

Project “Increasing the awareness of child-centered fathering in order to reduce the risk of harm to children and their mothers caused by domestic violence” 2018-1-EE01-KA204-047115

### **How groups are used in different programs?**

Group work is a tool that can be used as part of therapy work, peer support or various other forms of work. It can be a boon for the participants and coordinator of the group, but it does not work with all audiences and approaches must be adjusted according to each audience.

This text will handle the basic questions of how participant selection is handled and what ground rules there are for participation, how long the group processes are, how meetings are organized and what kind of feedback processes the groups usually have.

### **Participants selection and ground rules**

#### **Groups of one gender work best**

Creating homogenous groups and working with very similar people is safe and similar methods are more likely to work with them. They can also be a hindrance, if for example they have a group where attitudes should be changing but the viewpoints are too similar. In these instances, work can be slow, and the new viewpoints may come too often from the program. If this is the case more heterogenous groups could work better.

The same could be said for the unisex groups. When working with gendered violence, the offenders of different genders usually have different dynamics in their violence. This will slow the work down and make some participants unwilling to participate in the group.

#### **Similar violence history in groups is easier to handle**

The modes of violence the participants have used should be similar. The most common forms of domestic violence are physical and psychological violence, and most participants are ready to discuss these issues. If on the other hand some participants have a history of religious or sexual violence while others do not, this can disrupt the whole group process.

#### **Other problems should not be too overwhelming**

The other problems the participant has should not be the focus in their lives when attending the group. This rule is based on practical knowledge the organizations have gathered that shows that attendees who are not able to concentrate and commit to the program are more likely to drop out of programs, more likely to hinder the progress of other participants and lead the group sessions away from their chosen focuses.

But when does the problem become too much of an issue? This is hard to measure, but all programs agree that if the process towards nonviolence and the group meetings are regularly disrupted because of other issues in participants' lives, they may not be ready for participation and should work on the other issues in their lives first.

Most programs acknowledge that people may have many problems in participants' lives that are interwoven and cannot be worked on one by one. Domestic violence programs cannot avoid the issues of substance abuse, mental health issues, poor interpersonal skills, or work-related problems the participants have. These

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problems can be issued and if the participant can keep the focus on the process, they will not prohibit participation in the program.

Some programs even have a rule that the participant can only attend one program at the time. The reason for this lies in the therapeutic processes that the participant is going through. If the participant is learning certain ways of thinking, training practical skills with the program, and beginning to use these tools in everyday life, the participation in another program can disrupt the change. Usually participants have hard enough time practicing the skills of one program, let alone two. On top of this the therapists may work in different ways and use different methods. In these situations, each process may even be side-tracked as each process tries to change the thinking in different ways and the participant will be more and more confused as the processes go on.

### **The only general rule is that the group must make things better**

The ground rules of the groups vary, but the main rule is that the group must create a positive change in the lives of the participants. The ways of doing this may differ, but the focus is always the same.

The basic rule of groups is that badmouthing anyone is not going to help anyone. The participants have probably had their fair share of troubles in their relationships, with authorities, or in their childhood. It is only human to complain, blame others or even wallow in self-pity. Unfortunately, this will not change the conduct of participants or give them any useful skills for dealing with violence in their life. The group can spend their all time just trading these stories, so the stop must be put to this at the earliest opportunity. The group is for change, not for blame.

The participants usually have a lot of anger and their experiences can such, that they are apt in giving advice that will not have good results. This bad advice can include petty vengeance, stalking, lying, or using the authorities as a tool in personal battles. All these and other forms of bad advice must be prohibited. The group should seek to change the attendants in a positive way, not give them tools for other forms of violence.

The participants are usually advised to avoid passive aggression or sarcasm. There is no research on the subject, but this is seen especially important when the groups are web-based. The ability to notice whether someone is using sarcasm or being serious is lessened when working in internet. especially if the group has not met face to face before beginning the sessions on the internet.

### **How long is the group process?**

In Finland, the length of the process can be anything from a few meetings to an analytic process that takes years. If put bluntly the length of the process is usually tied to who is paying for the process: public sector wants as short programs as possible and the therapists who have patients paying for their own participation usually go for long processes.

