

A Solution Focused Approach to Adolescent Groupwork

Virginia Banks**

The use of Solution Focused Therapy in a group setting with adolescents requires the therapist to encourage the young persons to recognise when they are not bullying, what prosocial behaviours they use and how others respond to them. Furthermore it gets bullies to work together in a cooperative and purposeful direction, approaches negative behaviours positively, and allows desired outcomes to be supported. The group setting enables the adolescent to gain support from peers as well as provide support to others. The therapist must be flexible, remain focused on the solution and allow the group to determine the course to a certain extent.

INTRODUCTION

As a high school counsellor I was asked to address the issue of bullying behaviour within the school. A number of staff, parents and students were concerned about the level of bullying, particularly in Year Eight. I decided to use a survey to establish what the students classified as bullying behaviour, as well as to identify the bullying students. The Year Eight students were called together for a meeting by their coordinator who explained that the school had noticed an increase in bullying behaviour and that it was important to get their opinions. A survey was distributed to the students, who were requested to complete it as part of the meeting. Although the teachers could probably identify some bullying students, it would have a greater impact if the students were identified by their peers. Clarification of what the students understood to be bullying behaviour was important for both staff and students. Besag claims that:

Too rigid a definition could be counterproductive, as some of the most traumatic and terrifying instances of bullying have been seemingly innocuous acts, such as giving the victim 'the wink' or 'the look'. It is in the interpretation of the behaviour by victim and bully that the power lies (1989: 4).

There were 97 respondents; all were anonymous. The staff collated the survey and identified the eight most often named bullying students.

On the issue of what 'bullying behaviour' meant (more than one item could be checked), 94.8% of respondents identified 'bullying' as being 'teased', 80.4% saw it as being 'hit and kicked', 76.2% saw it as being 'shoved', 76.2% as being 'ganged up on' and 65% as being 'left out'. The results also indicated that eight students were

responsible for most of the bullying. These students were nominated between three and six times.

STRUCTURE

In response to the above results it was decided to conduct a series of sessions with the nominated individuals. The objectives of the sessions were to:

- Increase the students' awareness of their behaviour
- Increase the use of alternative behaviours
- Decrease the level of bullying behaviour in Year Eight

Content Outline by Session

Session One:	Introduction Survey results Is bullying behaviour okay?
Session Two:	Recap session one Look at exceptions Take home tasks
Session Three:	Task results Group scaling What if there was a miracle?
Session Four:	The older, wiser self Where to from here? Celebration and certificates

The group of eight participants met once a week for four weeks. Each session was for 55 minutes (one period). All students completed the four weeks with 100% attendance.

The Group

Two weeks after the survey the group was called together. Group members were not given any idea why they were being called together. The school staff made it clear that these students did not have a choice about attending the group, they *had* to attend. Whilst this compulsory attendance could have created some resistance,

**PO Box 219, Sans Souci 2219 NSW, Ph: +61 2 9529 8788; Email: bftc@bigpond.com.au

in this case the 'trade off' was that the students would miss a period of school work each week—they were all happy about that!

Session introduction

At the beginning of the first session I explained that I was the school counsellor and that this group had been identified in the bullying survey. Every time a student questioned the validity of being identified as a bully my response was 'I am not here to decide if you have bullied or not. Your behaviour has been identified by other students.' It was necessary to repeat this statement whenever I was challenged about the relevance of the session to them. These students were definitely not 'customers' (de Shazer, 1988)! I decided that it was important to make them aware of their behaviour and if I succeeded in this approach then that would justify the decision to intervene.

I raised the issue of confidentiality in this session. I explained that whilst I intended that the content of the group discussion would remain confidential there were circumstances that I was legally bound to tell someone about. I went through my legal obligations. The students were pleased to know that these did not include any comments that they might make about the teaching staff. The students were not concerned about group confidentiality. I tried to establish 'group rules'. The only one we agreed on was that only one person was to speak at a time—this was not at all successful.

Participation

The school operates a system of merits to reward good behaviour and demerits for breaking rules. A student with too many demerits is given a detention at the end of the week and a student with a certain number of merits gets an award; merits can actually be used to cancel out demerits. I decided to use this system to 'encourage' participation; every student therefore received a merit at the end of each session. Demerits were not given at all. This was made clear to the group during the first session.

The word 'Bully' was written on the white board and I asked the group if they could think of any other words that would describe their behaviour. They came up with quite a long list. They were then asked if this behaviour was acceptable at school. A lengthy discussion developed in which they were asked to explain why it was not. Besag states that 'These children need to understand and accept that a code of conduct which allows aggressive behaviour, in whatever form, is not allowed' (1989: 147). I felt it would be more beneficial if they convinced me why bullying behaviour was unacceptable rather than if I tried to convince them, because they had to construct what would be seen as appropriate behaviour.

