Building Your Toolbox for Maximizing Student Engagement in Tier 2 Groups

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• 5-year, multi-site randomized controlled trial funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (R305A200035)
• 13 public middle schools in two states (FL and MA)
• Approx. 1170 students in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8 and their teachers and caregivers will participate
• Approx. 50 mental health providers will implement the intervention
• **Well-Being Promotion Program (WBPP; Suldo, 2016)**, a Tier 2, small group intervention to increase students’ subjective well-being
• Purpose: to examine efficacy, feasibility, acceptability, and cost of the Well-Being Promotion Program
Session Objectives

1. Explain purpose of Tier 2 groups and their potential to promote positive student outcomes.

2. Describe strategies to maximize student engagement in small-group interventions.

3. Understand that interventions can use a variety of methods to improve group dynamics, and practitioners can start with areas that are more directly within their sphere of influence.

4. Model specific strategies to maximize engagement in skills-focused small groups.
Session Norms

- Be present and attentive to the presentation.
- Everyone is a teacher and learner: keep your mind open.
- If you’re talking too much, let someone speak. If you haven’t contributed at all, speak up—your opinion is important!
- Ask questions for clarification to help avoid making assumptions. We will save time for questions at the end.
Session Agenda

Tier 2 Groups
- Engagement → Outcomes

Building the Toolbox
- Leader strategies
- Group strategies
- Student strategies
Groups as Part of the Solution

Deliver services to groups of students with similar needs

- *Time is limited.*
  - Groups are an efficient & effective use of time and resources
- *Many students are in need.*
  - Groups maximize service delivery by allowing more students to be served at once
- *Evidence-based interventions are available.*
  - Resources for conducting effective group-based interventions are available

- Keperling et al., 2017
Benefits and Challenges of Small Group Counseling

Benefits

• Reduces barriers to accessing mental health services
• Gives counselor a glimpse into typical social interactions
• Opportunities to practice social skills
• Feedback and support by peers in group
• Normalizes the problems the student is working on
• Instills hope due to peers’ successes with similar challenges
• Gives student a fresh look at personal circumstances
• Opportunity to work through conflict in a safe/supportive setting

Challenges

• Scheduling during the school day
• Parent/caregiver permission for targeted intervention
• Intervention materials (e.g., manual, student handouts, incentives)
• Access to private space for group
• Severe emotional or behavioral problems disrupt the group’s learning

- Committee on School Health, 2004; Keperling et al., 2017
Engagement is a prerequisite for learning

Lewis et al., 2011
Goal for leading small groups: 

*Maximize student engagement!*

- **During sessions**
- **Between sessions (e.g., with homework)**
- **Relationships with peers and leaders**
What does engagement look like?

Engaged

Active
- Writing
- Reading aloud
- Talking to peer about assigned material
- Answering a discussion prompt

Passive
- Listening to the leader
- Looking at the handout
- Listening to a peer respond

Off-Task (Not Engaged)

Motor
- Playing with objects
- Out of seat without permission

Verbal
- Calling out
- Talking to a peer about unrelated materials

Passive
- Looking around the room
- Listening to a peer discuss an unassigned topic

Let’s chat:
How do we know when students are engaged during small groups?

Shapiro (2011)
Goal for leading small groups: 

*Maximize adult engagement!*

- In requesting permission for student participation
- In weekly communication and activities
- In initial information session
Maximizing Adult Engagement

No engagement | High engagement
---|---
No demands on time and resources | High demands on time and resources

Goal = Decreasing demands and increasing reinforcement increases the likelihood of engagement!

(Reynolds et al., 2012; Fefer et al., 2020)
Building a Toolbox to Maximize Engagement

**Leader**
- Establishing routines and structure
- Opportunities to respond
- Showing care
- Meet students where they are

**Student**
- 1:1 conversation
- Consider "why" of behavior
- Provide choices

**Group**
- Establish norms
- Arrange the environment
- Seek student input
- Revisiting the "why"

**More control**

**Less control**
Building a Toolbox to Maximize Engagement

**Leader**

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Establishing Routines and Structure

First few sessions are like the first 6 weeks of school

- Plan and prepare! Discuss roles and expectations with co-leaders.
- Establish structures and routines (e.g., opening ice breaker, closing routine)
- Set a session agenda
- Communicate and model high expectations for participation
- Preview frequently (next activity, next session)
Tools for Facilitating Sessions

Establishing Routines and Structure

Example Session Agenda from WBPP

Today’s Activity: Gratitude Journals

1. Take Home Challenge Review (Me at My Best)
2. What is gratitude? Discussion
3. Decorate your journal
4. 1st journal entry
5. Take Home Challenge
Tools for Facilitating Sessions

Leader

- Establishing routines and structure
- Opportunities to respond
- Positive regard
- Meet students where they are

Opportunities to Respond

- Thumbs up or down
- Think/pair/share
- Write the answer
- Show of hands
- Go around the circle
- Respond at the same time
- Tell someone next to you
- Move to a labeled area of the room
- Others?

