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Get REAL

A Practical Guide to Leading Adolescent Groups

Second Edition



Beth Harris Brandes & Judy Bost Ingold



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INTRODUCTION

USING *REAL* SKILLS WITH TEENAGERS

Leading groups with teens is a lot like learning to drive a car. A little driver's education helps. But because the road conditions are constantly changing, you need to stay alert, flexible and committed to the journey. The first time you drive in snow, it's a little scary. But once you learn to handle a skid on ice, you will gain confidence. As group leaders, we are always expanding our repertoire of "driving skills"—learning from others and the teens themselves. Experience helps us all relax.

Because no two teens or groups are ever the same, our best advice to new group leaders is to "be REAL."

- R:** Reflect what teens say and what they communicate nonverbally.
- E:** Explore what's going on. Don't assume you know their feelings.
- A:** Attend to the emotions behind the words and behaviors.
- L:** Loan teens tools to help them solve problems.

Being REAL means learning to listen. Teens will forgive many blunders if they know their leaders respect and care for them. And they usually learn best from people they trust.

Being REAL also means recognizing that teens are not adults. Groups with teens require a different awareness and set of skills on the part of the group leader. Keep in mind that adolescence is a time of big feet, big ideas, and big appetites. Early adolescence is a time of rapid physical growth, so teens need space to sprawl out and a group room they can move around in. Teen groups also need a range of activities that provide physical movement and ways to burn off energy. They also love food that begins with the letter "P": pizza, potato chips, and pretzels!!

Teens' moods may shift rapidly. Try not to take it personally. Instead, reflect and explore troubling verbal and nonverbal behaviors (remember REAL). Reinforce the healthy behaviors that you see.



Keep in mind that early adolescents are tackling many developmental tasks. Teens are often:

- Extremely self-conscious and self-focused
- Actively seeking acceptance from their peers
- Moving from a concrete way of perceiving the world to more abstract thinking
- Experimenting with new identities and developing values, both in and outside the group
- Pushing for independence, whether they are prepared for it or not

These developmental issues affect the way teens interact with one another and their group leaders. They may also affect the way you recruit, build, and facilitate a group for adolescents. The Developmental Issues in Adolescence Chart (pp. 4-5) provides a basic road map to guide your journey toward developing your own teen-group program.

Like adults, adolescents have a range of learning styles. Some learn by watching, others by hearing, and many by touching, feeling, and acting out roles and responses. Dr. Howard Gardner (1983)* notes seven primary ways adults and children learn, in “Seven Identified Intelligences.” These “learning styles” impact the ways youth will engage and learn from you. They have been helpful to us in adapting activities for teens and identifying their primary individual learning styles:

- Linguistic—Read about the subject, write about it, talk about it with others
- Mathematical—Approach the subject logically; analyze and discover patterns; classify information
- Spatial—Make a drawing of a subject; mentally visualize the object or subject
- Musical—Create songs, chants, or find music that illustrates a subject; learn while listening to music
- Kinesthetic—Construct a model of a subject; incorporate information through dance or physical routines
- Interpersonal—Engage others in working on a project; enjoys activity with a partner or group
- Intrapersonal—Connects the subject to a personal experience or previous experience



In group, it's important to observe preteens and teens to see what activities they enjoy most. For teens who learn more “mathematically,” or logically, you may want to use the puzzles and problem-solving activities in this book. Teens who learn “musically” may enjoy writing raps or bringing in songs that describe certain feelings. The dyad activities are great for youth who enjoy interpersonal exchanges. And all teens seem to enjoy “kinesthetic” activities that engage their hands and get them moving. This book includes many kinesthetic activities, such as craft projects, role plays, and group “energizers.” Often a combination of activities yields the best results with teenagers.

We sometimes compare group work to looking through a kaleidoscope of shifting colors, patterns, and movement. As you focus on teens' developmental needs and personalities, you will discover many surprising patterns and connections. These configurations and colors often change. No two groupings are ever quite the same, but each design is distinctive and beautiful in its own way—and every one contains a little bit of magic.

