

**W**ebster defines a group as “two or more figures forming a complete unit in a composition; a number of individuals assembled together or having some unifying relationship.” The italicized words are the basis for utilizing the group-process model when working with adolescents in the criminal justice system. Adolescents are typically known for forming cliques and peer groups, whether positive or negative. The negative groups generally consist of individuals who society views as outcasts — individuals who do not conform to the rules and norms set forth by society and government. These groups can demand negative attention through the use of intimidation or violence. These groups, and individuals within the groups, will gain negative power and accumulate victims to appease their negative leaders. They form a complete unit and promote togetherness and unification. In many cases, however, these groups will not bring about positive change due to their lack of sensitivity to those outside the group.

The positive peer group, as defined by Sharon Scott in her book “Positive Peer Groups,” is commonly utilized in the school system with the premise of making students cognizant of and sensitive to other students’ needs and bringing about positive changes to their attitudes. The groups learn to care about each other and members outside their group while promoting positive change within their existing groups or communities. The positive peer group is seen as accepting and conforming by others. Examples of positive peer groups can range from Boy and Girls Scouts to “Just Say No” clubs.

The adolescents at Three Springs School of Madison are students who have committed offenses against others and are now learning to develop a positive peer culture. The philosophy is that each adolescent entering the program needs help learning responsible thinking and behaviors. The students are seen as the most critical component of the process because of their ability to influence one another. Because many adolescents who commit crimes have faulty thinking, they are easily influenced toward negative or positive values, such as caring or not caring for others.

The positive peer culture groups help adolescents develop new attitudes about caring. All students are taught to follow norms they have established and have agreed to live by while at the facility. The students learn to gain a sense of control over what happens in their lives. They also learn how to avoid negative consequences and earn rewards for helping others work and succeed so that all may have the opportunity to succeed.

Students must learn critical components of how groups function after becoming a group member. The students are informed that all groups within the facility will go through changes so they are aware of how their particular group is functioning at all times. These changes are listed as follows:

- **Forming** — At this stage group members are assigned to a group and begin to form a unit in the composition.
- **Storming** — Group members are highly defensive, trying to get to know each other. Generally they do not trust one another or the developing system. There will be limit-testing where group members will begin to reveal basic personalities and behaviors. Stress and anxiety will be a factor, and individuals may develop cliques within the group.
- **Norming** — Students will begin to choose between negative or positive values and behavior. Cliques will begin to decrease, and a sense of purpose will evolve. Negative individuals will try to gain control, but when they fail, they tend to withdraw.
- **Performing** — The group will now have a strong bond, free of cliques and values as defined. Students will demonstrate mutual care and concern. Members are eager to help and bring in new students with openness.
- **Transition/Reforming** — This occurs anytime there are changes in the group membership, and the group will start the stage of development all over again.

“He who helps in the saving of others, saves himself as well.”

-Hartmann von Aue

Through the teaching of the positive peer culture, students learn how to confront negative behavior and praise positive behavior. It also allows students to give support to those who falter along the way in order to bring them up to the same level as the functioning members of the group. Students are taught to accept responsibility for their behavior as they learn self-discipline and self-control. Total group accountability is a must and stresses the importance of teamwork. ▼

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