Lots of and varied opportunities presented at quick pace = higher engagement!
Tools for Facilitating Sessions

**Leader**

- Establishing routines and structure
- Opportunities to respond
- Showing care
- Meet students where they are

**Showing Care**

5 positive statements for each 1 redirection

- Intentionally connecting with each student (e.g., positive greetings at the door)
- Creating space for students to get to know each other
- Catching students being good by letting them know what they did well (name the behavior!)
- Validate and redirect
- Be aware of how your limited attention is used (goal is to celebrate 5 good things for each redirection)
Tools for Facilitating Sessions

**Leader**

- Establishing routines and structure
- Opportunities to respond
- Showing care
- Meet students where they are

**Showing Care**

- Start with a mood check in

  - Which dog are you today?
  - How are you feeling?

- www.feelingswheel.com

**Catching being good with tickets or tokens**

**Icebreakers**

- **We will share an icebreakers guide**

**Getting to know you survey**

- Name and correct pronunciation?
- How do you like to be addressed?
- Tell us about yourself. What would you like your leaders to know about you?
- Is there anything that would make you feel more comfortable when contributing to the discussions during class?
Tools for Facilitating Sessions

Meeting Students Where They Are

*Practice cultural humility by conveying openness and supportive interactions*

- Examine your own beliefs and cultural identify to recognize how they might influence how you facilitate the intervention and group
- Invite and appreciate students’ diverse lived experiences
- Use examples relevant to students in your group
- Align session content with students’ values and goals

Leader

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- Positive regard
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Building a Toolbox to Maximize Engagement

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**Less control**
Tools for Managing Groups

Establish Group Norms

Co-creating norms facilitates feelings of emotional and physical safety

1. Decide what norms are important to you and your co-leader for creating a safe environment.
2. Come prepared with ~3 norms to present to the group (including maintain confidentiality)
3. When presenting norms to be students, be specific about what upholding this norm does and does not look like.
4. Invite students to propose additional norms.
Tools for Managing Groups

Establish Group Norms

Post norms and routinely revisit throughout the intervention

Sample Norms:

- Maintain confidentiality. What is said in the group, stays in the group.
- Everyone is a teacher and learner: keep your mind open.
- If you’re talking too much, let someone speak. If you haven’t contributed at all, speak up—your opinion is important!

What other norms may be helpful for groups?
**Tools for Managing Groups**

### Arrange the Physical Environment

*Thoughtfully use the physical layout of the space*

- Consider the physical layout of the room to ensure that it allows all group members to meaningfully interact.
- Use your physical presence to encourage or discourage specific behaviors (proximity control).
- Plan how to distribute needed materials to minimize transition time (e.g., have handouts ready in students’ spots, pass out materials quickly).
- Utilize visuals to teach concepts, communicate expectations, and outline activities.
Tools for Managing Groups

Seek student input

Promotes autonomy and increases motivation to engage

- Many interventions allow for flexibility in the way they are implemented – lots of opportunity for student input!
- Present group with two choices as a "choose your own adventure" for the session (e.g., for an ice breaker)
- Consider seeking input about:
  - Incentives for take home challenges
  - Ice breakers – Talking or movement?
  - Discussion format - In pairs or all together?
Tools for Managing Groups

Revisiting the “why”

Students, especially adolescents, seek competence promotion

- Students seek competence promotion, or feeling like they are experts, so revisiting the “why” (benefits; what’s in it for them?) can fulfill this need
- Emphasizing the “why” empowers students to make their own decisions about how concepts and activities fit or do not fit with their developing values.
- Helps students be able to engage their caregivers, friends, teachers, etc. with the concepts and positive activities.
"I'm concerned that [Student] is not maximally engaged"

Reflect on your facilitation
- Am I facilitating content at a brisk pace?
- Are the sessions structured and predictable?
- Do I have a connection with each student?
- Am I meeting students where they are and acknowledging their unique perspectives?

Utilize your group management toolbox
- Have the group norms modeled, practiced, and agree upon?
- Does the physical environment maximize engagement?
- Are students given the chance to provide input?
- Is the "why" explained in developmentally appropriate language?

If yes to above, now what?
- Check in with the student individually
  - Provide opportunity for the student to share their perspective
  - Students know what they need to be successful – just ask!
  - Strengthen relationship with the student and provide encouragement
  - Provides opportunity for additional teaching around expectations
Building a Toolbox to Maximize Engagement

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- Provide choices

**More control** → **Less control**
Tools for Working with Individuals

One-on-one check in

Promotes competence promotion, relatedness, and autonomy

**Student**

**1:1 conversation**

**Consider "why" of behavior**

**Provide choices**

- Goals:
  - Enhance relationship with student
  - Gain insight into the student’s experience
  - Learn from the student about what supports they need
Tools for Working with Individuals

Consider the “why” of behavior

Match your tool to the "why" for an individualized approach

Student

1:1 conversation
Consider "why" of behavior
Provide choices

WBPP Group Environment

Before
Determines likelihood of behavior happening

Behavior

After
Determines likelihood of the behavior happening again

Leaders’ Unique Life Experience

Student’s Unique Life Experience
Tools for Working with Individuals

Consider the “why” of behavior and match your approach

*Function = why of the behavior*
*Aka what the student gets or gets out of by doing the behavior*

1:1 Conversation

Get

Get Out

Catch them being good – a lot!

