

the magazine for family therapy and systemic practice in the UK

# Context



**Solution-focused brief therapy**

Context 118, December 2011

# A different type of talking: A solution-focused group for parents

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“ It was a different type of talking in the group. ” Nina

“ I don't remember the questions that Guy asked in the group now. But I remember that I had never thought of this or that question before. ” Deepa

“ It was really helpful for me and changed everything. ”  
Radhika

This is an account of two groups for parents at a primary school in London's East End, which ran in the winter and spring terms, 2010-11. Solution-focused groupwork was new to all of us, the parents, my co-worker, Bettina Dobb and me, and I hope to capture here some of the excitement this newness caused.

For a long time, I have been recommending the 2001 book by John Sharry, *Solution-Focused Groupwork*, as one of the best books in the solution-focused literature and, while watching a clip of John working with a group of children at a conference in 2001, I wrote in my notes, “*This makes me feel like doing groupwork*”. So it is something of a shame that it has taken me until the past year to actually do some! So, one issue I will touch on here concerns a barrier or two, which might get in the way of running groups. When the opportunity presented itself to do some groupwork, I came to realise that these barriers were not as big as they had appeared. The opportunity did have to present itself, though, so let's look first at some of the factors which helped to create a context favourable to the running of a group.

I had begun working with Kobi Nazrul school in a consultative capacity after their head teacher, Wendy Hick, became interested in solution-focused practice and, initially, I did what I was experienced in doing, that is, sessions with individual families where the parents or school were having some difficulty with a child. I did this work alongside Bettina, an experienced learning mentor who had done some training in solution-focused practice and had been identified by Wendy to be well placed to be my link with the school. The idea for running a solution-focused group for parents then emerged for the following reasons:

- There was a perceived need for more parents to receive the type of help provided by the solution-focused sessions
- I was working in a pro bono capacity and could not offer to see many individual families
- A tradition of facilitating groups for parents had developed at the school in recent years
- Bettina, the member of staff who led the running of these groups, was an experienced groupworker. So, applying solution-focused principles on a “meta-level”, running a group would *utilise* the school's and Bettina's strengths, and *cooperate* with their ways of doing things
- I had been further inspired by another solution-focused book!

Teri Pichot's chapters on working with groups in her 2009 book, *Solution-Focused Substance Abuse Treatment*, stood out from most accounts of solution-focused groupwork, which tend to describe integrative approaches, including an educational component. Solution-focused parenting groups, in particular, have – as far as I am aware – come solely into this category (Selekman, 1991, 1999; Zimmerman *et al.*, 1996; Todd, 2000; Sharry, 2003). Pichot's straightforwardly “pure” solution-focused approach appealed, first because that is how I do my individual and family work, and second – and crucially for practical reasons – because the absence of an educational component, no “curriculum” to “deliver”, meant that there was nothing to prepare. I could just turn up and do it.

This, however, presupposed that there would be a group of parents to do it with, which takes us to another potential “barrier” to running a group, again relating to time required for preparation – the time required for screening and selection to ensure suitable membership. The importance of pre-screening in group therapy has been an accepted truism from Yalom (1970) onwards, so it was refreshing to come across the countervailing approach of Bettina and Kobi Nazrul. Bettina did what had worked with previous groups, which was to put up a poster in advance, talk to one or two parents informally where staff had a hunch that they might benefit, and then, with the group starting at 9am, standing at the school gates on the morning of the first session asking certain parents who had dropped their children off if they would like to attend. This did lead to the presence at the first session of a number of people who did not return, but this did not happen in the second group, by which time word of mouth had probably helped the self-(de)selecting to happen beforehand rather than after one session.

Two groups took place, the first, from September to November 2010, being deemed sufficiently successful by the school for a second to run, from March to April 2011. Three parents attended each group (after eight or nine had attended the first session in September), and I interviewed all six of them in May 2011

about their experiences. The parents were all mothers, four of Bangladeshi origin, one Pakistani and one Somali. The rest of this article will explain how we ran the groups and look at some of the parents' responses to them.

