Implementing Effective Small Group Counseling

By Dr. Emily C. Brown, LPC, NCC
Assistant Professor of School Counseling
University of Missouri - St. Louis

Session Overview

Learn strategies for managing the logistics of small group counseling in elementary schools. Get ideas for planning, implementing, and evaluating small groups that effectively meet the needs of students. Walk away with templates and ideas for groups on topics such as social skills, transitions, self-esteem, study skills, self-control, and grief.

Why Small Groups with Children

- Early intervention is most effective (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2006)
- Groups allow children a place to learn & practice new skills
- Children recognize they are not alone in their feelings
- Groups can provide information, support, and counseling

Small Group Structural Components & Considerations
Planning Logistics

- Types of groups
  - Psychoeducational (structured)
  - Counseling (process)

- Number of sessions & length of sessions
  - Developmental level/attention span of participants
  - Schedule of the school
  - Flexibility of students’ schedules

- Referrals

- Screening
  - Individual counseling may better serve some children
  - First session as screening for group membership
  - Group size often 4-6 members


Additional Considerations

- Obtaining informed consent

- Scheduling Small Groups
  - Consult with classroom teachers to establish times for groups
  - Consider school activities students may miss, such as lunch/recess
  - Minimize classroom interruptions

- Confidentiality

- Naming your group


Evaluating Small Groups

- Use valid and reliable assessment methods to determine efficacy of activities (Bostick & Anderson, 2009)

- Collecting data before, during, and after groups
  - Process data - what you did for whom (# students)
  - Perception data - what students think, know, or demonstrate (pre/post-tests; feedback forms from students, teachers, and parents/guardians; follow up interviews)
  - Results data - so what (available data on attendance, grades, behavior referrals, etc.)

Group Leadership Counseling Skills

- When running groups with children . . .
  - Leader-oriented model rather than facilitator model
  - Vary the format and use multisensory approach
  - Cut off and hold the focus
  - Clarity of purpose
  - Special knowledge on topic
  - Integrate cultural, developmental, and environmental awareness, knowledge, and skills

(Jacobs, Messen, & Harvill, 2006)
Pair and Share

- What are barriers to implementing small group counseling within your comprehensive school counseling program?
- Share a success from implementing small group counseling as a school counselor.

Targeted Small Groups in Elementary Settings

Grief & Loss Groups

- Sample Topics: divorce, parental incarceration, bereavement, living with a chemically dependent person, dealing with bullies

- Resources and ideas:
  - Sesame Street Toolkits (divorce, grief, incarceration)
    http://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits
  - Grief Resource Guide
  - Banana Splits Divorce Group in handouts

Academic and/or Behavior Skills Groups

- Sample Topics: study skills, anger management, self-control (e.g., coping with ADD/ADHD)

- Resources and ideas:
  - Why Try Curriculum https://www.whytry.org/
  - Seeing Red by Jennifer Simmonds
  - Annie’s Plan by Jeanne Kraus
  - Mindfulness activities and strategies (e.g., Spiderman Mindfulness, YouTube clips)
  - Consider cultural strengths as well as systemic factors that may connect to school difficulties
  - Focus on promoting resiliency and building coping skills
### Social Skills Groups

- **Sample Topics**: self-concept or self-esteem, friendships, relationship building, shyness, leadership skills
- **Considerations**:
  - Select skills based on participants’ needs in group
  - Practice skills in small group
  - Provide opportunities for participants to try out new skill in a natural environment
- **Resources and ideas**:
  - Group Play Therapy
  - *Girls in Real Life Situations* by Trice-Black & Taylor
  - *Operation: Breaking the Boy Code* by Moon

### Transitions Groups

- **Sample Topics**: new students to the school, military deployment, preparing for middle school
- **Resources and ideas**:
  - Sesame Street Toolkits (deployment)
    [http://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits](http://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits)
  - New Kids Program in handouts

### Tips for School Counselors

- Use the Missouri Small Group Counseling Guide
  [https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/guid-respon-se
  rv-small-group-counseling-guide-2015.pdf](https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/guid-respon-se
  rv-small-group-counseling-guide-2015.pdf)
- Include questions about small groups on your needs assessments
- Ask for input from Advisory Council to gather interest and support
- Advocate for the time to do small groups and ability to pull students for small groups!
- Start small, be flexible, be reflexive.

### Next Steps

- What was a new idea or reminder about small group work with children?
- How will you use this information in your work as a school counselor?
Questions?

