

# Psychotherapy Groups for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

University of Rochester Medical Center  
Strong Behavioral Health: Child and Adolescent Outpatient Services



We are currently offering two skill-building groups for children and adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder.

- Interpersonal skills
  - This group is for children and adolescents who primarily need skills for successful social interactions.
- Anxiety Management
  - This group is for children and adolescents who need skills for both anxiety management and social interactions.

These groups are tailored to the needs of children with autism spectrum disorders, including a predictable structure and concrete language and activities.

Our groups usually run for 12 weeks and meet weekly for 50-minute sessions. To help children generalize their skills, role-plays of various social situations are utilized in the group, and children receive weekly home activities to practice the skills outside of group. Feedback meetings are also scheduled with parents/guardians midway and at the end of group to discuss each child's progress in group and plan additional strategies to encourage the use of new skills outside of group.

## Why is group therapy useful?

Joining a psychotherapy group is useful because it provides opportunities to learn with and from other people, to understand one's own patterns of thought and behavior and those of others, and to perceive how group members react to one another. We live and interact with people every day and often there are things that other people are experiencing that can be beneficial to share with others. In group therapy, you learn that perhaps you're not as different as you think you are or that you're not alone. You meet and interact with people and the whole group learns to work on shared problems.

## What about fees?

The initial individual screening appointment is billed as an initial evaluation. Insurance plans vary in mental health coverage and our financial staff can assist you in determining the cost for your family. Some insurance policies cover group treatment and some do not. Currently, we have a sliding fee scale for group and families pay \$0 to \$36.00 per session. Individual meetings with families to review progress are typically scheduled at the midpoint and completion of each group. Additional sessions can be scheduled as needed and the cost of the sessions again varies based on a family's insurance plan.

### **How do I get my child into a group?**

The first step is to complete a phone screen by calling our Group Intake Coordinator, Melanie DeMarse, BSW at 279-7808. This is to see if our group program is a good fit for your child. Background information and your concerns about your child will be gathered. If your child has not had a previous mental health evaluation, then one will be included as part of the group intake process.

Following the phone screen, children and adolescents and their parent(s) are invited for an individual appointment if group treatment may be beneficial. This session is typically 60-90 minutes long for new patients. During the session, a group therapist will provide information about group therapy and learn about the child's strengths as well as areas of concern. Two or three specific goals will be established and expectations regarding group participation are outlined. We then match children for specific groups based on strengths and goals, so that the group provides an optimal therapeutic environment. Therefore, some children start group treatment soon after the screening appointment while other matches take longer. We offer a wide range of social skills groups in order to accommodate participants at varying levels of functioning.

### **What are the types of skills my child may learn?**

The goal of the interpersonal skills group is to learn the fundamentals of social interactions. The specific skills taught include:

- ✦ Feelings - Understanding feelings, How to recognize feelings in themselves and others, How to appropriately express feelings, How to cope with difficult feelings (i.e. anxiety, sadness, anger and frustration)
- ✦ Friendship - How to make friends, How to keep friends, What it means to be a friend
- ✦ Communication - Verbal and nonverbal communication skills, Listening skills, How to initiate conversations and play, How to maintain conversations and play interactions, Reciprocal Communication
- ✦ Social Problem Solving
- ✦ Compromising with others
- ✦ Learning how to take another's perspective
- ✦ How to be empathic with others
- ✦ How to deal with bullying and teasing

The goal of the anxiety management skills group is to learn skills to reduce and manage anxiety while also building social skill competence.

Different groups focus on different skills based on the strengths and needs of the participants. Your child's group leader will be providing you with information on the specific skills being emphasized in his or her group. Some children and adolescents benefit from participating in future groups in order to achieve mastery of all the skills they need to be successful.

### **To find out more information contact:**

Melanie W. DeMarse, BSW (Group Intake Coordinator) at (585) 279-7808  
Pamela Schippell, PhD (Clinical Coordinator) at (585) 279-7811