



Outnumbered, *Not* Outsmarted!

**An A to Z Guide
for Working with
Groups of Kids
and Teens**

Cathi Cohen, LCSW





Dedication

My work has been inspired by the experiences, ideas, and day-to-day interactions with the many children in my life, and it is to them that I dedicate this book: my wonderful kids Jesse, Dov, and Lyana; my nephews and niece Matthew, Benjamin, Daniel, Jonathan, Alex, and Jennifer; and the hundreds of children from the Stepping Stones social skills groups since 1995.

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Introduction

Even the most experienced and enthusiastic of adult leaders are flummoxed by some of the dynamics and behaviors that crop up when working with kids in groups. One-on-one, most kids are an absolute delight. Get them together in groups, and it's a whole different matter!

Whether you are a teacher, a camp counselor, a Girl or Boy Scout leader, or a soccer coach, you know when your kids are getting the most


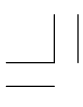


out of your group. The group environment is a peaceful one, and you feel confident and secure that your kids are getting along and working cooperatively to achieve common goals. Your group members participate and support each other. Their enthusiasm and positive energy is contagious and

self-sustaining. Working with these kids makes you feel like you are a terrific leader and can handle any issues that might come up. If the team you are coaching shows poor sportsmanship, you know how to handle it. If the students you are teaching are unruly, you know how to turn the negative behavior into positive. When the campers in your bunk fight with each other, you know how to help them resolve it.

But, let's be real. Even the most talented of you are tested from time to time. You may be comfortable with discipline, but not know how to build cooperation. You may be a master at handling bullying, but when a child asks you a personal question, you are tongue tied. Working with kids may not be difficult for you, but working with their parents? That's a different story altogether!

As a licensed clinical social worker and certified group psychotherapist, I've been counseling children in social skills training groups since



1990. I had been counseling children individually for several years before that. It became clear early on in my work with kids that they behave very differently one-on-one than they do in groups. Children who appeared confident, warm, and carefree in my office behaved very differently in groups with other kids. These kids expressed to me privately how frustrated and saddened they were at their schools, in their neighborhoods, and at their social activities because they didn't fit in. *Stepping Stones*, our social skills training program, grew out of a desperate need for kids to learn the skills necessary to make and keep friends. They could only do this in groups with other kids where they could see themselves through others' eyes. There is a distinct social complexity in groups that does not exist in a one-on-one setting. Groups are a natural setting for kids to form alliances, test boundaries, and push their own emotional limits.

The primary goal of our *Stepping Stones* groups is to help the socially challenged child develop positive peer relationships. We are able to use to our benefit the natural interpersonal dynamics that arise any time there are more than three children in a room. When conflicts come up, we encourage the use of negotiating and compromising skills. When new children join one of our groups, we help our kids with welcoming and joining-in skills. When the kids get angry with each other, we help them express their anger in appropriate ways. Our groups offer ongoing opportunities for children to learn and grow.

I've observed over the years that the complex interactions our *Stepping Stones* leaders handle in our therapy groups are no different from the dynamics that occur on my daughter's soccer field or in my son's bunk at summer camp. The leadership challenges exist regardless of the focus or structure of the group. Children exhibit common patterns of behavior when they are together. You have a mission as their leader to use your knowledge and experience to promote both individual and group growth. To be the most effective leader you can be, you'll want to have the necessary tools to manage any problem you face in your group. From this book, you'll learn strategies and techniques to deal with the typical challenges of working with groups of children.



How to Use This Book

You have picked up *Outnumbered, Not Outsmarted!* because you are a caring adult who wants to learn how to work with a group of children more effectively. You may be struggling with an issue that is specific to one child or with a dynamic that is impacting the entire group. In an A-Z format, this book highlights many of the major interpersonal challenges that develop in groups of kids. Each chapter offers concrete steps you can take to understand and address the issue, as well as specific things you can say when you are at a loss for words. You will be asked to try and practice new strategies when you are working with your kids. Some of these techniques will feel natural and comfortable to you. Others will not. Do what feels right for you and your leadership style, and at the same time, work outside your comfort zone. Challenge yourself to try new ways of relating to your group members.

You don't need to read the book chronologically, from start to finish. Feel free to focus as much energy and time necessary on the areas where you need the most help. Take a look at the table of contents. See which of the chapters speak most personally to you. Keep the book next to your bed. Pick it up and refer to it often. Be patient with yourself when you find yourself falling into old patterns of behavior that have not been successful in the past. We tend to get into a groove as leaders, even when those grooves aren't working for us.

Learning new leadership skills is hard and requires practice. Take it slowly, one step at a time. Good luck!