The reflections and tips in this practical guide are designed to help guidance counselors, teachers, social workers, residential staff, church leaders, and other youth workers embarking on the teen-group adventure.

*Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books..

The guide is divided into 7 chapters. The first four focus on one issue of adolescent development. Each chapter begins by helping the practitioner “tune in” to the developmental tasks in general, and then provides a series of practical facilitation tips for working with the developmental issue addressed.

Chapter 5 addresses teens and Electronic Media, noting how their adolescent characteristics may make them highly responsive and simultaneously quite vulnerable to new forms of electronic communication.

Chapters 6 and 7 are especially designed for group leaders and draw on lessons we have learned after 20 years of group facilitation with teens. Chapter 6 discusses Group Closure and its significance, especially for teens who may have experienced multiple losses in their lives. Chapter 7 highlights other “Lessons We’ve Learned,” noting tips for group leaders on working with coleaders, boundaries, interaction with teens outside of group, and liability considerations.

At the back of the book you will find additional resources that will be helpful for group work and work with adolescents.

Thank you for working with teens. We hope you enjoy the journey.

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DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES IN ADOLESCENCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GROUP*

Adolescents are . . .

SELF-CONSCIOUS

- Anxious about image of group
- May easily become embarrassed, reticent, silly
- Vulnerable to peers
- Concerned about body image
- Obsessed with mirrors, hair, designer or fad clothing
- Respond to personal attention

SELF-FOCUSED

- May need structured ways to empathize with others
- Unaware how their behavior affects others in group
- May compete for group time
- Are fragile emotionally in response to disappointments or tragedies in their peer group

SEEKING PEER ACCEPTANCE

- Need emotional safety
- May exaggerate to belong to the group
- Group can be an impetus for positive change

GAINING INDEPENDENCE

- Slow to trust adults
- Test the limits/authority
- Need ownership in group
- Need clear boundaries
- Need incremental freedom and responsibilities

* Adapted from *Working with Childbearing Adolescents* (1980, revised 1996) by Linda Barr, M.N. and Catherine Monserrat, Ph.D. New Futures, Inc., 5400 Cutler NE, Albuquerque, NM 87110.

Adolescents are . . . (cont'd)

DEVELOPING IDENTITY

- May idealize the group leader
- May attempt to “split off” group leaders from each other
- May be zealous about their group
- Experimenting with personal styles of dress and behavior
- Developing a repertoire of coping behaviors

EXPERIENCING RAPID GROWTH AND MOOD SWINGS

- Moods may swing high or low in group
- Short attention span
- Need visual prompts, energizers, and physical activity

MOVING FROM CONCRETE TO MORE ABSTRACT THINKING

- May describe issues in black and white
- May be judgmental
- Literal in responses
- May not understand irony, symbols, or allusions without explanations
- Need experiential learning
- Need step-by-step direction
- Little use of insight
- Prefer “here and now” demonstrations
- Romanticize future events and feel invulnerable
- Need short-term reinforcements

DEVELOPING SENSE OF FUTURE

- Have strong opinions and ideals about the future
- Undaunted by “fear tactics”
- Limited understanding of consequences of their behavior
- Need experiences that reinforce consequences
- Limited ability to transfer learning

GAINING SKILLS AND VALUES

- Need skill practice
- Respond well to short-term rewards
- Still open to change
- Impressionable
- Positive peer culture can make a big difference

Chapter 1

Self-Consciousness, Self-Focus, Self-Absorption, or ME, ME, ME!

As young teens grow and mature, they are often highly self-conscious. They frequently compare themselves physically to their peers and worry whether they are “normal.” Watching themselves in the mirror becomes a daily ritual as they attempt to integrate rapid changes and a new independent sense of self. They are sensitive to labels and easily embarrassed. Above all, they don’t want to look stupid in front of their peers. Many would rather suffer in silence than risk being a part of a group that is not “cool.”

