TEACHING "GROUPNESS"

DEVELOPING SOCIAL AND CO-OPERATIVE GROUP SKILLS

By Maria Sargent

Understanding "Groupness" as a Developmental Social Skill

Basic Concepts

*_Groupness_ is the ability of children to function and learn in a social group setting. This ability differs by age and individual developmental level.

*You can determine this level in young children (ages birth-age 8) by watching their play. Play will always be the child's <u>highest</u> level of groupness.

*You will notice that other forms of "group" (children birth-age 8) like circle, story, etc. will usually be <u>slightly below</u> the child's play level.
In children with special needs, the ability may be significantly lower…

*You can also get a sense of the groupness of older students (ages 6+) by looking at their social interaction in any group activity.

*The levels of groupness parallel the levels of play ability (solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative). These play levels are detailed on the next 4 pages.

*It is possible for advanced students (junior high and high school) and adults <u>to be most comfortable at a solitary or parallel level of groupness</u>.

Solitary-Level Grouping

*Children at solitary level play alone and may not even notice other children.

*The ONLY purpose of group activities for this level is to TEACH groupness.

*Story is a "lap" activity between one child and one adult.

How can you "teach" groupness to this level? Just do the following:

1. Choose a "magnet" activity that will draw the children's attention
    (i.e. musical instruments, bubbles, etc.).

2. Go to the area where you plan on always having group, loudly sing a "circle" song and then start
    the magnet activity on your own. If you chose the correct item, most (not all) will come to you ☺

3. Let the children play with you and come-and-go as they wish. The "group" should be fluid.
    Continue this once each day and eventually you will see children head for that group area
    as soon as you start singing the song! This is a sign that they are beginning to understand…
    You can now start to consider using techniques to develop parallel groupness.

Parallel-Level Grouping
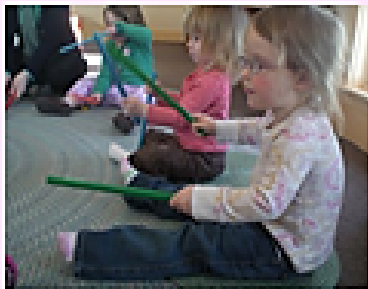
*Children at parallel level will still play alone for the most part but are beginning to notice those around them. They will eventually pay enough attention that they can imitate others.

*The purpose of group activities at this level is to develop more and more interaction between the children. Some limited information transfer and skill development may also occur.

*You can continue the magnet activities of the solitary level just make sure that ALL the children present have the item to play with. This will automatically set up your "group" at parallel level.

How can you "teach" groupness to this level? Just do the following:

1. Read a storybook during snack, which is the strongest "parallel" activity in the room (they all stay for snack ☺). Do not worry that you are hindering socializing by doing this---- at this level, children do not speak to one another during snack, they are silent .

2. When you begin to see most of the children stopping snack to listen to you, you know they are about ready to transition to associative level and a true story time. Begin to shorten the book you use during the "snack" story and add highly engaging and interactive books (i.e. with music, pop-ups, etc.) to the END of magnet activities. The children who are totally ready will stay…

Associative-Level Grouping
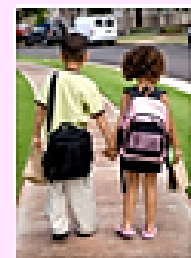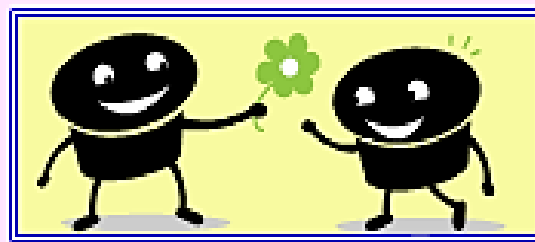
*Children at associative level may still play alone at times, but they are increasingly interested in others and will attempt to interact. At first the interaction is physical (i.e. a smile, glance or silly physical action), but eventually they will begin to speak to each other and <u>attempt</u> to share ☺.

*The purpose of group at this age is both increase in social skills and transfer information. A true story time is possible at this level.

