

NOT AN ORDINARY MOTHER'S GROUP

Mothers of Sexually Abused Children

by Tilla Lane

Tilla Lane is a Mental Health Worker in Exeter who specialises in Group-work.

Official Support

My job description had just been expanded to include a development work role when we received a letter from the East Devon Joint Agencies Child Abuse Team: J.A.C.A.T. They were asking for people to run a group that would help mothers of sexually abused children with support, understanding of children's behaviour and problem solving. Charlotte Dyer, a social worker at the Child and Adolescent Clinic and I responded to the request individually. We met for an hour to see if we could work together at the Victory Centre in Exeter, where I am employed as a mental health worker. She was offering knowledge of children in distress; I'm accustomed to working with adults. We both have group-work experience and liked each other; we felt we could undertake a group on a trial basis, a pilot group. So we put out a flier offering "an eight week group for six to eight women, providing a safe space to share experiences and feelings."

The Victory Centre backed us with administrative services, a room for the group and a crèche. J.A.C.A.T. offered a supervisor for the group and a number of referrals. They also furnished us with a copy of an article from *Social Work Today* (10 August '89) describing a similar group that had run in Bradford by the NSPCC and the local Social Services.

We plan

In the first planning session Charlotte and I agreed our respective roles in the leadership of the group. She would be time-keeper, helper of group members and anchor person. I took on boat launching, way-making and risk-taking. It was felt we could achieve balance if we made any tensions between us explicit. We also discussed at the early stage

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quite how much of J.A.C.A.T.'s request we felt prepared to meet. I was against trying to teach mothers parenting skills and child management. I wanted to use the group to meet the member's requirements and needs as they appeared through the unfolding of the group. Charlotte wanted some kind of eight week plan drawn up before the start of the group but was with me on the issue of facilitating versus teaching.

Our initial plan was for two weeks to get into the group, four weeks to do it and two weeks to end it. Within the eight weeks we hoped to cover anger and guilt, responsibility and blame, victim roles and parent roles. And then, with a flourish of hysteria as we felt our temerity wavering, we added to the list:

"And anything else that comes up"!

The Group arrives

Twelve women were referred to us. They came via Social Work teams, the local Community Mental Health Team and J.A.C.A.T. Eight women accepted our letter of invitation to join and none took us up on our offer of an initial individual meeting prior to the group. Six women actually joined the group. One of these left after just one session, bringing us down to our lower limit for what we decided was a viable group.

In our first two hour session we introduced "group conventions", emphasising that they were designed to give us all a sense of security and self-respect. We also made what I believe to have been the most crucial move for the whole life of the group. We stated very clearly the title of the group: "Mothers of sexually abused children" and asked that every woman present tell us "Who is in my family and what happened." I drew up a family tree for each woman as she told her story, identifying the abuser, the children abused and the nature of relationships now.

Our intention was to show ourselves ready to sit with the worst and confront the issue at hand. The family tree, being a material entity, gave us focus and structure; it was a statement of the facts that enabled us to go on talking about deep and confused feelings. At the end of the task the atmosphere was massively potent. Charlotte and I articulated for ourselves and the group the feeling of horror and awe, naming the fear in the room: "How can we survive with emotions as intense as this in our midst?" Somehow we managed to fit in a brainstorm of hopes and fears and when the group disbanded Charlotte and I were very glad we'd timetabled ourselves the next hour for "fallout". It was aptly named and well used each week!

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Dropping out

The woman who dropped out, our sixth member, wasn't at that session. She came in week two. I doubt she would have left us if she'd been there for the family trees. It was a bonding exercise. From that moment every woman present felt a strong connection within the group. We were all survivors together, even if only of that traumatic first session. She did a family tree and heard about the other women's but that wasn't the same. She telephoned me to say, after week two when we'd concentrated on "other people's reactions" that she was too angry at the other mothers to be able to be in the same room as them. She could not express her anger to them, but she told me what was angering her. It was the fact that they all allowed the abuse to continue after they had begun suspecting or they disbelieved their children's disclosures at first. (She and her extended family had disbelieved to the extent that social workers had to remove the 16 year old girl to bed and breakfast for her protection from her father.)

In week two the women talked about their feelings towards their husbands. We put this on the agenda so that we could clear the ground in preparation for the women to talk about themselves. Many women talked about what nice men their husbands were, what good fathers they had been, how they missed them and felt lonely now. The same women were also saying their men were monsters, hateful, cleverly deceitful, despicable. Ambiguity was rife, but there, expressed, shared; somehow tolerable.