Young teens usually respond eagerly to personal attention and individual challenges. Often they either love to talk about themselves or find discussing personal issues very difficult. They are legitimately concerned about confidentiality in groups because they know how other teenagers like to talk. And even though their verbal skills may be well-developed, teens often must learn how to listen to others. Empathizing with another teenager’s problems is a learned skill.



TIPS FOR GROUP LEADERS

Make the group a positive symbol and a socially acceptable one.

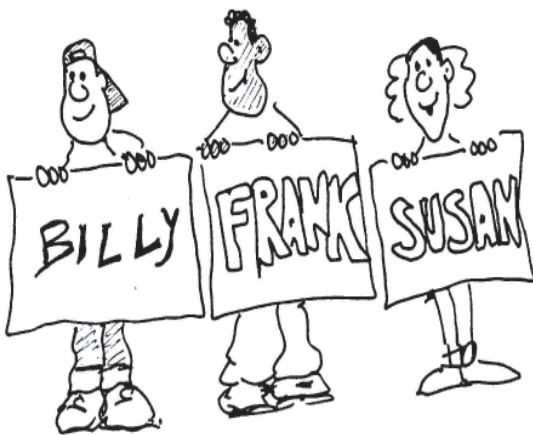
Even if the group is built around a negative issue such as divorce, death, or academic underachievement, sell it to teens, name it, and label the work of the group in positive terms. Teen group names such as Teen Challenge, TOPS, and Teens in Charge all connote positive action. One middle-school group dealing with loss and death was called “Good Grief.” A teen pregnancy prevention group was called TEEN UP. Another group for children of alcoholic parents was called C.H.A.N.G.E.S. (Children Hurt by Alcoholism Now Growing, Educating, Sharing). Teens can create acronyms for groups, too. Try sponsoring a contest among group members and give an award to the winning group name.

At-risk children may be particularly sensitive to labels that seem to reinforce their problems or insecurities. In dealing with teens with special needs or difficult problems, you may want to think of ways to reframe why teens have been invited to join. A group of teens who were foster children, for example, preferred the name “Learning to Live on My Own” to one that highlighted their status as children in foster care. In establishing a group for eighth graders who had repeated a grade and were experimenting with risky behaviors, we explained

that they had been referred because they had had “life experiences that had made them grow up fast.” We added that their teachers thought they were mature enough to handle the topics we planned to discuss. Many of them knew they were considered “at-risk,” but there was no need to rub it in their faces. This explanation for their being recruited also offered them a new way of reframing their life experiences. When one student noted that the group did not include any of the “preps,” another student commented that perhaps “preps were not mature enough to handle the conversation!”

At the first group meeting, begin learning names and devise ways for every group member to have a chance to talk.

Use name tags, name games, or whatever it takes—but learn teenagers’ names. Also tell them specifically what you want to be called. We have always felt comfortable with teenagers calling us by our first names, even



when we were leading school groups in places where teachers were addressed by their last names, but you should use what you find comfortable. Ensuring opportunities for each member to talk early in the process helps alleviate anxiety and promotes a personal belonging to the group. Especially during the first few sessions of the group, leaders may want to use a brief structured activity as a get-acquainted exercise or springboard for discussion. If written, the activity should be very simple to ensure that poor readers can participate fully. All members of the group need a chance to express themselves, however briefly, because it lowers their anxiety and it establishes each member equally as part of the group.

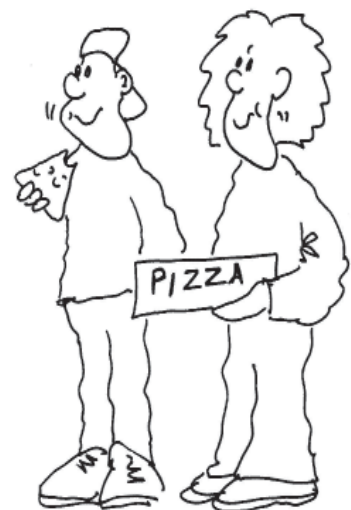
See A Sampler of Get-Acquainted Activities, Icebreakers, and Rounds on pages 13 to 15.

