



My Experiences with Special Groups for Special Adolescents

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Over the years I have worked with many different kinds of groups for children and adults. By far, one of the most rewarding groups is the one for adolescents with syndromes and conditions, such as Asperger's Syndrome, pervasive developmental delay, or non-verbal learning disabilities. These syndromes and conditions create delays in emotional and social development. Regardless of their particular condition, these adolescents have in common the profound sense of being different from others. I have found that, for these adolescents, a group of peers who share their sense of isolation and loneliness is growth-promoting and life-giving. Group therapy for adolescent boys and girls who experience school and social activities as times of stress, if not times of extreme pain and fear, find group therapy an opportunity to feel part of teen life.

In group, adolescents with special needs address their fears of being different. When doing this they learn that they all have had many similar experiences. The group members acknowledge their confusion and find clarity from each other's feedback and encouragement. These adolescents experience surprise and joy when they discover that there are rules they can learn for social interactions that other teens seem to know. They readily learn the rules and practice social skills because the rules and skills work for them in group and nongroup situations. Although these adolescents may still experience moments of isolation from peers outside of group, they learn that they have the capacity for empathy and compassion not only for those with similar special needs, but also for those who seem to reject them. Group members begin to realize that rejection is the problem of the rejecter and need not be their problem as well.

Adolescents with social and emotional delays begin to blossom when they learn in group, and then put into practice outside group, encouraging self-talk, soothing self-reassurance, patience and tolerance for mistakes. They realize that they can accept feedback from peers who say, "I don't like your behavior at this moment." When they voluntarily change their problem behavior, these young people experience peer acceptance. They discover their personal power to motivate, solve problems, and get help when needed. These teens also thrive on the joy of socializing and talking to each other about things that their contemporaries talk about, but from which they had previously been excluded.

Adolescence is a time of identity formation. It is a time when adolescents integrate childhood images of self, but also current experiences in family, groups, and community. I continue to delight in facilitating group therapy experiences that are growth-promoting opportunities for teens with developmental delays. As in all experiences with children

and adolescents, we adults thrive as we share their enthusiasm and joy for what is new in life.