Blame

We also heard that week how these women all felt blamed, by family, friends, strangers and even sadly, professionals in some cases. One had been told by her G.P. that it was her fault for not keeping her partner sexually satisfied. No one had support from their families to attend the group. They were told: "For-



get it. It's behind you. It will do no good to rake it all up." One of the group had left the abuser just three weeks before the start of the group. Another was two years into divorce proceedings. One had found out six months before that the abuse had ended five years ago.

They were women alone, single parent families, most having lost the marital home, on living in a Refuge with six children, all experiencing financial difficulties and disturbed behaviour in their children, and they kept coming to the group.

One of our members told us: "At last I have a name for what I'm feeling. Now I can explain it to myself. I was wishing him dead but it's me and my life that has died. I'm grief-stricken." And it emerged that half of these mothers had been sexually abused themselves when they were children. Three had married men who had been sexually abused in childhood.

Rewrite the script

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Each week we tried to end on a positive note, to allow women to feel a little hope, to help them go out of the room ready to face their everyday lives. In the second week "the feelings that others cause us" were written on slips of paper, screwed up and thrown away. They made mottoes to take home and pin on the wall. They rewrote personal rules, so as to stop expecting themselves, for instance, "to be there for the children 24 hours a day" or "to put others always before myself". They made paintings to depict their public and their personal selves and had a message pass from one to the other. One woman's strong public self told the sack of potatoes that was her private self: "You are valuable to me, even if you feel lumpy." They encountered their inner children in a guided fantasy and received gifts for that part of them from other women in the group. The woman who reported that her inner child was afraid to smile received "a mask with a grin on it so you can at least pretend." The woman who's inner child was too shadowy to make out was given "a lamp to light the way" and "a mirror to see yourself" by two of her fellow group members. At every turn the rottenness of the world that we talked about in that room was balanced by the wealth those women gave each other freely.

In our planning sessions we were careful to decide which exercises and activities we as group leaders would participate in. We wanted to normalise feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, anger, confusion but we didn't want to lose sight of the fact that we are not mothers of sexually abused children, we were there as group leaders doing a job.

Ending

They were shocked when we asked them: "What part of you needs protecting?" No one had asked that before, everyone had urged them to concentrate on protecting their children. It was through questions like this, our leadership attitude being one of expecting the women we were working with to have personal needs as adult human beings, that gave the group its ethos. We were also modelling (isn't hindsight a boon?) co-operation and differentness. Charlotte and I are very unlike. That helped the group to operate cohesively as a band of sharing and important individuals.

In week seven we were into the "ending it" stage and looking at "support and how I use it." They told such different stories of the help they'd received from social, health and legal services! Magistrates who just refused to believe their testimony and denied them divorce, social workers and police who turned out at all hours on and off duty, health visitors who became friends, social work departments that were totally insensitive; the whole gamut of possible responses were represented.

In the final week they wanted to go on meeting and we talked about reunions and becoming self-run. I told them how so often group members want to avoid losing touch but find it really difficult to continue for long, things fizzle out and leave people with a sense of failure. So they exchanged telephone numbers and took great pleasure from hearing that Charlotte and I would run another group, better informed because of what we had learned from them.

Evaluation

J.A.C.A.T. wanted to hear from us what the group had done to improve the care the mothers were giving their children. We were able to quote the women:

"My daughter no longer feels she has to protect me. We can talk now."

"My children have stopped fighting. I don't know why. I think its because I don't feel so tense. But I don't understand it really."

"I don't feel guilty anymore. Somehow my children seem to know and they treat me with more respect."

"My teenage son has had a shock. He used to get away with murder but now I think: 'Why should he?'"

"It was such a relief to cry together, and I'd been afraid if I started I'd never stop."

Charlotte's dog isn't getting quite so much exercise these days. And my head-aches, stomach cramps and trembling stopped the day I told the group what was happening to me each week.

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It feels as if I have accomplished something. Charlotte says she's walking three inches taller.

The Victory Centre, a Social Services groupwork resource, has offered each of the group members the opportunity to continue as clients. One woman has joined assertiveness training. Two continue to use the creche and another has joined the swimming group. In a week or two she'll join the "Letting Go" women's dance and dramatherapy group. The fifth woman lives a long way out of town. She's started driving lessons.

Our next group for mothers of sexually abused children will run soon. We're looking forward to it.