*If children are having difficulty, drop to a parallel group for a moment (i.e. finger play, movement activity or song) to get them back on track. Many use this technique without being aware of why it works—-the "magic" is the level of groupness. They have dropped down to the parallel level!

How can you "teach" groupness to this level? Just do the following:

1. Use parallel activities (i.e. rhythm sticks, etc.) and bring the children's attention to what you are doing. When they can imitate (associate) with you well, then begin to bring their attention to their peers (i.e. "Did you see what Tyler did with his sticks".

2. You may need to PHYSICALLY CUE the children to pay attention to peers at first. To do this, all you need to do is reach over and touch the child you are speaking about. Every child that can already <u>associate with you</u>, will follow your motion with their eyes. This BRIDGING ATTENTION may be needed a great deal at first. Peer association is easy in play but much harder in group activities!

Cooperative-Level Grouping

*Children at cooperative level can now work and play with others. At first the children will do best with only ONE "best" friend. Groups of three can often be an issue, so keep the groups even in number so children can pair off. As they get older, they will be able to widen their circle of friends, include those that are not a "best" friend and adapt to others at different levels of groupness.

*The adult must still guide this level, especially when conflicts arise. A difficult age is the "club" age where numerous, convoluted "rules" guide group behavior and cause many conflicts ☺

3. Some students will continue to lag in this social skill and may still be stuck at lower levels, even solitary. for their whole life. We have all experienced this when put into groups in high school or college with someone who would not interact with you, tell you what they were doing, etc. All you could do is show up on "presentation day", praying that they had done their assigned work! You can structure group activities to assist these students! The rest of the document will show how to assist these children in a variety of ways…

Assisting Individual Students

**(students at a lower OR higher level than the rest of the class)**

Solving Group/Circle Problems
for an Individual Student (Step One)

1. Observe the student, and then **Determine the Group-Level of the Child**

2. Use the appropriate techniques for that group level (provided in earlier section) plus the following…

3. Address Special Needs (i.e. autism, communication problems, etc.) that may keep the child from progressing.

4. If the student is older, use solutions that develop their skill level while keeping them comfortable in social situations.
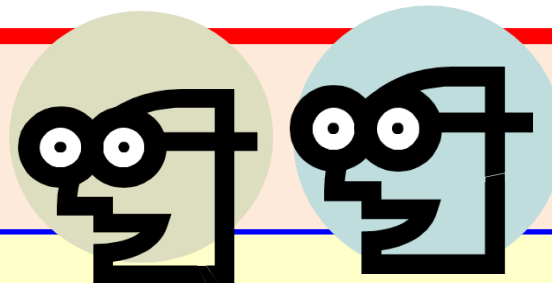
Determine the Group-Level of the Child
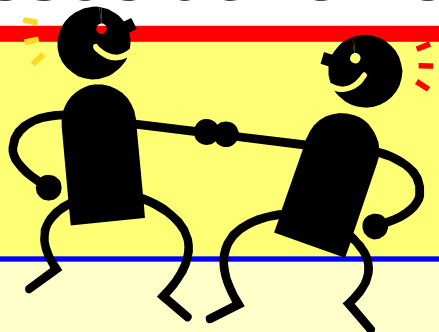
Solitary-Level
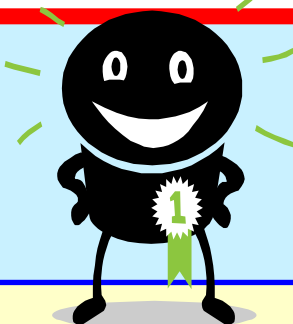
The student plays/works alone. They may notice other people, but they rarely interact with them.

Parallel-Level

The student will play/work next to others in the same activity, but they usually only pay attention to their own work. They will look at others briefly.

Associative-Level

The student plays/works with others on a limited basis. At first they work best with an adult or a best friend. Eventually they will work with peers but may need adult assistance.

Cooperative-Level

The student plays/works with others in groups. At first they may tend to focus most of their interaction on one or two "best friends", but they are able to extend that circle over time.