Exceptions

If these students were going to change, then it was important for them to be able to identify non-bullying behaviours and also to recognise that there were many

times when they behaved more prosocially. Finding times when appropriate behaviours are occurring is a useful way for adolescents to recognise that they are *capable* of acting differently and that there are times when they *do*. The list of bullying behaviours was left on the white board as I went on to find some exceptions. Cade and O'Hanlon point out:

Rarely does a problem occur all the time, so we often pursue a line of inquiry that highlights reports of things that interfere with the problem, interrupt it, or happen instead of it (1993: 58).

Examples of questions

Counsellor: When you're not behaving like this, what are you doing instead?

Students: Being social, giving, friendly, good natured, normal (everyone in the group agreed on these).

Counsellor: When was the last time you were ... ?
What did you do?

Each student described in detail their exceptions; other students joined in and added to the list (the bullying behaviours were taken off the white board as the exceptions were written up). The students became quite involved in this process and even helped each other out with exceptions, often identifying behaviours they had seen in each other at various times. The students were not *encouraged* to assist each other: it happened naturally within the group.

Exception	Behaviour
Being Social:	Talking Going to work Visiting
Giving	Presenting a gift to mother Being polite to parents
Friendly:	Talking to someone Saying 'Hello' Playing with others Helping Uncle Not reacting Helping parents Ignoring teasing
Good natured:	Helping mow the lawn Helping friend's mother
Normal:	Being myself

Tasks

Tasks are a practical way of getting adolescents to act differently. Tasks seem to work better if they relate directly to behaviours that adolescents have themselves identified, rather than to behaviours identified as desirable by others. By limiting the number of times the task is to be performed, the chance of non-compliance or failure is also decreased. Students were asked to select one of the following behaviours from their list (being prosocial, giving, friendly, good natured or normal) and to practise it *once only* during the coming week. Each student wrote down their name and what they would

practise. I decided on this task because it was specific and the students had already been doing it, so it would be difficult to fail. The task also related to what was happening now and did not in any way relate to past behaviour. When contrasting brief strategic intervention to both behavioural and strategic family therapy, Amatea says: ‘Persistent problematic behaviour in students is perceived to result not from past faulty learning, but from current interactions between people’ (1989: 16). The task was a practical way for them to find solutions to bullying behaviour.

Results of tasks

Each student reported back to the group on what they had done and how they did it. All of the students reported doing the task more than once. For example:

- Being Social: Talked to boy I didn’t know
 Visited friend
- Giving: Lent pencil
 Carried things for teacher
- Friendly: Said ‘Hello’ to postman
 Talked to someone
 Said ‘Hello’
 Played with others
 Stood up for others
 Did homework early
 Didn’t react
- Good natured: Took my turn in canteen line
 Said ‘Good morning’ to teacher
- Normal: Didn’t act like someone else

In response to these reported actions, I asked questions like ‘How did you do that?’, ‘What was different?’, and ‘Who noticed?’ In asking these questions I was also looking for more exceptions, and specific examples. This part of the session went on for quite a while and all

students became involved in the process. When the student answered with ‘I didn’t ... [exhibit a bullying behaviour]’ I asked about the alternative behaviour. An example of a student reply: ‘I didn’t tease George’. Counsellor: ‘What did you do instead?’

Scaling

The use of scaling gives adolescents a concrete way of looking at how they are progressing. Scaling in a group setting is also a practical way of getting the group to practise cooperating with each other, listening to others’ points of view and coming to a consensus. I decided to use the scaling question to encourage the students to come up with a *practical measure* of where they thought they were at. I chose to use a scale that gave the students an indication of how far away from bullying behaviour they had moved, in the direction of the kinds of behaviour they had already identified as desirable. I also decided that the ‘solution’ should be stated in their words so that it would be more meaningful to them.

Counsellor: ‘On a scale of nought to ten, with nought representing behaviour that is not acceptable in this community and ten being behaviour that is regarded as sociable, giving, friendly, good natured and normal, where would you say you are now?’ Students: ‘At six’. (They arrived at this answer after a discussion and voting.) I then asked the students what told them they were at ‘six’?: how did they know? Recognising that other people are noticing new behaviours provides the adolescent with evidence independent of what they notice themselves.

I asked the students where they thought they would be on the scale by the next time we met; they settled on ‘seven’. I then got them to expand on this by asking: ‘What would that be like? How would you know? Who would notice what you did and how did you do it?’