Dr. Emily C. Brown
brownemily@umsl.edu

Twitter: @schoolcslriideas

Conference Announcements

- For all conference related information, download the Conference Yapp App. The Yapp ID is MSCA17.
- Please complete the Workshop Evaluation: http://tinyurl.com/mscaworkshop17
- Please complete the Full Conference Evaluation: http://tinyurl.com/MSCAeval17
- Support this year’s Annual Project through raffles, Monday reserved seating, Monday power hour, poker run, project walk, and service project.
- Visit exhibitors and the MSCA promotions booth in Windgate Hall.
- Make plans to participate in evening activities:
  - Hospitality from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.
  - Dance Celebration beginning at 9:30 p.m.
- For more information on MSCA, like us on Facebook (mymsca) and follow us on Twitter (@myMSCA).

References


Group Counseling Referral Form  
K & 1st Grades

Teacher: __________________________

Several counseling groups will be forming soon. Please refer any students in your class who may need a group counseling intervention for problems they are experiencing which are in some way affecting them here at school. Depending on the number of referrals, some groups may not begin until next semester. I will do some screenings for personalities together in groups. All students who participate in groups must have a parent permission form signed.

Most groups will meet once a week for 30 minutes for 4-6 weeks. Thanks! Emily

_______ I don't have any referrals at this time.

PLEASE RETURN TO MY BOX BY XXXX!

Dr. Emily Brown
brownemily@umsl.edu
Group Counseling Referral Form
Grades 2 - 3

Teacher: ____________________________

Several counseling groups will be forming soon. Please refer any students in your class who may need a group counseling intervention for problems they are experiencing which are in some way affecting them here at school. Depending on the number of referrals, some groups may not begin until next semester. I will do some screenings for personalities together in groups. **All students who participate in groups must have a parent permission form signed.**

Most groups will meet once a week for 30 minutes for 4-6 weeks. Thanks! Emily

__________

Hospice Grief and Loss (Death of family member or friend who died at least 5 weeks ago – include relationship to student of person who died)
1. 
2.

Self Control (Anger management and conflict resolution skills)
1.
2.

Self-Esteem and Relationship Building (Support for making friends, respecting self and others)
1.
2.

Divorce Support (Parents have separated or divorced within past 6 months)
1.
2.

_______ I don’t have any referrals at this time.

PLEASE RETURN TO MY BOX BY XXXX!

Dr. Emily Brown
brownemily@umsl.edu
Teacher: ______________________

Several counseling groups will be forming soon. Please refer any students in your class who may need a group counseling intervention for problems they are experiencing which are in some way affecting them here at school. Depending on the number of referrals, some groups may not begin until next semester. I will do some screenings for personalities together in groups. All students who participate in groups must have a parent permission form signed.

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Hospice Grief and Loss (Death of family member or friend who died at least 5 weeks ago – include relationship to student of person who died)
1. 
2.

Why Try (at risk with behavior referrals, attitude, motivation, and/or school connectedness) *This group meets for 40 minutes for 6-7 weeks.
1. 
2.

Self-Esteem and Relationship Building (Support for making friends, respecting self and others)
1. 
2.

Divorce Support (Parents have separated or divorced within past 6 months)
1. 
2. 

_______ I don't have any referrals at this time.

PLEASE RETURN TO MY BOX BY XXXX!

Dr. Emily Brown
brow nemily@umsl.edu
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Counseling Groups Notice

Teacher: __________________________

I have tried as much as possible to accommodate your schedules as I’ve planned for these groups! I hope there are no major conflicts!!! These students have returned forms and will be coming to group on the dates below. I will place hall pass/reminders in your box to give to the students to help them be responsible for coming to me. For K/1 I will come to your hall to help bring students to my office. Others hopefully can make it on their own. Please let me know if there are questions. Thanks so much for letting them be part!

Emily

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>11/7, 11/21, 11/28, 12/5, 12/12</th>
<th>(4/5 Girls and Banana Splits also meeting 12/19)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:20 – 1:00</td>
<td>4/5 Self Esteem (includes lunch)</td>
<td>__________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:15 – 1:45</td>
<td>Banana Splits (Divorce)</td>
<td>_________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:45 – 2:15</td>
<td>2/3 Self Esteem</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 – 10:30</td>
<td>K Self-Control</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:15 – 1:45</td>
<td>Grief Group</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:45 – 2:15</td>
<td>2nd Self-Control</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>11/9, 11/16, 11/30, 12/7, 12/14</th>
<th>(Why Try also 1/4, 1/11, 1/18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:30 – 1:15</td>
<td>4th Why Try (&amp; lunch)</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:15 – 1:45</td>
<td>3rd Self-Control</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<th>Thursday</th>
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<th>(Why Try Group also 1/5, 1/12, 1/19)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:15 – 1:00</td>
<td>5th Why Try (&amp; lunch)</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:30 - 2</td>
<td>1st Self-Control</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
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<th>Friday</th>
<th>11/4, 11/18, 12/2, 12/9, 12/16</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 – 10:30</td>
<td>K Social Skills Group</td>
<td>________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dr. Emily Brown
brownemily@umsl.edu
Permission Form

Dear Parent,

I am writing this letter to invite your child, __________________________, to participate in a small group experience that I will be offering for children who have gone or are going through a divorce. While many families experience divorce, most children feel as though this has only happened in their family. In addition, a number of children believe that they could have prevented the divorce in some way.