Most of the NGOs that work with violence prevention get at least some of their funding from Finnish Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations. This money comes from national gambling monopoly and used towards betterment of Finnish society. These funds must be used as frugally as possible. Getting most results per euro is the goal. Because of this the programs that are funded should strive for short therapeutic approaches to problems.

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The most common length of a program has gone down towards 5 meetings because of this. This is not much, and various ways have been found to work around this limit.

The most used one has been using pre-participation interviews, so that all the actual meetings are as useful as possible. The basic information about the participants situation as well as the basic data collection can happen during this meeting.

Another way to lengthen the participation has been taking the participant in for five one-on-one sessions before group work. This guarantees that their personal problems get enough attention and that the participants in the group will all have processed their situation to some degree before the group work begins.

After this, the participants go to group, where they again have five meetings.

After these meetings, the group can have feedback session, where they can discuss their situation and the program can get feedback on how it has helped the participants in their life. To get proper feedback these last meetings are usually held half a year or more after the group closes. To get participants in, the theme of this meeting can be dining together, going to a forest sauna together or some other form of activity that is suitable for the group.

In this kind structure the one-on-one work with therapist be crisis work after the violence. The meetings should regular, especially in the beginning when the participants have not committed to the work. The meetings can happen every week or have a few weeks between themselves.

In the group phase of participation on the other hand the meetings can be more apart, monthly for example. The meetings can be about how the participants are handling situations in their lives and what they should work on. The participants are committed to their change and the group itself binds the participants into coming to the meetings.

The public sector uses longer processes when working with offenders that have a longer history of violence. In these cases, social funding for therapy is used.

In prison programs the group work can take 6-8 months of group work with supported by one-on-one sessions. The total number of sessions can be above 100 in the end.

Private programs for violence prevention can vary from empowering weekends in the wild to a long analytical work that goes on for years. Of these the longer work forms probably leave more time for reflection and adjustment to changes that not using domestic violence can bring into the participants everyday life.

### **How are meetings organised in practice?**

The practical issues for groups were mainly about participation arrangements and location.

#### **Participation arrangements**

The common theme was that the group should be as binding as possible without being restrictive to the participants. All groups maintain certain rules for the groups, such as arriving in times and keeping the location tidy, but on top of these the rules are mostly about how strictly participants should be bound to the program.

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The basic tenet is, that the groups with shortest or most structured program should be more binding than the groups with longer timespan. The groups with short timespan or with educational structure that builds on previous sessions should have a strict culture of attendance. The participation should be agreed upon in the first meeting and the participants should attend all the sessions. If they have a medical emergency or some other similarly serious reason for non-participation, they should inform the organizers as soon as possible.

Some groups have a web-based discussion form, WhatsApp group or some other form of communication, where they can discuss together. This was brought up as a good practice that seemed to work, especially for the father’s groups.

Even the groups with longest participation had rules for participation. At least some in case of being late or not attending the participant should inform the group. If the participation rules for attending, doing all the assignments for sessions if there are any, being on time, or not keeping the premises clean were not maintained, the participation would begin to seem trivial. It was proposed that this would cause loss of participants as they quit the program. This would seem to be case, as most groups have experiences about most lax participants that are on the verge of non-participation pushing the boundaries, but there is not enough research on the subject to know for certain what rulesets are strict enough.

## Location

If the place for the group meeting is safe and the locations are accessible, most the locations seem to work whether they are office buildings, sport halls or garages.

The physical safety of the group work area has been the focus for many programs that work with violence. There are several guidelines like not leaving sharp or heavy objects around, having enough exits from the premises, not having open fire sources anywhere or leaving boiling water around – although the last one is regularly broken by almost every program with ever-present coffee and tea.

But when questioned, one program had had a situation where physical safety was challenged during the last decade. This does not mean that the measures are not needed – taking those measures may have prevented violence already or given the sense of safety to both participants and therapists.

The psychological safety is another issue for the participants. The entrances for the program should be placed so that the participants can arrive without being clearly identified as perpetrators of violence. The premises should be soundproof and such that outsiders will not see the group from outside through windows. Some groups were meeting at upper floors of buildings with multiple entrances to meet these criteria.

The accessibility of the group was clearly an issue for the groups. The location where the group gathers should be such that it is near public transportation hubs. There should be enough parking space for cars, motorcycles, and bicycles near the location. The location should be such that people with movement disorders can reach it – especially wheelchairs and crutches were mentioned as something to consider.