Teens respond favorably to individual attention, projects that belong to them, and personal challenges in the group.

Like all of us, young teens especially love personal attention and recognition of their unique identity. Self-decorated notebooks, name tags, photos, and records of accomplishments all rank high on the list. Leaders may want to make a group chart or bulletin board with all members’ names and pictures, on which teens can chart goals, group attendance, school attendance, and so forth. Certificates and other forms of recognition for group participation can also be very significant for teens who are unaccustomed to receiving public approval for their accomplishments.

Children who have very few belongings or little personal space at home like projects they can keep and show off. Decorated keepsake boxes, scrapbooks, or craft projects are often particularly important to these children.

Door prizes or incentives for group attendance should also have personal utility and genuine appeal. Picture frames, school supplies, jewelry, and vouchers for burgers or CDs are often popular among young teens. If working with teen moms, you may find they like personal gifts



more than they appreciate gifts for their babies. You should be aware, however, that what may seem useful to you may seem very uncool to a teenager. We once had to beg teens to take a contribution of socks and gloves off our hands.

Using incentives for groups should be carefully considered. We have found that the promise of food or a small gift does attract teens to a group event initially, and for some teens a concrete reward can be a reinforcement after each meeting. Many teen pregnancy prevention programs offer limited-income teens a dollar a day for attending group and avoiding pregnancy. Some programs offer a cumulative reward for group participants (e.g., a pizza party or amusement park outing) or special recognition for participants who meet certain attendance requirements in group. But, in our experience, a concrete incentive alone does not sustain a teen's attendance or participation in a group activity. Teens often tell us that they attended groups because they "felt loved," cared for, respected, and listened to in the group setting. They also like the fun and sense of belonging that can flow from a group that is working together. Concrete incentives may be an extra attraction, but teens also need to believe that the group will value them as people, that they will not be judged or stereotyped unfairly, and that they will have a chance to succeed and to belong.

Establish a 5-minute check-in at the beginning of group.

Use this time to attend to the immediate needs or collective mood of the teens. A 5-minute check-in at the beginning of each meeting often gives group members time to bring up burning issues that may affect their learning or participation during the rest of the group time.

For instance, it is helpful to know if Julie just had a falling out with her boyfriend in the hall or if Steven is upset by some event at home. With young teens, the leader may need to ask for input specifically. "Since last week, has anything especially exciting, good, upsetting, or frustrating happened?" Be prepared to hear anything from the most benign event to the most devastating. The challenge is to listen.

You can also pick up clues to members' moods from individual or group nonverbal behaviors: "Susan, you look really sad today" or "This group is really wound up this morning. What's happening?" Another quick way to assess moods is to go around and ask each teen in the circle, "What color describes you today? What does that color mean to you?" Or ask: "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being great, how are you feeling today?" Leaders can draw on information from these check-in activities throughout the life of a group.

Occasionally, a question may uncover a deeper issue, so leaders may need to explore between the lines of an answer. Sometimes, you can almost instinctively guess the bigger issue, but be careful not to assume. Begin by reflecting the answer ("Sounds like you feel . . ." or "Sounds like you've been thinking a lot about . . ."). Then explore the statement, using phrases such as "how," "in what way," "tell me a little more," to understand what the teen is really saying.

If a group member discloses information during the check-in that needs the group's or leader's immediate response, the leader may need to forego a structured activity and explore the issue presented by the teen. For example, during a check-in period, the group leader learned that a teen's grandmother had died. The leader chose to focus on the loss before moving ahead with the planned activity. The leader inquired about the teen's experience and then asked other teens in the group if they had ever lost a grandparent or someone they cared for deeply. Offering support and understanding in such circumstances is more important than staying with the curriculum.

