

## **Orientation to Family Workshops**

There isn't much time to talk at Family Workshops so this is an attempt to provide some information about what happens, why we do them the way we do and why they are useful.

### **BACKGROUND**

These workshops focus on meeting the young people's needs first, because it is a contradiction to the oppression of young people. Making things right for young people is a key goal of our work with families. It contradicts our own internalized oppression that came in on us as a young person and helps us work on early hurts. We want and need lots of allies to contradict the isolation of and lack of resource available for parents, all of whom want to do the best for their young people and find the organization of society stacked against them.

Allies often struggle with the messages that they are not needed or welcome in the lives of young people. Additionally, society does not acknowledge the tremendous benefit for any adult who develops a relationship with a young person. The attitude is that the benefit is only one-way toward the young person, that you are doing someone a favor by spending time with their young person. The reality is it is a joy and a privilege to build a relationship with a young person and the benefits are mutual.

We are trying to provide a model experience for young people and adults of what is possible in our relationships with young people. It is challenging and very useful to adults because it means facing early distresses around where things were not right for us. While the primary focus is on the young people, we try to get the adults enough attention so that everyone can get a chance to heal some of this early hurt. We hope everyone learns things they can use at home to keep improving and deepening their relationships with young people and adults alike.

### **SOME DO'S AND DON'TS**

- \* If you're new to this work, don't come in expecting to initiate sessions with young people. Your role is to play hard, have fun, develop relationships and be permissive counselors for the young people.
- \* When playing anything where there can be winners and losers, the adults should be the losers.
- \* Don't tickle, even though some young people seem to enjoy it.
- \* Adjust your efforts to the ability of the young person you play with. Provide a challenge but don't overwhelm or overpower them. It is much better to be overpowered by the young person. Being the pretend victim is often useful.
- \* Resist the pull to compete with other adults. For example, sometimes we compete by showing how good we are at playing or by aggressively trying to initiate sessions.
- \* Stay connected to at least one person and find the opportunities available for as much discharge as possible *consistent* with the workshop's needs.

- \* If you are playing and the young person is laughing and having fun, stick with that activity. Laughter is the grease that allows people to open up and opens the door to other kinds of discharge.
- \* Ask questions.
- \* Assume you are wanted regardless of how it may look to you. YOU ARE WANTED!

### COUNSELING YOUNG PEOPLE

You will see lots of permissive counseling, letting the young person direct the play, much of which will result in laughter. You will also see heavy sessions. There may be session where someone is holding a young person and the young person is screaming for help. The things the young person may be saying should not be taken literally, any more than what an adult says in session. If you look closely, what is being said isn't actually happening, a feeling is coming up to be discharged. For example, a young person working on her birth may feel like she is being hurt and about to die, may say things like I can't breath, or I'm stuck. That may be accurate about her birth but is not true now. The young person is not necessarily being hurt in the present. This can be very hard for parents or allies to watch. It is a good time to watch and possible discharge some off to the side. Don't try to ask questions of the counselor during the session but someone else may be able to answer your questions, or you can ask them at a later time.

### SPECIAL TIME

Special time is a chance for young people to do favorite things or try new things with the aware attention of an adult. Your role is mainly to follow the young person's lead and stay aware, relaxed and engaged in the young person's activity.

### THE SCHEDULE

*Despite the playful and chaotic nature of these workshops, it is actually very important to be on time for group activities. We count on everyone during the transition times between sessions and classes and the group play. Don't assume you will not be missed. You will be!*

**Friday night** everyone comes in with a variety of feelings about workshops, meeting new people, and unrelated feelings from the week. The goal Friday night is to begin building the relationships that will allow sessions to happen on Saturday and Sunday. So it is a time to play hard, to have fun and bring everyone into the group. For the youngest it may be a time for sessions on their parents leaving them to go to a group. It is not a time to push for sessions, it's better to let them develop more slowly. We stay up late to get in as much of this building relationships time in as we can. Adults have discharge groups in shifts.

