

# Open or closed groups?

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An open group has an undefined number of group members with new people coming and going on a regular basis. A closed group has a fixed number of group members and has a set duration. At the program development stage group leaders need to decide if their group will be an open or closed group. Benson (2001) identified a range of advantages and disadvantages for open and closed groups. Ongoing groups can be either open or closed groups.

Advantages	
Open Groups	Closed Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constant modification of group culture</li> <li>• Greater variety of resource and skill</li> <li>• Can be more creative and imaginative</li> <li>• Good for working on initiating, and terminating relationships</li> <li>• Issues of separation, termination, inclusion</li> <li>• Issues around change adaptability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent and predictable</li> <li>• Can be more cohesive and intimate</li> <li>• Easier to balance immediate needs of the group members</li> </ul>

Disadvantages	
Open Group	Closed Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be more unstable, less predictable</li> <li>• Lacks depth and intimacy</li> <li>• Sub-grouping, cliques, alliances may develop</li> <li>• Hard to balance immediate needs of the group members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tendency to get into conformity and 'group think'</li> <li>• Lacks the range and variety of the open group</li> <li>• Less able to deal with change and adaptability</li> <li>• Limited opportunity to deal with termination issues</li> </ul>

**Example of ongoing closed group**

A weekly 1½ hour counselling group operates on a weekly basis. This is followed by a 1hour psychoeducational session that is attended by the same participants. The combination of these formats allows the participants to be exposed to the structured development of new skills and knowledge about family relationships and parenting and address personal issues affecting their life. The same participants attend both of these sessions and new participants cannot attend the group after week three of each group.

At the end of each 9 week block (school term) the participants decide if they are leaving the group or if they choose to commit to attending another block in the following term. This format is useful for working with group members who have a number of complex needs. The participants can have numerous opportunities to work through issues of separation, termination, and inclusion in the safety of a closed group environment.

**Example of ongoing open group**

A support group for single parents operates on a weekly basis. As an open group, members are able to attend the group as much as they wish. When participants face a more difficult phase of their life, they attend the group more. When participants are feeling more independent, they attend the group less. The group is available whenever they need it.

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