The Power of Group Therapy for Neurodiverse Teens and Adults

Tasha Oswald, Ph.D.
and Cady Stanton, M.S.
About Me

Tasha Oswald, PhD

• Licensed Psychologist
• Founder & Director of Open Doors Therapy
• Specialize in Social Skills Groups for Neurodiverse Teens and Adults
• Parent Support Groups
Group Facilitator

Cady Stanton, M.S.

- Co-facilitates neurodiverse adult groups
- Facilitates parent support groups
Why Seek Out Social Skills Group

- Reading social cues does not feel natural
- Isolation and loneliness
- Wanting to make friends
- Social Anxiety
  - Lack confidence about social abilities
  - Lower self-esteem
  - Bullied
- Daily high levels of anxiety
  - Due to not fitting in with societal norms
  - Sensory overload
Why Working Autistic Adults Seek out Group Therapy?

- Negative Job Performance Review
  - Unapproachable/Cold
  - Excellent Technical Skills

- Caught Off Guard
  - But, I Got the Job Done!
  - Great Work Ethic
  - Hyperfocus on work

- Don’t Feel Comfortable with Social Behaviors, like:
  - Small Talk, Smiling a lot, Making Eye Contact, Not Being Blunt
Courage & Persistence in Autism

• Take a moment to acknowledge the courage and persistence it takes to live in a world you don’t feel made for
• All this stuff comes naturally to others!
• You just feel wiped by the end of the day
• But, you still want meaningful relationships
• And, with courage you persist
Benefit of Being in a Neurodiverse Group

• Everyone needs to feel like they belong
• Safe place to explore your struggles with others who get you
• Being in a group setting energizes you to grow
  – You learn from others (there is a lot of wisdom held by the group)
  – Normalizes your experience
  – Reduces stigma and shame
  – You see others growing and it inspires you
• Self-Compassion
  – No one is perfect, we’re all growing

This is all true for parents!
A Former Participant Said About Group…

“I spent most of my life feeling out of place
- thinking wrong thoughts,
- feeling wrong feelings.

Thank you all for being so honest
and for making me feel I belong somewhere
and that the things I’m going through aren’t wrong.”
Social Skills Groups Help You Practice Social Skills

- Partner Activities
- Group Discussions
- Role Plays
- Modeling
- Homework (Weekly Theme)

“PRACTICE CREATES confidence. CONFIDENCE EMPOWERS YOU.”
-Simone Biles-
What’s Unique About Our Groups

Peer Consultation Model
- Examples
- How you can apply it
Peer Consultation Model

- **Phase 1: Sharing**
  - One group member shares about a challenging social situation

There is a student in my class. We were in a group project together. We realized we both liked science fiction books.

We’ve started hanging out. He said he liked me. I feel confused. I don’t know if I’m ready for dating.

Neurodiverse Young Adult
Peer Consultation Model

• Phase 2: Exploration
  – Group members ask open-ended questions
  – Do not give advice
  – Tune into the emotions

How do you feel about him?

What do you like about him?

What kind of outcome would you like?

Group Members
Peer Consultation Model

- **Phase 3: Feedback**
  - Validate feelings (acknowledge their feelings)
  - Empathize (express how you relate to their feelings, thoughts, experience)
  - Identify 2 positives
  - (Optional) Offer suggestion/advice

I can see you feel confused.

I also want to date, but feel terrified by the idea!

Bringing this up in group shows you are being thoughtful about it.

**Group Members**
Repetition of Key Concepts

- Empathy
- Perspective-Taking
- Flexible Thinking
- Self-Regulation
- Self Compassion
- Conversation Skills
Peer Consultation Model for Parents

- **Phase 1: Sharing**
  - One group member shares about a challenging social situation

  **Parent**

  My son was melting down and crying this morning, and he wouldn’t tell me why.

  I’m afraid this could get worse – like when a couple of years ago he had a meltdown over being bullied and didn’t leave his room for weeks.

  I’ve been so stressed all day that I can’t focus on work and feel sick to my stomach.
Peer Consultation Model

- **Phase 2: Exploration**
  - Group members ask open-ended questions
  - Do not give advice *(Difficult for parents)*
  - Tune into the emotions

**Group Members**

- What else leads your son to melt down?
- Who else might your son talk to about his problems?
- How has your son grown in the past 2 years?
Peer Consultation Model

- **Phase 3: Feedback**
  - Validate feelings (acknowledge their feelings)
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You’ve helped your son become more resilient in the past 2 years.

I feel stressed when my child has a meltdown. I can go to worst case scenario.

I know you’re feeling scared.
Sharer Then Reflects

- Phase 3: Feedback

Actually, he has grown a lot.

It’s nice to feel like I’m not alone.

He does have fewer meltdowns and they’ve been easily resolved.
Parents Can Use The Consultation Model

• **Phase 1: Sharing**
  - Listen

• **Phase 2: Exploration**
  - Ask open-ended questions
    - What kind of outcome would you like?
    - What are some things you could do about it?
  - Pay attention to the urge inside to direct or advise them
  - Resist that urge!

• **Phase 3: Feedback**
  - Validate feelings (acknowledge and accept their feelings)
  - Empathize (share briefly a similar challenge/feelings you’ve had – normalize it)
  - *Express confidence in their ability to sort it out*
  - Identify 2 positives
  - (Optional) Offer suggestion/advice
Cady Stanton, M.S.