Divorce groups are designed to offer support to these children. Just the act of being in a group allows children to see that they are not alone. As part of the group I provide directed instruction and activities to help children talk about their feelings and build or share coping skills to face the challenges specific to divorce.

In a divorce group, I work with four to six children once a week for about 30 minutes. The group lasts for six sessions. These groups occur during the school day; I work with teachers to schedule groups at times that minimize the loss of instructional time.

If you have any questions or specific concerns, feel free to call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX. I look forward to working with your child. Please sign and return the form below by XXXX to ensure your child’s placement in the group.

Sincerely,

Emily Brown
School Counselor

______________________________

PLEASE SIGN AND RETURN TO THE GUIDANCE OFFICE

Student’s Name __________________________

Teacher’s Name __________________________

Parent’s Name __________________________

_____ Yes, my child may participate in the Divorce Support Group.

_____ I prefer that my child not participate.

Parent’s signature __________________________ Date __________________________
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Session 1:
- Introductions
- Explain the purpose of this group and ways the group will work.
- Review Group Norms
- Draw a picture of your family and share with the group. After each member shares, others can ask 2 questions about this person’s family (model appropriate questioning.)

Session 2:
- Check in with highs & lows from week
- Bibliotherapy - Read sections of the book Dinosaurs Divorce by Marc Brown. Stop while reading to link book with personal experiences. Look for opportunities to normalize experiences.
- Topic - Finding out
  - How did you find out about your parents separation?
  - Why did they separate or divorce?
  - What did you think when you found out?
  - How did you feel when you heard the news?
  - Draw a picture of how you felt.
- Processing: What was it like to think about this?

Session 3:
- Check in with highs & lows from week
- Discussion - The Ocean of Feelings
  - Divorce brings many feelings about change. The pain that you feel is called grief. Grief comes and goes like waves in the ocean. There will be stormy times, and there will be calm times.
  - A lot of kids your age feel sad (shocked, angry, relieved, etc.) when their parents separate. When did you feel sad (shocked, angry, relieved, etc.)?
- Activity: Create a Calming Bottle (see Pinterest for ideas). Discuss how there are times when “we’re all shook up” and times when we’re calm. Sometimes when you’re feeling “shook up,” you could use this bottle and watch it settle down to help you settle down as well.

Session 4:
- Check in with highs & lows from week
- Topic - Speaking Up
  - Even if they don’t mean to, sometimes parents might do things to make you feel uncomfortable, like if your dad says something bad about your mom or the other way around. Sometimes your parents might still fight or argue about private things where you can hear them. Or maybe they don’t give you privacy when you’re talking on the phone to the other parent.
  - Write down 3 things your parents do that make you uncomfortable.

Dr. Emily Brown
brow nemily@umsl.edu
Role play one of these with the group. (*Model giving feedback and encouragement to members as they share.*)

Processing: How does it feel to verbalize this?

**Topic - Changing Families**

- After parents split up, most kids really wish they would get back together so that their family would all live together again. Have you ever felt this way? Did you ever tell anybody about this wish? What did they say?
- Even if your family doesn’t live together in one house, you are still a family. Families are different and sometimes families change because your mom or dad might start dating or even get married to somebody different. Has this happened to anyone in the group? How did you feel about this?

**Session 5:**

- Check in with highs & lows from week
- Round - What are 2 things you like to do for fun?
  - You’ve got a lot going for you that will help you even when your family is split up. These things you like to do for fun can help you feel better. Physical activities can energize our bodies and minds when we’re feeling sad. Art and music can help us express ourselves and let others know how we feel.
- Activity: Banana Split Craft
  - Give students template to write parts on and create banana split.
  - Have students share their banana split with the group.