1:1 Conversation

Choices

Choosing your tool based on the "why" provides the opportunity for a student to achieve the same "why" through engaged behaviors.
Tools for Working with Individuals

One-on-one conversation

Show care by checking in and collaborating to co-create an environment that maximizes engagement for the student

1. Start with specific feedback.
2. State high expectations.
3. Express confidence in the student’s ability to meet the expectations.
4. Offer your support to make a plan for the future.

Student

1:1 conversation
Consider "why" of behavior
Provide choices
Tools for Working with Individuals

Consider the "why" of behavior

For students who need individualized support to get

Student

1:1 conversation

Consider "why" of behavior

Provide choices

1:1 Conversation

• Specific feedback
• State high expectations
• Express confidence in ability to meet the expectations
• Make a plan

Catch them being good - a lot!

• Acknowledge each time the student displays the desired behavior
• Use variety of acknowledgments (e.g., public praise, private praise, tangibles, non-verbals)
• Avoid attending to or quietly and selectively redirect off-task behaviors
Tools for Working with Individuals

Consider the "why" of behavior

For students who need individualized support to get out

1:1 Conversation

- Specific feedback
- State high expectations
- Express confidence in ability to meet the expectations
- Make a plan

Provide choices

- Give student choices to avoid or escape non-preferred tasks (e.g., do you want to stay in this session or attend make up group on Thursday?)
- Do you want to draw or write?
- Would you prefer to work alone or with a peer?
- Reduce task demand (e.g., fill out 2 examples instead of 5)
# Checklists for Group Leaders

## Group Process Check-In

Please consider the Well-Being Promotion Program (WBPP) session(s) you led/co-led this past week. Rate each domain on a scale from 1 to 5, where: 1 = Not at all; 2 = A Little; 3 = Somewhat; 4 = Quite a bit; 5 = Totally.

### Student Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent did the session facilitate student engagement? Did you...</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ask open-ended questions as much as you can?</td>
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<td>2. Provide multiple opportunities to respond using a variety of methods?</td>
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<td>3. Affirm students' effort in engaging in positive activities, whether it was planned or unplanned?</td>
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<td>4. Reflect on students' sentiments to make sure you understand them?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Relationship Enhancement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent did the session enhance relationships? Did you...</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Convey a positive, accepting demeanor?</td>
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<td>6. Make a personal connection with each student?</td>
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<td>7. Encourage students to interact with each other?</td>
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<td>8. Reinforce students' efforts and plans to include caregivers in positive activities?</td>
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</table>

### Session Flow

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent did the session flow? Did you...</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. Deliver the materialized content seamlessly (e.g., more between topics and activities smoothly)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Readily provide personal examples to illustrate ideas and content in the manual?</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Monitor when to adjust pacing (moving through more quickly or slow down)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Provide individualized assistance for students who appeared disengaged or confused?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Cultural Humility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent did the session reflect practicing cultural humility? Did you...</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13. Examine how your own beliefs and cultural identity influenced how you facilitated the session?</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Invite and appreciate students' diverse lived experiences?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Use examples that were relevant to students in the group?</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Align session content with the goals and values of students in the group?</td>
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## Tools in Your Toolbox

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader Tools</th>
<th>Group Tools</th>
<th>Student Tools</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establish routines and structure</td>
<td>Establish norms</td>
<td>1:1 conversation</td>
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<td>Opportunities to respond</td>
<td>Arrange the environment</td>
<td>Consider &quot;why&quot; of behavior</td>
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<td>Showing care</td>
<td>Seek student input</td>
<td>Provide choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meet students where they are</td>
<td>Revisit the &quot;why&quot;</td>
<td>Catch them being good – a lot</td>
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**Intervention Integrity Checklist**

### Core Session 1

**Date:** ____________________________

**Leader(s):** ________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Activity</th>
<th>Completed?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. You at your best activity: students write their personal stories.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Students share their you at your best stories.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Discuss strengths students' displayed in their stories.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Discuss perceived importance of happiness.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Discuss purpose of group (to increase students' happiness).</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Discuss what determines happiness.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Comprehension check: Overview of Program Activities handout (complete What Determines Happiness and Purpose of Group).</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Discuss confidentiality.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Comprehension check: definition of confidentiality.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
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<td>10. Develop rules for appropriate behavior in group.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Discuss incentives available for completing group homework.</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Assign homework (read and reflect on you at your best stories).</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
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**Session Integrity Level:**

A. Number of session activities completed (circled "Yes"): A. ______

B. Number of session activities expected: B. 12

Percentage of activities implemented this session (box A/box B): ______ %
Checklists for Group Leaders

Available on ABPS conference website
Review of Key Points
Engagement is a prerequisite for learning.
Goal in leading small groups: **Maximize engagement!**

**For students**
- During sessions
- Relationships with peers and leaders
- Between sessions with take home challenges

**For caregivers**
- In requesting permission for student participation
- In initial information session
- In weekly communications and activities
Building a Toolbox to Maximize Engagement

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References

Thank you!

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Sarah Fefer – sfefer@umass.edu