- Group Facilitator at Open Doors Therapy
- Transition to Adulthood Specialist at Facilitate Joy!
- 15 years experience in research
- Adult son & brother on the spectrum
Psychoeducation

What is Psychoeducation?

- “Psychology” + “Education”
- Learn skills that support mental, emotional health & wellbeing

Psychoeducation is most effective when paired with the other elements of group therapy, e.g. practice
Foundational Concepts

• Deep Dive into Foundational Concepts
  • Understand Why the Concept is Important to You
  • Explore Concept Deeply
  • Concepts are Interconnected (e.g. managing social anxiety and info-dumping also come up when discussing building relationships)

• Learn Strategies to Apply this Information to Your Life
A Sample of Some Foundational Concepts…

- Building Relationships with Friends & Colleagues
- Managing Social Anxiety
- Understanding Your Social “Battery” – What Fills You Up & What Drains You
- Info-Dumping: Make Your Passion Work for You, Not Against You!
- Understanding & Navigating Sensory Sensitivities
- Self-Compassion: The Antidote to Self-Criticism
Foundational Concepts

Today, we will explore part of the foundational concept of “Building Relationships with Friends & Colleagues”.

We will focus on handling a conversation with someone you just met.

Remember, in group therapy we would also practice these skills and address interrelated concepts like dealing with social anxiety.
Deep Dive into Foundational Concept

Foundational Concept:
Building Relationships with Friends & Colleagues

Deep Dive Topics:

• What Does It Take to Build a Relationship?
• Levels of Friendship
• Stages of a Conversation
• Verbal Communication (Listening, Validating, Open Ended Questions)
• Non-Verbal Communication (Body Language, Discourse Markers)
• Emotions (Paying Attention to Your Own & Others)
• Disclosure
## Conversation Stages

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Initiation Stage: What to Talk About with Someone New

• With a stranger, the one thing you definitely have in common is the shared environment, so you can comment on that

• Use open-ended questions or “Tell me more” to elicit more discussion

• Comments should be positive or jokingly negative

EXAMPLES

• If at an event, discuss event
  – Have you been to an (event) like this before?
  – Oh cool, tell me more.

• If at a restaurant/café
  – Have you been here before?
  – What do you recommend here?

• Jokingly talk about traffic or other transit difficulties getting there
What to Pay Attention to During Conversation

• You want to be able to identify the person and have something to talk about the next time you see them

• Pay attention to:
  • people’s faces, identifying details
  • people’s names
  • things they share about themselves
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Maintenance Stage: Continuing the Conversation

- Remind yourself of your purpose:
  - To identify common ground
  - To build a connection that leaves the door open for future interaction
  - Ultimate purpose is to develop a friendship
- Ask questions and provide answers that open up the conversation
- Be cautious about info-dumping
Strategy: Open the Conversation

• Continue asking open-ended questions

• When someone asks you a question, provide a response that includes an explanatory detail or two (one to two sentences total). This gives the other person something to follow-up on and may identify common interests.

Example:
- (you) What do you like to eat at this restaurant?
- (other person) I really love salmon. What about you?
- If you reply, “I don’t know,” the conversation is likely to come to a stop.
- If you reply, “I don’t know. This is my first time here. I just moved to San Mateo,” the other person can now ask you questions about why you moved here, which opens up the conversation.
Potential Barrier: Info-Dumping

Info-Dumping to strangers, or to people we know who are not interested in the same topic, may harm our relationships:

- People may avoid us
- It can prevent friendships from forming
- It can end friendships
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- **Initiation**

#### You’re holding a conversation

- **Maintenance**

#### You’re leaving the conversation

- **Exiting**

#### You’re reflecting on how the conversation went.

- **Reflection**
Exiting Stage: Ending the Conversation

- Ask “anything interesting coming up this week for you?”

- Say something positive about meeting them
  - It was nice talking to you

- Say something future oriented about seeing them again
  - Hopefully we’ll see each other at another meetup.
  - I’m usually here Thursdays. Hope to see you in the future.
Exiting Stage: Ending the Conversation

Earlier we mentioned paying attention to the person’s face, name, and anything personal that they shared.

After you exit the conversation, take a minute and remind yourself:

- What was their name? (e.g. Jennifer)
- What did they look like? (e.g. brown hair, glasses, taller than me)
- What did they share about themselves? (e.g. they are going to the dog park this weekend with their dog named Scuba)

Next time you see the person, refer to them by name and follow-up with them about something they mentioned in your last conversation (especially something they mentioned they were going to be doing).

Example: Hi Jennifer. How did Scuba like the dog park last weekend?
Group Services

Open Doors Therapy (Palo Alto, CA)
- Social Skills Groups (20 weekly sessions)
  - Teen & Parent Groups
  - Young Adult Groups
  - Working Professionals Groups
  - College Transition Summer Intensive
- Private pay (superbill available)
- Website: www.opendoorstherapy.com

Lists of Bay Area & Online Groups
- The SFBA Autism Society List of Support Groups & Meetups
  www.sfautismsociety.org/support-groups--meetups.html

- CAC List of Social Programs for Youth
  cacpaloalto.org/information-center/palo-alto-area-resources/social-programs/

- Parents Helping Parents Support Page
  www.php.com/#get-support

New Groups Starting In Jan 2020