Solving Group/Circle Problems
for an Individual Student (Step Two)

1. Observe the student, and then Determine the Group-Level of the Child

2. Use the appropriate techniques for that group level (provided in earlier section) plus the following…

3. Address Special Needs (i.e. autism, communication problems, etc.) that may keep the child from progressing.

4. If the student is older, use solutions that develop their skill level while keeping them comfortable in social situations.

Younger Child is at Solitary-Level..

..but the class is at a more advanced Solitary-Level

The child should be allowed to play freely in the room <u>without</u> being encouraged to participate in magnet activities if they are not ready. Being aware of the child's favorite toys and/or introducing new toys <u>during</u> a magnet activity may eventually entice them to come over.

..but the class is at a Parallel-Level

The child should be <u>physically</u> included but permitted to play with the item as they choose. Physical prompting here and there (keep reasonable) will eventually encourage them to do what the others are doing. This will first occur with an adult, so adults should be actively playing and very expressive. Turn-taking play interventions can work wonders for these children---make sure to try them!

..but the class is at Associative-Level or Cooperative-Level

The child should be permitted to engage in a solitary activity that is either separate from the group (with another adult) or embedded in the classroom activity. Try to keep the toy/activity close to what the other children are doing. Use the parallel times of the group (i.e. fingerplays, movement, etc.) to physically prompt the child to participate (in the manner described above).

If the child is being kept separate from the group, structure the activity so it either begins or ends with a segment that is at parallel level. The child can be included in the group during these times to increase skill levels and then moved to another area of the room to play with related items on their own during the rest of the group time.

Younger Child is at Parallel-Level...

...but the class is at a Solitary-Level

The child should engage in the magnet activities typical for that room. Adults should engage the child in parallel activities within the context of what the other children are using in a solitary manner. Placing a child near them who is on the verge of parallel play may increase the skills of both children.

..but the class is at Associative-Level or Cooperative-Level

The child should be included in the normal activity but given items to hold, interact with, or demonstrate during the more advanced group levels. For example, having the child hold up items that have to do with the story being read, turning pages for you, being the one to hand out items, etc. keeps them engaged at a semi-parallel level while meeting the needs of others in the room.

If the child is struggling a great deal, they can be brought into the more advanced group activity at times when the children are doing something that is closer to parallel (as described before). You can also invent tasks to be done that encourage attention, provide continuous physical movement, but still keeps the child somewhat engaged. For example, having the child put a block in a basket for each page turned during story time to "count the pages in the books we read" can keep them somewhat attentive but give a "parallel-flavor" to what is essentially an associative group time.

Also use **Parallel Response Methods**. For example, having the other students answer questions physically can help. For example, say---"If you like vanilla ice cream touch your head, and if you like chocolate, touch your toes. So, Lily, what is your favorite ice cream?" This will encourage the child to notice the physical movement of the other children and imitate it, all at a parallel level!

Younger Child is at Associative-Level

..but the class is at Solitary-Level and Parallel-Level

The child should engage in the magnet activities typical for that room. Adults should engage the child in associative activities within the context of what the other children are using in a solitary manner. The adults should also encourage peer modeling and interactive attempts with the other children. It is true the other children probably will not notice, but it will benefit the more advanced child. If the student has no play-peers, arrangements should be made for adult-child play time and/or having the child "visit" other rooms during each day to provide them with more appropriate playmates.

..but the class is at Cooperative-Level

The child should engage in the typical classroom activities with the support necessary for their more limited social skills. This should include specially designed pieces in each activity (e.g., having the child find costume pieces with one peer while the others are working together to write a play). This will allow the child to interact on a more controlled level. Placing the child with their "best friend" will also provide the security some children need to attempt cooperative-level demands.

If this appears to be a long-term problem, it can be helpful to strongly encourage the development of a friendship with a supportive and more advanced peer. Many of these students have special needs that are causing this long-term delay. Techniques for this group include play intervention, social scripting, and "social practice" and will be described in the section on assisting students with special needs.

Younger Child is at Cooperative-Level

..but the class is at Solitary-Level and Parallel-Level

The child can be engaged in the magnet activities typical for that room, but adults will have to engage the child often in order to prevent boredom. The adults should also encourage peer modeling and interactive attempts with the other children, even if the other children do not notice. A child this advanced will definitely need to "visit" other rooms during each day or moved to a classroom with more appropriate playmates (part of day or permanently) in order to meet their higher developmental needs.