We decided to have five sessions each time, which was in some ways an arbitrary figure arrived at by averaging the length of other solution-focused groups (a little longer) with the typical length of my work with families (shorter). For future groups, I might arrange to have four sessions, as this is the number that the three parents in each of the two groups effectively used – the first session of the first group being a bit messy, in part due to numbers, and two parents being unable to attend the last session of the second group. The group's format roughly followed these stages:

**Introductions and explanation** – explaining the purpose of the group proved a little tricky. We had given it a name in order to advertise it, focusing on the fact that it was to be a group for talking, rather than being activity-based like other groups. Let's Talk had seemed a little vague to the first parents Bettina spoke to, however, so we ended up going for Let's Talk About Parenting, given that the group was to be comprised of parents. However, we had wanted to be open to whatever people wanted to get from the group, and saw parenting as just one aspect of their lives out of many. When we tried to convey this at the beginning of the group, our own lack of clarity – was this group about parenting or about anything? – probably came through. I will think more about this for future groups.

**Asking each member in turn what their children would say they were good at** – a version of a question with which I always heard Insoo Kim Berg begin her family sessions. This was intended to set a tone for the group, that we were interested in people's abilities, that I was going to go around the group asking each member the same basic questions, and that the questions might well be hard! Here is what Shirin said about this question: *"I liked the question 'What would your children say you're good at?' I went back and asked my son and got positive feedback! At the time, I didn't know, I didn't have a clue!"* Others working in the same part of London have found this aspect of solution-focused practice to fit well for Bangladeshi families (Khaliq *et al.*, 2002) and the parents' responses here indicated it was a useful way to begin.

**Asking each member what their best hopes were from the group** – we "contracted" with each group member individually around their desired outcome from the group (Shennan & Iveson, 2011). I was also influenced here by Pichot's idea of a group theme, distilled into one word for each member. For example, in the first group, by asking follow-up questions – typically *"what difference would that make?"* – we reached a situation where Nina voiced wanting to be more *patient*, Deepa, *calm*, and Radhika, *happy*. Having a theme represented by one word connected up the group members so that, although they were each working in individually defined directions, these directions were linked and dialogue with one could always have some relevance for the others.

**Helping the group members to describe detailed preferred futures** – once a desired direction had been established for each group member, the dialogues consisted of questions by the group leaders prompting members' descriptions of their preferred futures and progress being made towards those futures – "preferred

future" here being defined as the future in which the member's hopes from the group have been realised (Iveson, 2003). As with all aspects of the process, each member was helped to describe their own individualised preferred future, and the dialogue was always between myself as facilitator and group member, not between the members. In this way, we followed a *treatment* group model rather than a *support* group model – see Pichot for more details – but the group members still experienced added value from this process taking place in a group rather than in individual sessions, as will be apparent from some of their comments below.

**Helping the group members to describe progress towards their preferred futures** – I ended the first session by asking each group member to describe something about themselves or something that had happened recently that told them they *could* achieve their hopes. Each follow-up session then began with the question *"What's better?"* Follow-up questions were asked to help to amplify any progress, and to help the members shift from the general to the specific, in the usual solution-focused way. Scales were used to further elicit signs of progress, and to move the interviewing back to the future in the latter part of each session.

## Endings

In keeping with recent developments in solution-focused practice (Shennan, in press), the ending of the work was low-key and did not involve the sort of ritualised celebration that is a feature of many groups. Sessions more or less came to an end after the last question had been answered, and the final sessions were little different. The group members' answers were seen as the therapeutic ingredient rather than anything we said back to them, and changes the members made in their lives outside the sessions were seen as more important than what happened in the sessions. For this reason, the intervals between the sessions increased as the group progressed.

## Questions and answers

Let me hand over now to the group members. When I interviewed them after the groups had finished, I asked them about the process as well as the outcomes of the groups. Their last words will be about outcome, but we will start with some of their thoughts about the questions they were asked and the effects of these questions.

*"Normally, life goes down one road, it's the same routine, getting the children ready for school, cooking and so on. Then you ask these questions and it makes a difference... When Guy asked the different questions I got this new knowledge. So many questions he had to ask me!"* – Deepa.

*"The questions opened me up a lot more, and helped me to say more, in particular, the personal ones"* – Radhika.

*"[The questions] left it up to us to say more than yes or no"* – Shirin.

