptives, one of the girls remarked that she had thought one could not conceive from first time intercourse. Another girl believed that contraceptive pills also protect against sexually transmitted diseases. From these misconceptions, we can infer that there is a vital need for passing on neutral and realistic information.

At this meeting, a girl named Ruthy, who regularly showed up late, walked in about 25 minutes late and into the middle of the phy-

sician's lecture, interrupting the entire session. According to Ziv and Barhav (2001), there could be many motives of psychological significance for this tardiness, including deliberately denouncing attachment to group members, expressing dissatisfaction and/or frustration, and rejecting authority. In this session, the leader identified Ruthy's motive as an expression of authority rejection.

Further acquaintance with Ruthy revealed a problematic relationship with her mother, one which included shouting, power struggles, frequent quarrelling, and severe verbal abuse. It also turned out that Ruthy had a record of discipline and behavioral problems in school and that she was suspended for assaulting a teacher. Ruthy seemed to be going through a process of displacement from her mother to the leader, and through her regular tardiness she expressed resistance to the group contract, rules, and limitations. Once the physician had finished lecturing and had left the room, the leader broached the topic of tardiness while attempting to reflect this unwitting process to Ruthy.

During the discussion, common difficulties many teenagers have in accepting authority surfaced, and more girls shared with the group their problematic relationships with their parents. In this manner, we used the "universality factor" as one of Yalom's therapeutic factors thus succeeding in giving Ruthy the impression she was not alone in her struggles. After broaching this subject, Ruthy's tardiness waned, although did not stop completely.

Ninth Meeting

Subject: Defining patterns of violence in social and interpersonal relationships.

Goals: To identify patterns of power and control in relationships, recognizing the warning signs of violence, and learning how to cope and effectively deal with them.

Procedure: The leader showed a video that demonstrated a violent relationship between the members of a couple. A thorough discussion of this relationship and how to deal with violence followed.

Observations and analysis: The participants learned about the warning signs of violent behavior, how to avoid getting into potentially violent situations, as well as how to deal with violence should it occur in their relationships.

Tenth Meeting

Subject: Homosexuality and lesbianism.

Goals: To provide the girls with information about homosexuality and lesbianism and to encourage a tolerant approach toward different sexual preferences.

Procedure: All the girls filled out a homosexuality questionnaire. The group then discussed questions about homosexuality, points of view, stereotypes, and false beliefs. The leader presented information about the topic.

Observations and analysis: In this session we focused on transmitting objective information about single-gender relationships and reinforced acceptance and tolerance of such relationships. According to Yalom & Leszcz (2006), using deductive guidance in group therapy be a tool for changing thought patterns and general outlook. Following the conveyance of information and an open discussion on stereotypes, some related dogmas were rebutted. We felt, however, that a significant change in the girls' attitudes had not been made. It would seem that longer term, more dynamic work would be needed to establish a more thorough and lasting change in opinion and general outlook.

Eleventh Meeting

Subject: Pornography and Eroticism.

Goals: To discuss feelings and attitudes toward pornography, distinguishing between pornography, eroticism, and art, and discussing the use of sex to fulfill various needs.

Procedure: The leader had participants review magazines and other print material to extract advertisements that encourage sexual behavior or are perceived to be pornographic. The girls then presented this material in the group. A discussion about exposure to pornographic material, its meaning and impact ensued.

Observations and analysis: The participants seemed to understand the risks of transmitting sexual messages in society, in social contacts, and, particularly, in personal relationships. However, during this meeting, a few of the girls were unwilling to take an active part

In the discussion and resorted to long silences. The leader understood that this topic is a source of embarrassment for some adolescents. It turned out that some girls already knew about this subject, but dreaded admitting it to the group and the leader. The leader then chose to share her own thoughts and feelings and admitted that she felt slightly uncomfortable discussing it. Aiming to legitimize open discussion of the subject, the leader then disclosed an experience of when she was inadvertently exposed to pornographic material and her reactions and thoughts about it. In addition, the leader reflected to the girls on their silence and embarrassment and helped them share their feelings and acquaintance with the topic, thus breaking the silence around it.

Twelfth Meeting

Subject: Summarizing and farewell.

Goals: To summarize the group's activity, discuss separation, and establish a basis for continuing healthy social relationships.

Procedure: The leader summarized the group's activity and the central content that was dealt with. She encouraged verbal feedback from the participants. We then discussed feelings about separation and termination. There were refreshments at the end of the meeting.