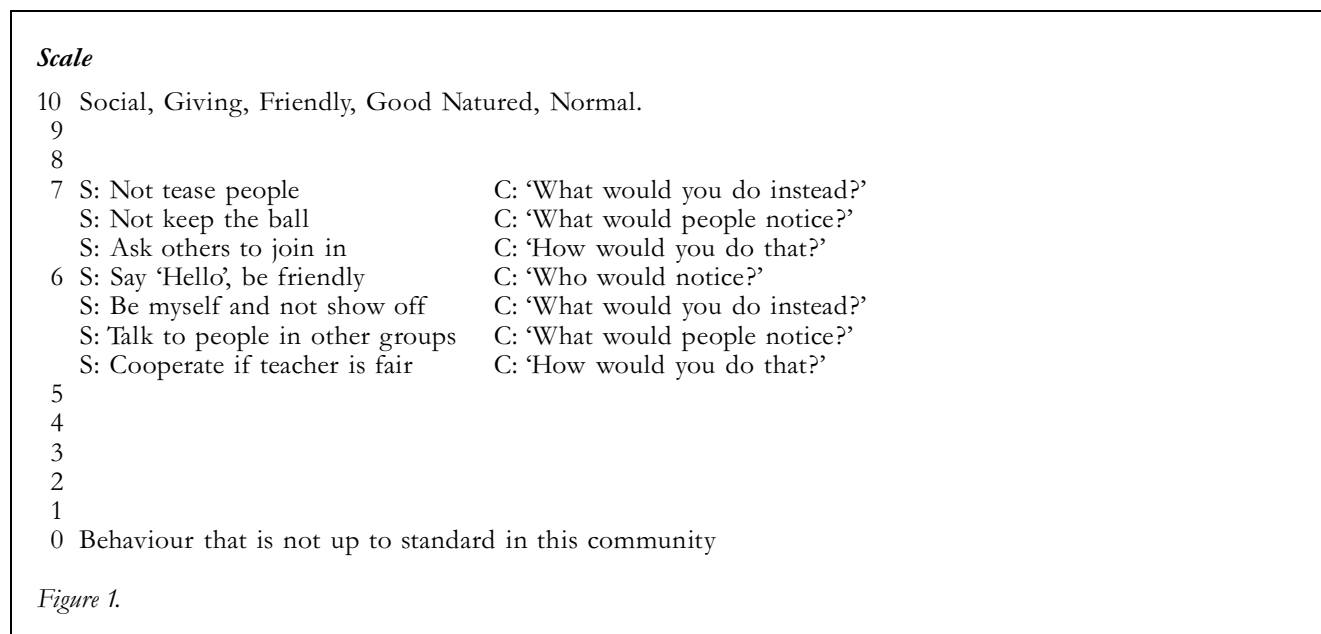


Figure 1.

Miracle question

The miracle question is another way for the students to see what life might be like when things are different. A reasonable time needs to go into the preparation for presenting the miracle question. I started by asking them about how well they could imagine things and if they thought they had good imaginations. The purpose was to get them curious about what was going to happen so that they would want to be involved. I began the miracle question with 'Just imagine that tonight while you're asleep a miracle happens. This miracle changes some things. It changes some of your behaviour, in particular the behaviour that led you to become part of this group. You have no idea this miracle has happened because you are asleep. When you wake up you notice some changes and realise that a miracle has happened while you were asleep. What are some of the changes you would notice that would tell you a miracle had happened while you were sleeping?'

The miracle question is a way in which the students can imagine an alternative behaviour. As de Shazer states:

The framework of the miracle question and other questions of this type allows the client to bypass their structural, causal assumptions. They do not have to imagine the process of getting rid of the problem, only the results (1991: 113).

The students participated with enthusiasm. I asked them what they would notice in the classroom and in the schoolyard. How would they know a miracle had happened? What would they be doing after this miracle? What would they be doing instead of ... ?' I encouraged them to look at what would be different at school rather than at home, as I wanted them to be very specific and relate the difference back to the reason they were in the group.

In the Classroom

sit next to different people
talk to others*

join in*

get to know others*

help others with work

lend things*

not tease teachers*

not ask to go to toilet

be friendly to teachers*

put hand up

listen

not laugh at others

not tease others*

help people*

not show off*

In the Yard

join in games*

talk to people who would

be at 7-10 on the scale

don't throw away balls

let others join in*

not get into a fight

pick up papers

say 'Hello'*

After going through how some of these things are done and getting the students to be very specific, we marked all the things that were already happening with *, as in the list above. One student then decided the group was pretty close to a miracle, and all agreed. De Shazer says that 'Indirectly asking about goals, using the

miracle sequence, consistently elicits descriptions of concrete and specific behaviours' (1988: 5). After exhausting ideas about the behavioural changes that the miracle would create, we then went on to talk about what other people would notice if a miracle happened and how they would know. Who would notice first?