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Dr. Emily Brown
brownemily@umsl.edu
Session 6:
- Celebration Time! Make banana splits (check for food allergies!)
- Watch video clips from Sesame Street Toolkit on Divorce-
  http://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits/divorce Chase’s Story (2 clips) and Victoria’s Story (2 clips)
  ○ Processing questions: In what ways are Chase’s story and Victoria’s story like yours? How are their experiences different?
- Review: Remind students of topics and activities from each week. Round - What is one thing you learned from all the weeks that can help you?
- Evaluation - Complete end of group survey.
- Closing: Thank students for attending group. Have students take materials home and letter to parents/guardians.

Banana Splits Group Evaluation Form

Directions: Please read each statement carefully. Check (✓) the answer that YOU believe tells ME what your TRUE FEELINGS are.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I like being here each week.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. We talked about things that matter to me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I enjoyed the activities we did in the group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I would recommend this group to my friends in a similar situation.</td>
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<td>5. I learned more about how to deal with my family changes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Something I learned that I can remember after the group is</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. What I liked best was</td>
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<td>8. What I didn’t like was</td>
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Please feel free to write anything else you might want to share with me below. Thanks for being a group member!

Dr. Emily Brown
brownemily@umsl.edu
Final Letter Home

Dear Parent or Guardian,

This week your child completed our 6 week special group on separation, divorce, and changing families called “Banana Splits.” Thank you again for letting your child be a part of this group. I believe all participants were able to process the changes in their family unit and learn more about dealing with the feelings that come as change happens.

As this group concludes, here are a few additional thoughts on helping your child cope with the changes in your family.

- Take pains to reassure your child that they are not to blame for the separation or divorce.
- Discourage your child from taking sides.
- Resist the temptation to confide in your children.
- Don’t make your child feel guilty about enjoying themselves with their other parent.
- Encourage your children to share their feelings with you without fear of dismissal or criticism.

I believe it is important for children to learn skills to cope with difficult situations that arise in life, and I am glad to have had time to work with your child as they develop coping skills. Thank you again for the opportunity to work with your child and for the care and concern you have for their well-being.

Thank you for your support!

Sincerely,

Emily Brown
School Counselor
New Kids Pals Program

Information Notice to 1st - 5th Grade Teachers

The New Kids program is designed to offer some support to students who are new to our school this year. This year we have about 85 transfer students in grades 1-5. I will have a small group lunch meeting with the new students from each class during the first weeks of school.

To help with this process, I would like for you to select two friendly and responsible students (1 boy and 1 girl) who attended this school last year to be your New Kids Pals. They will help these new students (and others throughout the year) to feel included.

Please refer to the other side of this sheet for a schedule. I will briefly touch base with New Kids Pals in the next few days to explain their role and then will have one lunch meeting with our new students plus the pals. All of my contact will be during lunches so they should not miss any class time with you. If possible, please have these students in the front of your lunch line to maximize my time with them!

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thanks for your support!

Emily Brown, School Counselor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday 8/29</th>
<th>Tuesday 8/30</th>
<th>Wednesday 8/31</th>
<th>Thursday 9/1</th>
<th>Friday 9/2</th>
<th>Friday 8/26</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:40 – 1:05 Tuttle</td>
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</table>

New students this year (that I have on a list as of 8/26) are:

Please send any other newly enrolled students that I didn’t have on the list at the time of printing.

Dr. Emily Brown
brownemily@umsl.edu
New Kids Pals Letter to Parents

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Your child has been chosen to be a New Kids Pal! These New Kids Pals are special friends to new students at our school. They help them get around our school, play with them at free time, and bring them to the school counselor’s office to meet me and other new students at our school.

Your child was chosen because he/she is friendly, responsible, and a positive influence on fellow students.

We are looking forward to making our new students feel special at our school. I am pleased your child will be helping in that process!

Sincerely,

Ms. Emily Brown
School Counselor

Referral Form for New Kid Pals

Please return to the school counselor’s box by the end of the day on Tuesday!

Teacher’s Name ___________________________   Grade _______
Girl Pal ____________________________________
Boy Pal ____________________________________

New Kid Pal Lunch Group Agenda (25 minutes)

- Pick up students from lunchroom and escort to Counseling Office
- Introduce self as counselor and your role
- Have everyone say name, previous school, where they used to live before transferring
- Have New Kid Pals tell the group 1 thing that everyone should know about our school
- Ask members if there are any questions about our school
- Icebreaker Questions (draw an index card with question)
  - What’s your favorite tv show?
  - What’s your favorite kind of ice cream?
  - What is one thing you did this summer?
  - What is one thing you like to do for fun?
  - Who do you live with?
  - What’s your favorite sport to play or watch?

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- If you had $5 to spend at the gas station, what would you buy?
- Tell us about any pets you have.
- What is your favorite movie?
- Tell us the name of a really good book.