Observations and analysis: We used the last meeting to conclude and recapitulate the group's general essence as well as to reinforce its therapeutic value. The girls expressed their difficulties as well as some unhappiness about the group's termination. They were, however, able to give constructive feedback about the group sessions, remarking on the parts that were meaningful to them as well as those that were not. We solicited this feedback as a way to counter the feelings of loss expressed by some of the girls. At the end of the meeting, we circulated a contact sheet so that the girls could maintain the social bond that had formed in the group. The leader shared her feelings about the process as well, giving expression to her own difficulties with breakup and goodbyes while emphasizing the necessary acceptance of conclusion as the consummation of the group process.

EVALUATION

At the end of the program, an evaluation questionnaire was filled in by all participants. It asked 14 questions aimed at determining to what extent the group's goals had been achieved, the degree to which each of the participants was satisfied with the subjects addressed, and how each felt about the different experiential exercises presented. The questionnaire included open- and closed-ended questions and space for additional comments. Group members filled in the questionnaire anonymously.

The group members' responses emphasized interest, participation, learning, changing perceptions, and future applications. Analysis of the answers showed a positive evaluation of all the examined topics. The participants reported that the meetings contributed to their understanding, expanded their knowledge of the subjects addressed, and enabled them to make changes in their lives based on what they had learned. In addition, the girls indicated that the experiential exercises contributed to their understanding of the theories presented. They were especially positive in their comments about the film they had seen and the physician's lecture.

The girls also reported that they generally felt very relaxed and open in the group context and appreciated the group's accepting climate. Some expressed their desire to have additional meetings so as to have continuity and further exposure to the topic, and some declared that they would recommend the workshop to other girls. A few girls, however, expressed difficulty identifying with certain activities, such as the therapeutic cards and the evaluation questionnaire, and some reported that they felt emotional discomfort discussing issues such as pornography.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In adolescence many changes take place physically, socially, cognitively, and academically. Central themes in adolescence involve

emotional and physical separation from parents, shaping an independent identity, and being able to integrate within a wider social environment. One characteristic of these changes involves a partial transfer of emotional investment from parental to peer group relationships. Adolescents have a felt need for support from peer group members who are trying to address similar developmental issues (Golan & Lahav-Gsantini, 1999; Turel, Joly, Zafrir & Schneiderman, 2002), hence the importance of using group dynamic interventions in working with adolescents.

The group sessions with girls at risk discussed many topics, including sexual harassment, violent behavior in social and personal relationships, having early sexual relations, undesirable pregnancies, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and avoidance of potential rape situations. The group members brought personal experiences from their daily lives into group discussions. The girls' relating to each other's experiences in group discussions seemed to help them develop insights about alternative ways of behaving. Consequently, the girls established a better understanding of the importance of developing healthy non-abusive egalitarian relationships. Our assumption was that dealing with these subjects through experience would increase their alertness to and awareness of the dangers of entering into non-egalitarian relationships, thereby helping them avoid risky situations.

Learning about the process of maturation; social pressures that encourage girls to enter relationships; perceptions of gender roles; sexual rights; ways to communicate when in social conflict; and the process of choosing a partner have been found to be essential for understanding non-healthy relationships and learning to or avoiding them. Avoiding sexual relations at an early age, recognizing violent relationship patterns, and understanding sexual exploitation are critical for understanding the dangers inherent in non-egalitarian relationships.

The evaluations suggested that sessions were quite effective in preventing the participants from entering violent relationships and having sexual relations at an early age. The girls' feedback seems to indicate that participation in the group generally elevated their self-awareness and enriched their knowledge of the subject material presented.

The challenge in working with this group was immense. The leader had to stay perceptive and alert to group processes and phenomena, in order to properly address and deal with instances of acting-out (e.g. deliberate tardiness, use of cell phones during meetings) and different roles that formed within the group.

In light of the girls' perseverance and cooperation, as well as the generally very positive feedback we received, we conclude that the group process was successful. Based on our positive experience, we recommend that people who deal with adolescents in general, and with girls in particular, consider establishing psychoeducational groups designed to prevent spousal violence, despite the fact that we encountered difficulty locating girls at high risk and convincing them to join. We think it might be helpful for professionals to make contact with such girls through individual treatment first and later encourage them to consent to group therapy.

One should be mindful of the fact that ours was a short-term psychoeducational therapy group, which probably only has limited effect on long-term behavioral patterns. Group participants might benefit from further group work and/or entering into a long-term, more dynamic-natured therapy, which may then lead to a deeper, more permanent change in sexual behavior patterns and better communication skills. We do not claim that this group brought about such substantive changes; however, it did allow the girls exposure to the topic of egalitarian relationships, attempting to draw their attention to the importance of self-awareness, all the while creating a positive group experience to facilitate further treatment. Our group work did seem to provide the girls with essential therapeutic value and helped inform them of relevant information as well as provide them with group support. Based on the outcome of this project, we recommend developing similar groups for adolescents of other age groups, as well as documenting group process and developing measures for long-term follow-up.

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