**Saturday morning** is aimed at setting the parents and young people up for special time together, which they do the second half of the morning. First there is a general play-time and then a short class to give people a bit of theory and an overview of the day. The allies will have assigned sessions while the parents do special time.

Parents, your young people may want to do the things that are the hardest things for you to do. This is not being mean, it makes sense that they would use this opportunity with lots of resource to push you to be with them. Where you struggle is a limitation they have to live with and when they get hopeful they will ask you to step though your feelings for them. They want to try everything and not be limited to where you are comfortable. These are places they need you to move and the workshop's extra support makes it a good place to try. You will get a chance to discharge soon.

After lunch the parents have assigned sessions and the allies play with the young people as a large group. This is the time to encourage the young people to play together and for the allies to be building a connection to the young person they will do special time with later in the afternoon. Young people (and adults) may need encouragement to keep asking to play together in the face of rejection and old feelings of rejection. As a general rule, this is not the time to go off with one young person alone, even if they really want to. Sessions may happen off the encouragement to play together, or to try things the group is doing.

**Saturday afternoon** is typically the hardest time for adults. Our early chronic distresses flare up because of the presence of, and focus on doing right by, the young people. This is the time to push through the feelings and stay with the group, putting your attention on the young people's needs and the activity. You are essential to the workshop going well and we need you in the thick of it, putting the group first. Subject to that priority, there may be space for mini's on the edge of things but don't go off out of touch with the group.

There will be a class for allies after the parents return from their sessions where you can ask questions about the coming assigned special time for allies and young people. The parents continue to play with the young people as a group. This is a chance for the parents to think about helping each other with their young people. Then the parents have a class while the allies and young people do special time.

**Saturday night** is the time when you hope to see sessions happening if they haven't already. It's the time all the previous work building relationships and safety should bear fruit in sessions for adults and young people. As things wind down we have a songfest or creativity and a chance for skits, jokes, etc. This is another time where sessions happen around visibility and humiliation. We try to find a way to have everyone participate in some way and appreciate everyone's efforts to try to show themselves in front of the whole group. Open questions time usually follows and is focused on the adults getting time to ask questions. Hopefully the young people are slowing down and playing in a way compatible with this.

**Sunday morning** we are moving towards getting people's attention out rather than trying to initiate sessions. For many, a lot of work has been done on Friday and Saturday but the topic of saying good-bye to this group they have come to trust brings up feelings to discharge. Enough safety has been built that many

sessions continue to happen but we are not actively trying to bring up new areas for discharge.

**At home afterwards**, you can expect that things may stay opened up and perhaps a bit raw for the young ones for a while. It is good to plan ahead, so that you can have extra attention available so feelings can continue to discharge and be looked at rather than put away immediately. Parents and allies often have more feelings coming to the surface to discharge during the workshop then they can work on there. It is good to plan several sessions for yourself for a week or two after the workshop.

Also it is important that parents keep a perspective on the big sessions your young person had at the workshop. You may feel the pull to agree with feelings that old fears discharging were actually new hurts. Your young person may need your help remembering that people were trying to help them, rather than needing you as an ally against a counselor or agreeing that so and so is hateful. They need you to remember that the way it "feels" is not the repeat of what originally happened. We all get mixed up between what happened in the past and the present when feeling old fears. After the workshop take advantage of the things the workshop brought out of the gray mist for you to work on even if they seem trivial: fears of violence, rejection, not liking people, wishing you had parents or allies who played with you, not liking the food, feeling tired etc.

Thanks for coming. There is no more important work than this. Nothing will move your reemergence faster; nothing will teach you more about good counseling than this.

For more detailed understanding of family work read:

Family Work by P.Wipfler, D.Shisk, T. Jackins, et al \$4.00

How Parents Can Counsel Their Children, by T.Jackins \$4.00

Listening Effectively to Children by P.Wipfler \$7.00

If your local literature person does not have them for sale. You can order them from Rational Island Publishers, P.O. Box 2081 Main Office Station, Seattle WA 98111

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