If the group seems restless or distracted by the attention given to one member, the leader might comment that "Susan is really upset right now and needs a chance to talk about how she feels, but I know that some of you want to continue with our planned activity today. Should we talk about this for 5 more minutes and then continue?" or "Susan, would you feel OK talking with me individually about this after group?" The challenge is to balance the needs of the individual and the group as well as to help teens learn ways to express their own needs.

During the first few group sessions, watch for nonverbal cues, especially from reticent members of the group. Young adolescents often seek attention and ask for help in indirect ways.

Remember, don't assume you know what is going on. Check it out. Often, introverted members of a group appear uninterested or depressed when they are merely timid. On the other hand, if a student displays a pattern of depressive behaviors, you need to attend to his or her needs. Use the REAL formula to explore the emotions behind the behaviors and find out whether a significant problem exists.



Minor self-destructive behaviors are often a teen's primary way of getting attention. Pierced noses, tongues, and ears with twelve rings have never been our favorite look, but many teens adopt "extreme" looks, dress, and behavior to signal their independence. Before you try to extinguish a behavior, you probably need to give the teen a replacement behavior—another way that he or she can gain attention from you and the group, or another role that offers a different identification. In this case, the leader might ignore the attention-seeking devices (i.e., drawing ink tattoos all over one's arms, excessive piercing) or reflect: "Looks like you can stand a lot of pain. How did you learn to do that?"

The leader also can try to reinforce positive behaviors honestly: "You know, Susan, I'm not really into multiple piercings, but you have a great flair for picking out artistic jewelry. How about helping me with the design of the poster for the group?"

On other occasions, you may need to consider nonverbal behaviors occurring outside the group setting. For example, in one group, a teen frequently rolled her sleeve up, revealing a bandage on her arm. When the leader inquired about the injury, the teen refused to comment. However, after group, the leader followed up with the student and discovered that the teen was cutting herself with a razor blade. Obviously, the group leader needed to pay attention to this self-destructive behavior, even though it represented a negative way of getting attention. Chapter 3, on concrete thinking, contains other suggestions on exploring nonverbal behaviors.



In groups, indicate clear beginnings and endings of events.

Structure helps alleviate members' anxiety about what the group will be doing. Present clear agendas, time frames, and structure for group activities and meetings. It's helpful at the first meeting to distribute a handout listing meeting dates and topics to be covered.

Give specific feedback to teens about their behaviors.

In *No More Nagging, Nitpicking and Nudging*, Wiltens (1991)* suggests a model for giving immediate feedback to teens.

- **Catch them.** Catch them when they are behaving positively and constructively. Immediate feedback is more helpful to teens than general statements about their attitudes or characteristics. Positive reinforcement encourages positive behavior and ensures that teens behaving disruptively do not get more attention than those who try to succeed.

*Wiltens, J. (1991). *No More Nagging, Nitpicking, and Nudging*. Sunnyvale, CA: Deer Crossings Press.

- **Praise them.** Identify the positive behavior in specific terms: “I appreciate the way you organized your materials for class.” “I noticed you were angry at Bob, but you expressed yourself without yelling or hurting his feelings.”
- **Use “I” messages.** Start sentences with “I” to show how the undesirable behaviors affect you. “You” sentences often sound blaming and create defensiveness on the part of the teen.
- **Reinforce.** Teens often say adults nag too much. Try reinforcing positive behaviors with written signs or one word reminders (i.e., “Quiet Zone” or “Leadership”). Use a hand signal to quiet a group. Label storage boxes with signs—Pencils, Sign-in Sheets, Recycling—to remind teens to take care of their own materials.
- **Ask teens to “recall” for clarification.** Ask the teen to tell you what he or she understood you to say. This technique helps clarify what the teens heard. As teens actually say or write down the positives they hear, they physically reinforce the concept in their minds. This repetition is the first step to incorporate a new behavior.

Facilitate the discussion so that each member has a chance to be heard.

