

PROLOGUE

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As Zipora Shechtman argues in the first paper of this special issue, "...much of what we know about group work with children is based on adult groups..." Indeed, this is the first time in its history that Child and Adolescent Group Counseling has begun to receive the attention it deserves from practitioners and researchers worldwide. As a result, research on the effectiveness of psychoeducational or counseling/psychotherapy groups for youth has become systematic and rigorous and there are currently many established (i.e., evidence-based) psychoeducational group programs targeting various behavioural, developmental, and emotional problems of children and adolescents. What's more important, the theory and practice of group work with children is systematically taught in various institutions all over the world - both at an undergraduate and postgraduate level - and there are currently several accredited academic programs specializing in preparing professionals to deliver individual and group counseling services at all levels of K-12 schools. Undoubtedly, the advent of the 21st century has marked the beginning of a promising new era for the advancement of theory and practice regarding children's and adolescents' group and individual counseling.

According to the accepted typology (Association for Specialists in Group Work [ASGW], 2000), there are four types of groups: task groups, psychoeducational groups, counseling groups, and psychotherapy groups. Psychoeducational groups is probably the most common type among the group interventions currently conducted in schools (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). They are usually short in session length and overall time, and they employ well-designed skill-building activities to prevent certain issues or educate participants about coping skills (Brown, 2011; DeLucia-Waack, 2006). A growing body of evidence indicates that psychoeducational groups could be an effective method for addressing the social,

Note: We would like to thank Professor Anastasia Efklides, Editor-in-Chief of the Hellenic Journal of Psychology, for her invitation to guest edit this special issue. We would also like to express our gratitude to the authors and the anonymous referees for their contribution. Finally, we wish to dedicate this issue to the memory of our friend, colleague and mentor, Alexandros Kosmopoulos.

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emotional, and academic needs of children and adolescents in the school environment (Bore, Hendricks, & Womack, 2013).

To the best of our knowledge, this special issue is the third to appear in the new millennium on this thematic area. There have been two earlier issues of the *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* (2007) devoted entirely to innovative school group work. Many new studies appeared since 2007, and a range of topics have been explored and addressed, for example the therapeutic factors and potential mechanisms underlying group work effects on children (Brouzos, Vassilopoulos, & Baourda, in press; Shechtman & Katz, 2007) and the variables mediating or moderating the psychoeducational group outcomes (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2009; Tol, Komproe, Jordans, Gross, Suzanty, et al., 2010; Tol, Komproe, Jordans, Ndayisaba, Ntamutuba, et al. 2014; Tol, Komproe, Jordans, Vallipuram, Sipsma, et al., 2012). Moreover, work

on many innovative psychoeducational group programs has been published, that addresses various issues, including sexual abuse prevention, social anxiety, traumarelated symptoms, disruptive behaviour, anger management in children with Asperger, peer pressure and so forth (Hall, Rushing, & Khurshid, 2011; Kenny, 2009; Ruttledge & Petrides, 2012; Shechtman & Mor, 2010; Sofronoff, Attwood, Hinton, & Levin, 2007; Vassilopoulos, Brouzos, Damer, Mellou, & Mitropoulou, 2013). Finally, there have also been a few studies examining the effects of a particular type of group work with children in conjunction with, or in comparison to, other types of groups (e.g., humanistic vs. cognitive behavioural group therapy; Shechtman & Pastor, 2005).

The first paper of this special issue by Zipora Shechtman is entitled *Group counseling in the schools*. In this paper the author reviews counseling groups conducted in school settings with a particular focus on the theory and practice of the so called 'Expressive-Supportive' groups (i.e., groups that focus on emotions and selfexpressiveness).

She puts a case for this type of groups being helpful in the current context of school staff accountability, evidence-based school counselor-led interventions and growing multicultural awareness.

In the second paper, *Psychoeducational group intervention for juvenile sex offenders: Outcomes and associated factors*, Anne-Marie Tougas, Marc Tourigny, Annie Lemieux, Denis Lafortune, and Jean Proulx examine the efficacy of a psychoeducational group that was designed to meet the needs of adolescent juvenile sex offenders (JSO). Another important question under investigation was whether the presence of childhood maltreatment and the quality of parent-adolescent relationship influence the effectiveness of the intervention program. Their study showed that participation in a psychoeducational group helps JSO to improve on different aspects of development targeted by the program. Crucially, although the quality of parent-adolescent relationship at the beginning of the intervention did not influence outcomes, nevertheless, physically and/or sexually abused JSO appeared to benefit more from the group program than their non-abused counterparts.

The following paper *Evaluation of a universal social information-processing group program aimed at preventing anger and aggression in primary school children* by Stephanos Vassilopoulos, Andreas Brouzos, and Christos Rentzios examines the possibility of integrating cognitive bias modification procedures in a universal psychoeducational group for anger and aggression. A 5-session social information group program with a focus on helping children develop a more positive attributional style was designed and implemented in primary school children. Results showed that, compared to a no-intervention control group, children receiving group intervention were less likely to endorse hostile attributions in response to a set of ambiguous hypothetical social situations and evidenced fewer peer-directed aggressive behaviours. Interestingly, reductions in aggressive behaviour were associated with reductions in hostile attributional style, which is in line with social information processing theories.

The fourth paper by Melissa Mariani, Elizabeth Villares, Jacqueline Wirth, and Greg Brigman is entitled *An evaluation of the Student Success Skills program on student learning, behaviour, and wellness outcomes*. Here the authors review studies that evaluated the Student Success Skills Program (SSS), a program aiming to increase student achievement by teaching students cognitive, social, and self-management skills. Drawing mainly on group outcome research, these authors discuss a growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of SSS curriculum in improving academic and behavioral outcomes.

Finally, as Shechtman correctly notes in this issue, another outstanding question is whether to work with children or with their parents. Therefore, the last paper CBT

parent training program for the management of young children with behavior problems - a pilot study by Ioanna Giannopoulou, Sophia Lardoutsou, and Alexandra Kerasioti presents data supporting the efficacy of a parent-training group for parents of children with behaviour problems. An 8-session group program, tailored to the specific needs of its Greek parent participants, was developed and implemented and its effectiveness was compared to that of an extended 10-session group program. Both group versions were found to be equally effective and led to significant reductions in parent reported child behaviour problems as well as to significant improvements in child psychosocial functioning, although better results were observed in the extended 10-session group.

Perhaps one conclusion that can be drawn is that psychoeducational groups for children and adolescents are not only a time-saving and cost-effective way of reaching and serving multiple students simultaneously, but also therapeutic to students

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themselves. This is why it should be embraced as a powerful intervention in schools. Future research will continue to expand their applicability by tailoring them to address a wide variety of topics as well as investigate which psychoeducational group interventions work, for whom, and under what circumstances.

Taken together, this special issue provides an overview of group work with children and adolescents including: (a) studies that review the available evidence regarding counseling groups conducted in the school setting, (b) studies that advance our understanding of group outcomes and associated factors or variables moderating the group effects, (c) new research findings following the integration of well established CBT techniques and procedures into psychoeducational group work, and (d) preliminary findings regarding the effects of a CBT parent-training program on parent reported child behaviour problems. We hope that this special issue will advance our present understanding of the efficacy issues and processing variables that affect outcomes from both a fundamental and an applied perspective and that the work presented in it will be interesting to both (research-minded) group workers and applied researchers.

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