..but the class is at Associative-Level

The child can engage with this level fairly easily and may be a catalyst for some of the other children to move forward into the cooperative level.

Sometimes these little ones will continue to attempt to play at the cooperative level and begin to bully other children and/or use their leadership skills in inappropriate ways. Making sure the child's group includes some very advanced children (close to cooperative levels themselves) can help. Including the child's best friend may also reduce problems.

In other group settings where adults are the leader (i.e. circle, story, small group), this can be easily managed and should be no problem. If problems are occurring even in these situations because the student is highly gifted, you may want to consider intervention programs that will assist them in tolerating peers who are less advanced, teaching them to allow others to be leaders, and learning to accept mistakes in peers without ridicule. These points of intervention are often missed in gifted children and may cause social problems and isolation as they get older if not corrected...

Solving Group/Circle Problems
for an Individual Student (Step Three)

1. Observe the student, and then Determine the Group-Level of the Child

2. Use the appropriate techniques for that group level (provided in earlier section) plus the following…

3. **Address Special Needs** (i.e. autism, communication problems, etc.) that may keep the child from progressing.

4. If the student is older, use solutions that develop their skill level while keeping them comfortable in social situations.

Addressing Special Needs

Communication or Auditory Processing Problems

The child should be provided alternative communication avenues if deaf and/or unable to speak (e.g., signing, FM amplification, etc.). Use the system currently being used in the classroom. If the child has Central Auditory Processing Problems (CAPD), placement in the room (e.g., away from fans, in a room by themselves, etc.) can usually solve the problem. Make sure to check for understanding as you go to catch any miscommunication between group members and consider assigning "group roles" so the student can be given tasks that will ensure success.

Blindness or Visual Processing Problems

The child should be provided visual processing avenues currently used in the classroom (e.g., enlarged print, voice output, Braille, etc.). If the child has visual processing problems that result in unusual visual understanding (e.g., Irlen with print movement; Gestalt with visual distortion or separation, etc.), you should check for understanding and/or help manage group tasks. This is also an instance where adults can help structure group roles to make sure everything runs smoothly.

Dysgraphia and other Motor Problems

Since many cooperative group activities involved hands-on demands, a child will motor limitations or any of the three forms of dysgraphia may have difficulty. If the child can draw, cut, or color (e.g., forms of dyslexic dysgraphia and some with visual dysgraphia), make sure they are given those tasks or provided a computer if writing is demanded. Children with motoric dysgraphia should receive any adaptation needed to be successful. Again, teacher assistance in assigning roles can prevent a child feeling embarrassed or being accidently given a role that has to be adapted after the fact.

Autism

The child with autism may need special structure to be successful. This may mean artificially creating a role that provides the social isolation they need (e.g., they create the cover for the project alone on the computer while the others are writing the story). This will allow the student to participate in the manner that they can handle at that time. Providing social stories (show the social interaction in detail), social practice (actually practicing a part of the social demand), and visual cues (providing picture, symbol or words cues to guide and interaction) can be especially helpful to this student.

For example, a younger student who loves to play in a housekeeping center can be receive play intervention that shows picture sequences for themes that the other children are currently using in that play center (or one you plan on introducing soon like a pet store). The child and teacher play out these scenarios using those picture cards until the child can do them easily. Then just place those cards in the center (I used to put mine on the side of the main toy in an envelope) and encourage the child to go look at them when they feel stuck or uncomfortable in the play. Works very, very well!!!

Older students can be taught in a similar fashion. Just develop and teach a role or two that they will be comfortable doing (e.g., always being the one to make the cover on the computer or create a glossary from the dictionary). Then, teach them to volunteer for that role in group either verbally or with a picture communication/exchange card. Prep the other students that this is happening so they respond positively. Then, over time, you can develop and teach new "roles" and even attempt to teach higher level of groupness over time by developing and practicing new cards. Remember daily activities like lunch, library and special activities like selling cookies at lunch can be a lovely way to do this…

Solving Group/Circle Problems for an Individual Student (Step Four)

1. Observe the student, and then Determine the Group-Level of the Child

2. Use the appropriate techniques for that group level (provided in earlier section) plus the following…

3. Address Special Needs (i.e. autism, communication problems, etc.) that may keep the child from progressing.

4. If the student is older, use solutions that develop their skill level while keeping them comfortable in social situations.