Older wiser self

The 'older wiser self' question is a great way of encouraging the group to give themselves some advice. I use this question a lot in individual counselling sessions. I find it helps to put the focus on the solution rather than the problem. I chose this activity at this point for two reasons; to consolidate prior discussions and as a means of keeping the group participation going. I asked them: imagine that you are a lot older and wiser, and imagine that you met someone who is in the same position that you have been in: what would you tell this young person? Is there any advice you could offer? Dolan writes about 'the older wiser self': 'What do you think that this wonderful, old, wise you would suggest to you to help you through this current phase of your life? What would he (she) tell you to remember?' (1991: 36). I used this activity to reinforce what we had covered in previous sessions and to give them some positive reminders to write in their diaries. Two encouraging statements that the students made were: 'Don't be afraid; you can change', and 'You *can* teach an old dog new tricks'.

Follow-up

Six months later, a 'Bully Survey' was distributed to the same student group, now in Year Nine. The results when compared to the original survey indicated a decline in behaviour identified by the students as bullying. The number of students who were able to identify other students as being bullied also dropped most noticeably. Of course we may assume that the survey in itself makes students aware of bullying behaviour. It also acts as a deterrent to some students by letting them know that their behaviour has not gone unnoticed. The 1998 survey identified as bullies only two of the group participants. However, the identification rate of bullying incidents had decreased by 50%. The overall results certainly indicate that according to the students, bullying behaviour had declined compared to the previous year.

CONCLUSION

The use of solution focused therapy in a group setting is a concrete and practical way of getting the group to work together; it provides a common purpose through practical application of the processes. The group is able to build on each other's exceptions to the 'problem' and gain a clearer idea of the fact that the 'problem' isn't always present. With guidance and some input from the counsellor, the group actually works to help each other. At the conclusion of each session I was able to compliment the group on the way they had done this, which

SURVEY COMPARISON 1997–1998

Have any of these things happened to you this year?

	Never		Sometimes		All the time		No Answer	
	1997	1998	1997	1998	1997	1998	1997	1998
a) teased	22.6	40.8	63.9	50.5	12.3	6.4	1.2	2.3
b) left out	59.7	67.7	26.8	25.8	4.1	1	9.4	5.5
c) shoved	49.4	53.7	7.2	43	3	1	40.4	2.3
d) ganged up on	64.9	87	11.3	9.6	2	1	21.8	2.4
e) hit	64.9	69.8	27.8	23.6	2	2.1	5.3	4.6
f) kicked	70.1	81.7	22.6	16.1	2	1	5.3	1.2

Do you know of someone in your year who is being bullied, that is receiving any of the treatment mentioned in question 1?

	1997	1998
YES	54.6	15.1
NO	45.4	81.7
No Answer	0	3.2

Do you know of someone in your form who is bullying other students in the form?

1997	1998
YES	22.6
NO	63.4
No Answer	14

Figure 2.

was another practical way for them to recognise some positive behaviours. Although tasks related to the list of exceptions identified by the group collectively, they were assigned to individuals. However, I see no reason why group tasks could not be used also. I think it is very important that the tasks be as 'fail-proof' as possible because they are discussed openly in the group. Group members often helped each other identify people who may have noticed changed behaviour.

The scaling question worked well. It required the group to interact, cooperate, negotiate and listen to other people's opinions. It was also a very concrete way for the group to decide where they were at and where they wanted to be. Using the miracle question in a group takes a long time as each person's miracle is slightly different and each one has to be considered as part of the whole. Although it was time consuming, however, I thought it was very worthwhile in getting the group to focus on what a solution would look like. It gave the group feedback about their progress and also some indirect goals to work towards.

These students had lots of energy. Each session had to be interesting enough to hold their attention for 55 minutes. Whilst I did allow time for the group to coast along at its own pace I discovered that things worked better if it appeared the session was moving quickly. I also found it was helpful to ask each student to write points on the

white board: it seemed to keep them from becoming too distracted.

Although attendance was compulsory it was interesting that not one of the students was absent on the day of the group. At the completion of the four weeks we had a celebration, each student received a certificate of 'appreciation of participation and attendance': bullying was not mentioned. The results of the follow-up survey conducted with the same students six months later identified only two of the original group, and only half as often. The other six students were not identified at all. The survey also indicated that bullying behaviour within that population generally had decreased.

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