## Feedback processes

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The participants in the groups are usually likely to give information in the beginning, during the program and in the end. Then most of them are likely to disappear from the organizational radar and no feedback will be obtained from them.

The basic information about participants, their backgrounds, problems and changes they seek should be gathered in the beginning. This information gathering can be part of pre-group interviews, group work or simple pre-participation questionnaire that participant should fill. This information shows that the program reaches the right participants and that they have proper issues that need addressing.

During the program there should be some form of opportunity for feedback. The observations from participants can show weaknesses of the program or parts of it that need clarification.

At the end of the program there should be information gathering about the changes in the lives of the participants and what they have learned during the participation. This information is needed for the program to show that it has given the information, understanding and skills it tried to give and that the participant is applying this information in day to day life. If the program does not have this information, it is hard to show whether the program had the intended impact on participants or not.

The lasting impact of the program can only be shown if the group participants give feedback at some later date. This is hard. The participants are outside the program's influence after their participation ends and most are not willing to give feedback on the program after six months or a year after the participation.

One way to increase the amount of participant that will give feedback is to discuss this last round of feedback during the group process and stress how important the feedback will be for the continuation of the program and for the future participants, as the feedback will be used to form the program to suit the needs of participants. This practice will bind the participants to the program a bit and they will be mentally prepared to give the feedback when the time comes.

Another way to increase the percentage of participants who give feedback is to hold a meeting some time after the program has ended. The meeting should be agreed upon during the program, including dates and locations. The meeting should include something that all participants find enjoyable, whether it is hiking, kayaking, or going to a restaurant. Having a meeting like this not only increases the amount of feedback but creates a lasting connection for the participants for the waiting period. They know that they will see each other and because of this they are likely to feel group pressure to adhere to what they learnt during the group process.

No matter the part, it should be made known to the participants that all kinds of feedback will be valuable. If the program failed them, that will be useful information. If the participant thinks that the program worked, but they could not change for other reasons, this will be valuable information too. If this is not stressed to the participants, only the people who liked the program and succeeded in their goals are likely to give feedback.

### **Good practices and failures**

The good practice that came up was peer-confrontation, that was used to bring up hard subjects. The bad practice on the other hand was bringing newcomers in to long-running groups with too little preparation and not concentrating on their process when they begin attending the group.

## Peer-confrontation

One tool that groups can use is peer-confrontation. When working with a group, an experienced therapist can give the group subject to discuss and the group can confront each other's beliefs and practices in ways that professionals cannot. The peer feedback can be much more direct and still appreciated. This can speed up the group process if there is no malice in the ways the participants confront each other.

In optimal cases, the group can work through most of their issues together. If this works, the therapist does not have to confront the beliefs of the participants too often. For participants, this can create a feeling that they share values and practices that they should strive for. This works much better than having the professionals tell the participants what they should value and how they should behave.

## Long-lasting groups are hard for newcomers

One part where groups that last longer can fail is bringing in new participants. The main reason for this is that new participants can feel left out from the dynamics that the group has and decide that attending is not worthwhile because of this.

The main ways to avoid this is to prepare both the new participants and the group for the inclusion of the new participant. When the participant knows that the group has been going on, but they have a structure for taking in new participant, they will not feel as threatened by the group dynamics. The group on the other will know, that they will need to adjust to the new participants and the group work will be different for a while because of inclusion of the new participant.

When new participants come into the group, they should be given time to tell about themselves and why they want to participate in the group. The older participants should introduce themselves and they can tell what they have gotten out of their participation and what they strive for by participating.

The therapist and the group should make an agreement to pay close attention to the needs of the new participant and pay heed to concentrate on issues most essential to them at least for a while during each session for a while after their inclusion to the group.

The first sessions after taking in a need participant should have a clear structure. This structure should be known to everyone and adhered to.

The group has likely formed different forms of communication and shares common terminology after a while. These practices should be explained to the new participant and they should be informed that they can ask about the terminology or ways of communication whenever they need to.

These practices can ease the transition into the group, but mostly it will about human communication. The group should be inviting and warm-hearted to new participants. They are working through their problems, which they most likely are ashamed of. Niceness and hope will keep them in group, feeling left out will drive them away.

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