The beauty of being in a position to ask questions of people is that questions make people think, which was valued by the group members.

*"The group made me think, how can we make ourselves happy, and in a good mood? How can I make myself happy and what can I do with my children?"* – Deepa.

*"I thought about it in between the groups – for the next time"* – Deepa.

*"It made me think about myself. And when I think about it I think I will try"* – Nadia.



### The group provided "added value"

Although, during the sessions, the members worked towards their individually defined desired outcomes, several comments made clear the benefits of this taking place in a group context.

*"It was also good listening to others. When you listen to others, you can see you're not the only one struggling... managing children and daily life"* – Nina.

*"I said to myself, there are people in the group, they are calm and relaxed, so why can't I be? Why do I have to rush so much?"* – Nina.

*"Listening to other people and the way they did things with their kids helped me to do different things with my own kids"* – Radhika.

*"The group was helpful because I could hear other parents' views... I learned some new things, like giving my children time, one-by-one; special times, listening to them"* – Deepa.

*"We listened to each other and I think that was very important"* – Beydan.

### Five out of six ain't bad

Turning to outcomes, while the interviews took place only two weeks after the second group had finished and, therefore, could be seen as being in its "honeymoon period", they were six months after the first group, so any positive outcomes from that group might be harder to ignore. As it happens, five of the six women made clear that the group had resulted in a positive outcome, with the sixth being from the second group.

*"It has been helpful. At the end of the group I said I was a bit calmer and less anxious and I'm still like that"* – Nina (first group).

*"I am more relaxed... When the children get home I am less stressed and in a better mood. I spend more time with the children, asking them about school, and watching TV with them. They like this, and there is less shouting and fighting"* – Deepa (first group).

*"I became more confident... Other parents became friends"* – Radhika (first group).

*"I'm able to stick to it, when I say I want something to happen. I can say 'no' to a lot of people now... I have more confidence... I'm less dominated by male family members"* – Shirin (second group).

*"I am feeling more confident. Since the group finished, it's been helpful everywhere and with everything. I feel happy going out with other parents. We went out on a science trip. It's the first time I've done this"* – Beydan (second group).

No approach will work for everyone however, and here was no exception.

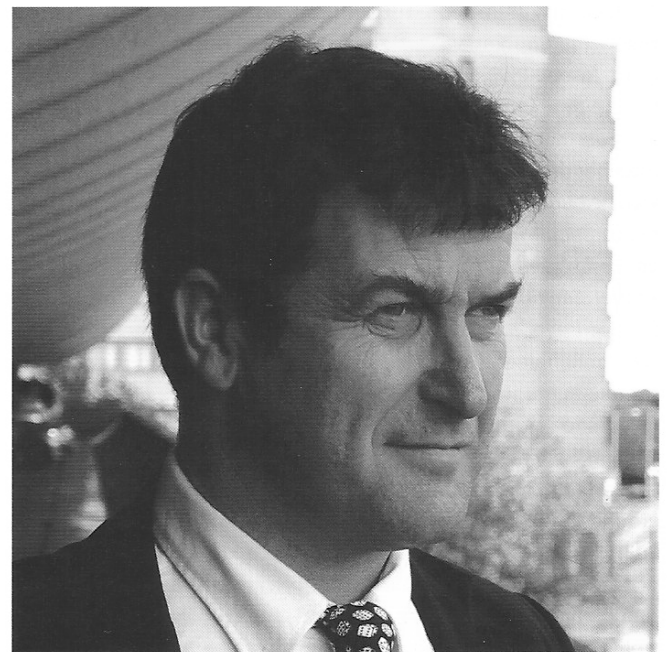
*"I would have found it more helpful if I had been to every session... Guy didn't advise me or tell me what to do. He didn't say anything. He just listened. He's a good listener. But sometimes I like to get some advice"* – Nadia (second group).

Nonetheless, overall, the outcomes that were described, together with Bettina's positive impressions from her later informal contacts with the parents, provide support for the potential effectiveness of running purely solution-focused parenting groups. I am therefore confident that the inspiration

originally provided by the writings of John Sharry and Teri Pichot will continue – especially if the skills of a colleague like Bettina Dobb and the support of a creative school like Kobi Nazrul are thrown in for good measure.

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