
Book Review

Simmonds, J. (2006). Children in change: A group curriculum for kids ages 8-14 who are experiencing family change. Minneapolis, MN: Family & Children's Service, 77 pp. (paperback). Reviewed by Camille R. Quinn, AM

The home lives of children have changed considerably over the past few decades. There has been an increase in the numbers of children born to single and/or divorced parents and children spending a portion of their childhood in single-parent households (Mare & Winship, 1991). Children whose parents live separately are often disadvantaged as compared to children whose parents live together (Amato, 1994) and given that the current rate of divorce for first-time American marriages is 50 percent it is more likely that children will face challenges. In addition, the number of children born into cohabitating families is increasing. As a consequence, about two-fifths of all children spend some time in a cohabiting family, and the greater instability of families begun by cohabitation means that children are also more likely to experience family disruption (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). For all of these children, mastery is an ongoing task that requires special tools and preparation. Therefore, the prevalence of family change and the potential effects on children requires our attention and effective methods must be emphasized to assist children in becoming successful. Social workers would be remiss if they use one-dimensional clinical approaches when treating children with these experiences. Also, comprehensive interventions and guidelines that address the full spectrum of children's needs should be utilized. The book covered in this review has attempted to provide a curriculum including several techniques specially designed for children experiencing changes in their home lives.

Overview of the book

“Children in change: A group curriculum for kids ages 8-14 who are experiencing family change” is a straightforward and fairly concise tool to educate and guide children who are experiencing life changes. The book’s overall goal is to normalize the experiences of children whose family lives are changing, and to provide coping strategies. It is based on a support group model with exercises for younger and older children and includes a Background Section as well as instructions for the facilitator and 12 weekly lesson plans: Welcome Week, Family Forms, People I Live With, A Look Back in Time, Introduction to Feelings, My Change, My Feelings, How Our Families Express Their Anger, The Worry Burden, Hopes and Dreams, Working Through Grief, Reaching Out and Final Celebration. This review will focus primarily on the background section and five of the weekly lesson plans but activities from the other lesson plans will be touched upon.

Included in the Background Section are the history, program objectives, lesson plan design and key points about family change, curriculum goals, and information regarding how to facilitate effective groups. This section provides a solid overview and enough information to begin the weekly group sessions. Each lesson plan outlines the objective, supplies needed, preparation required prior to the session, notes or information for the facilitator, learning activities, closing activities and some helpful hints. There is slight variation depending on the chapter but it is fairly consistent throughout. It is stressed that participants attend all sessions to ensure confidentiality, but this was not discussed in detail in the Background section; it may have been helpful if it were included there as well.

Welcome Week is the first session and includes strategies for creating group rules by the participants and facilitator. The activities are distinguished by the age of the participants and the primary goal is to develop group cohesion and lay the groundwork for the upcoming sessions.

A Look Back in Time is designed to better understand each participant’s life journey. This is accomplished through creating a “Family Timeline”. Each participant uses symbols to identify different life experiences for each year of their lives. This project allows the facilitator and the other participants to share in each other’s life journey. The exercise has the potential to provide for each group member an understanding of the role that history plays in their present and future lives.

How our Families Express their Anger is an extension of the previous session on feelings. It should provide an opportunity to validate each participant’s angry feelings and help them identify positive ways to manage and control their anger. The most compelling aspect of this session is a marshmallow play activity where the participants create marshmallow people reflective of themselves and someone else in their family with whom they are angry, then perform a role play. The activity allows the participants the opportunity to deal with their anger toward that person even if they cannot express it to them directly.

Working through Grief provides information about grief, loss and depression. Reaching Out prepares the participants for termination. It focuses on the participants and their ability to identify supportive people and resources they can use once the group ends. There are some powerful activities in this session, such as the Helping Hand and Who Can I Trust which require participants to think about whom they can trust and who will be their support once the group sessions end.

Lastly, there’s a Trust Affirmation activity where the participants read an affirmation aloud as a group while each looks in a mirror. By far, these are some thoughtful exercises to end the session.

Conclusion

This book is a solid curriculum for facilitators and it provides a comprehensive outline of lesson plans for children experiencing changes in their families. It includes useful information and activities to aid individuals that facilitate groups with children. All of which will be useful guides to address the increase in the numbers of children needing additional support due to their family changes. Simmonds clearly demonstrates the need for objective and thoughtful and therapeutic interventions. She also highlights why group sessions must be open and inclusive when working with children. It is plausible that Simmonds will update and revise this book. An update should incorporate activities that embrace issues related to diversity, such as the race and class of the children. Also, the inclusion of sample drawings for some session exercises like Welcome Week may better illustrate what the participants should strive to accomplish during the session. This book can serve as an effective guide for social workers that provide group services for children. Moreover, social workers could use this book as a foundation for their comprehensive work with children.

References

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