After young teens discover that they have a listening audience, they often can talk nonstop—seemingly without breathing—with little regard for others in the group. They are not necessarily being selfish; they are just so involved with their personal issues that they may have little awareness of how their behavior affects the group. Sometimes their stories can be convoluted and tangential, which may result in other group members losing interest. The leader should acknowledge the earnest talker’s feelings (“Blair, you’ve got so much on your mind”) but then may need to ask the teen to focus (“We’re running short on time” or “We have about three more minutes to discuss this”). Another tactic is to ask for a summary point: “Blair, could you tell the group the most important/difficult/frustrating thing that happened?” Depending on the ego strength of the teen talking, the leader may also ask the group if members want the teen to continue, although leaders should note how difficult it is for teens to confront one another gently. They will often either avoid the confrontation or be mercilessly blunt. You may opt to give the feedback yourself, especially if you feel peer feedback may make the teen feel defensive or hurt.

Redirect the conversation. Cutting short a group member’s monologue or redirecting an adolescent group member is sometimes necessary to balance the needs of the individual and the group. The leader’s tone and style can convey positive regard while still moving ahead. Keep the group discussion focused and encourage participation by all. You may have to elicit responses from quiet members or redirect dominant ones more actively than you would in an adult group.

Sometimes teens don’t listen to one another very carefully; they may interrupt or change the topic entirely in group right after another group member has spilled his or her guts. The group leader may need to intervene at this point to ask a teen to “hold that thought” until the other teen has finished making his or her point.

At times, one group member’s disclosure may prompt a therapeutic watershed, when several teens reveal secrets or admit similar experiences.

These disclosures may offer an opportunity for the group to grow and bond together. However, leaders should be aware of how upsetting and difficult it is to listen to emotionally charged stories. Watch for nonverbal clues (tears, fidgeting, distracted looks) that signal limits to the group’s attention span or a particular member’s need for support.



Young teens may also compete to tell the most dramatic story in group as a way of gaining attention, acceptance, or status. At times, this can lead to contagious outbreaks of dramatic and exaggerated disclosures. If you sense that children are beginning to fabricate stories, attempt to make a summary statement, noting the key needs that have been expressed.

Certainly there is a danger of “overfacilitating” or overcontrolling a teen group and interfering with the power of the group process, but a leader’s skillful interventions can also help teens gain focus and utilize group time effectively.

A SAMPLER OF GET-ACQUAINTED ACTIVITIES, ICEBREAKERS, AND ROUNDS

BINGO

Design your own grid with each square containing one personal characteristic, such as “good sense of humor” or “loves animals.” Pass out copies of the bingo grid and let each person circle all the characteristics that apply to him or her. Then ask “Who has BINGO?” and have these players read their bingo line to the group. This is a good nonthreatening way to introduce group members and help them note what they have in common.

NAME GAMES

Tell the group your name and a characteristic that begins with the first letter of your first name (e.g., “Friendly Fran”). Tell us your name and an animal that you think is a lot like you, and why (e.g., “I am like a cat because I am sneaky” or “I am like a bear because I love to climb trees”).

BEAN BAG OR YARN TOSS

Toss a bean bag from person to person around or across the group circle. When a person catches it, he or she should describe a personal strength, something he or she is good at, or another characteristic of your choosing.

With the yarn toss, members stand or sit in a circle. The leader takes a ball of yarn, holds the end of the yarn and tosses the ball to another member across the circle. The person who catches the yarn says one thing he or she has learned or what she or he feels about some event. As each member holds a section of the yarn, the group creates a web. Note how the group of individuals is now connected. This web can then be tacked on a bulletin board or taped to the floor to symbolize group connectedness. We use a version of this for closure activities as well.

FOUR CORNERS

Have teens cut pictures from magazines to illustrate the following categories: my favorite food, something I like to do, something I want to improve, and something I like about me. Ask participants to paste the four pictures or words on construction paper. Have teens use this “poster” to introduce themselves to the group.

TOILET PAPER TOSS

Pass a roll of toilet paper around the group. Ask each teen to take as many sheets as he or she wants. After the roll has gone around, ask group members to tell one thing about themselves for every sheet they have!