Techniques for Older Students
Stuck at Lower Level of Groupness

*Older students often have social deficits that also show up as special needs or behavioral considerations. It is important to take all of these into consideration when assisting this type of student.

*Most important is the ability of the teacher to keep the student secure and comfortable. If the social situation is not reinforcing, you will NEVER get the student to develop the needed skill.

*To meet these goals, brainstorm roles, themes, and other small adjustments that can put this student into a secure yet noticed role. Many of these students have unusual skills and even a level of giftedness that is not noticed or highlighted in the classroom (i.e. music, dance, vocational skills like mechanics, etc.). By picking the right theme or role, you can allow this student to shine, maybe for the first time in their life!

*Pay special attention to how the work is shared. At this age level, many of these group projects are "presented". Make sure to use non-verbal presentation strategies and/or provide social safety by videotaping them, playing them on a computer, etc.

Troubleshooting Problems in Total Classroom

(many different levels in room)

Techniques for Early Childhood Classrooms that have Different Groups

*If you have more than one teacher, separate the children into groups that match their social level of groupness. This is the easiest way to manage this problem when group demands are high.
You can randomly mix the children when group demands are low.

*If this is a long-term problem, consider having two groups a day….one that is low enough to allow random mixing and one that is higher and more core objective driven where children are separated to better meet their needs.

*If you only have a single teacher or do not wish to separate the children, you can structure the group to include the lower and/or higher levels using the techniques provided earlier in this document. Embedding "parallel-response" methods like mentioned earlier can be especially useful.

Techniques for Upper Elementary Classrooms that have Different Groups

*At this age, separation is more difficult and may not easily possible. Where it can work, use it….many of the children are at cooperative level and can work independently, leaving you free to work with others who are struggling or need role-guidance to get their groups moving.

*Teach the children to interact. Definitely use the techniques already mentioned, but also consider systematically developing listening skills. You can do this by requiring the children to "summarize" what their previous peer said before they give their own answer. You will be shocked at how many cannot do this! When you think about how much information is flowing from their peers (reading, answering questions, etc.) and then see how much they miss, you will definitely see the need to work on this skill. Eventually, have the children summarize more than one person's response by asking them questions like, "What have we learned from others/Jackie/etc. so far?" In other words, require them to listen to each other and use the information. This assists them in developing social groupness in many ways.

Techniques for High School Classrooms that have Different Groups

*Older students are actually a bit easier to separate since so much of their work is already in small interactive groups that can be managed in terms of level and participants.

Many of the previous techniques will work here, especially since students struggling at this age usually have long-term special needs and issues that mesh with what you have learned before. Use any technique that provides the success and security these students need.

*If you are working with a population that has special behavioral issues, you may have to structure groups tightly and/or teach skills directly. One way to develop this skill in this age group is to have them work in solitary groups (on their own) to develop projects that mesh with their value levels and interests. Here are some that I have used in the past (on next page) to get you started thinking this way:

Techniques for High School Classrooms that have Different Groups

-<u>Student wants to be a chef</u>: Makes own cookbook
-<u>Interested in theater</u>: Learns makeup skills (making people old, etc.)
*<u>Interested in mechanics</u>: Learn car detailing
*<u>Interested in computers</u>: Designs own game

*I then permit the students to engage in this project once their regular work is done (very effective by the way). I weave all academic skills in (spelling, reading, appropriate language when presenting, graphics work, etc.) and then, once the project is done, have them present it to others. I usually video-tape the presentations or record them via Power Point so the students do not get nervous in front of their peers. This MUST be wonderful for them… I make sure they are so engaging <u>that other students want to learn the material they presented</u>---and there you have the setup to begin working on social skills ☺ Yes, a bit sneaky, but I have held more high school students with emotional and/or behavioral problems in school this way AND taught them the vocational and social skills they needed to succeed at the same time. Beyond that, you know your students the best and can tailor this to work for you!