

Effectiveness of Group Therapy for Adolescent Emotional Problems - An Overview

Dr. R. Sakthi Prabha¹, Dr. M. Amirtha²

¹Dean & Head, Department of Social Work
Hindustan College of Arts & Science, Chennai

²Head, Department of Psychology
Hindustan College of Arts & Science, Chennai

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a developmentally sensitive period characterized by significant physical, psychological, and social change, during which young people are especially vulnerable to emotional and behavioural problems including anxiety, depression, and stress. Global data indicate that a substantial proportion of adolescents experience mental health disorders, making early and accessible intervention essential. This narrative review synthesises empirical literature published between 2020 and 2025 to examine the effectiveness of group therapy in addressing adolescent emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Drawing on studies from psychology, social work, counselling, education, and psychiatry, the review explores multiple group intervention modalities, including cognitive behavioural group therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, mindfulness-based interventions, skills training groups expressive therapies, trauma-focused groups, and emerging digital/online formats. The theoretical foundation draws on Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Rogers' Humanistic Theory, explaining how peer modelling, vicarious reinforcement, and a supportive therapeutic environment contribute to positive outcomes.

Findings across randomized controlled trials, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses consistently show that group therapy produces moderate to strong reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms, improves emotional regulation and social functioning, and offers a cost-effective, scalable alternative to individual therapy. School-based and community-based delivery models further enhance accessibility and reduce stigma. The review concludes that group therapy is a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, and evidence-based intervention that warrants greater integration into adolescent mental health policy and practice.

Keywords: Adolescent mental health, Group therapy, Cognitive behavioural group therapy, Emotional regulation

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescents is characterised by the transition between childhood and adulthood (Shechtman, 2025) and it is a stage marked by severe physical, psychological and social transformation which are essential for adolescents to be more mature and be able to live independently. An adolescent is a crucial period for

developing social and emotional habits important for their well-being. It is important for them to adopt healthy sleep patterns, exercising regularly, developing coping, problem solving, interpersonal skills and learning to manage emotions. Protective and supportive environment in the family, at school and in the wider community are important. The primary development task for adolescents involved achieving independence while developing coherent self-identity and personal integrity. Successful navigation from childhood to adulthood requires adolescents to develop emotional expression abilities affect regulation skills, cohesive identity formation and social competencies.

The cotemporary world presents increasingly complex challenges for adolescents. Based on the WHO date as on September 2025 Globally one in seven in 10 to 19 years will experience mental disorders and accounting for 15% global burden of diseases in this age group (WHO). Adolescent mental health problems are wide range of emotional and behavioural problems. They include depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, eating disorders and others. These disorders are difficult for the adolescents as well to their families and institutions. (Osman et al., 2019). Suicide is the leading cause of death among those aged 15-29 years old. Emotional and behavioral problems among adolescents represent a considerable public problem in develop countries (WHO). These can profoundly affect the academic performance. It can lead to social withdrawal leading to isolation and loneliness. Much risk taking behaviour for health such as substance use may start during adolescence and these behaviours are unhelpful to cope up with emotional difficulties and can impact adolescent's mental and physical wellbeing. The various risk factors are peer pressure, exposure to diversity, violence, bullying, harsh parenting and socio economic problems, lack of access to support and services, influence of media. It is crucial to address the needs of adolescents with mental health conditions. One of the interventions to equip the adolescent to build their resilience is through Group therapy.

GROUP THERAPY

Group therapy represents an optimal intervention modality for adolescents, providing a naturalistic setting that reduces stigmatisation compared to individual therapy while offering extensive emotional and social support (Shechtman, 2025). It facilitates belongingness, social skills acquisition and friendship development. Group therapy varies in structure and objectives. The established typology for adolescent group encompasses psycho-educational, counselling and psychotherapy modalities.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This narrative review aims to synthesise existing evidence on the effectiveness of group therapy in addressing emotional and behavioural problems among adolescents. Specifically, the study seeks to: examine the various modalities of group intervention, including cognitive behavioural, mindfulness-based, skills training, expressive, trauma-focused, and digital group therapies; explore the therapeutic factors and underlying mechanisms that contribute to positive treatment outcomes; evaluate the comparative effectiveness of group therapy against individual therapy; and identify contextual factors influencing outcomes across school, community, and online settings. The review draws on interdisciplinary literature to inform practice, policy, and future research directions in adolescent mental health.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The effectiveness of group therapy in addressing the adolescent emotional and behavioural problems can be best understood through an integration of multiple psychological and social work theories.

Social learning theory proposed by Albert Bandura, emphasises the individual learn behaviours, emotional responses and coping strategies through observation and imitation (Bandura, 1977). Adolescents observe peers managing emotions, expressive vulnerabilities and resolving interpersonal conflicts. The observing learning fosters adaptive behaviour through modelling and vicarious reinforcement. Group settings provide opportunities for adolescents to learn emotional regulations and social skills, making social learning theory highly relevant to group therapy interventions.

Humanistic Theory emphasizes self -growth, self-awareness and the importance of supportive therapeutic environment (Rogers, 1957). The concept of unconditional positive regard is central to group theory. In group settings adolescents experience acceptance, empathy and genuineness which foster self-esteem, emotional expression and personal growth. The facilitator plays a non-directive role, creating a safe place for exploration and self-discovery

The effectiveness of group therapy lies in the integration of these multiple theoretical approaches. This integrative framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how group therapy addresses emotional problems among adolescents.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This narrative review was conducted through a systematic literature search of PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases. Search terms included combinations of: 'group therapy adolescents,' 'group counselling emotional problems,' 'group intervention anxiety depression youth,' 'school-based group therapy,' 'peer group mental health adolescents,' 'group CBT adolescents,' and 'dialectical behavior therapy group teens.' Studies were included if they (a) involved participants aged 10–19 years This review synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed empirical studies, randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and systematic reviews published between 2020 and 2025 to examine the effectiveness of group therapy for adolescent emotional problems.

TYPES OF GROUP THERAPY INTERVENTIONS

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by emotional instability, identifies exploration and heightened sensitivity to social influences (Steinberg, 2020). Group therapy represents an optimal intervention modality for adolescents, providing a naturalistic setting that reduces stigmatization compared to individual therapy while offering extensive emotional and social support. Groups facilitate belonging, social skill acquisition, friendship development, and intimacy formation. However, adolescents present unique therapeutic challenges. Typically referred to by others rather than self-referred, they often lack enthusiasm for psychological intervention and therapeutic sophistication. Adolescents can demonstrate significant resistance, anger, and defiance. Traditional talk therapy may prove excessively threatening; therefore, specialized indirect and projective techniques are required, necessitating specifically trained group facilitators.

Cognitive behavioral group therapy is one of the empirically supported modalities, it is based on principles of cognitive behaviour therapy which posits that maladaptive influence emotions and behaviours (Beck, 2011). The therapy enables participants to work collaboratively to identify the negative thoughts thought patterns, challenge cognitive distortions and develop adaptive coping strategies. This group setting enhances learning through shared experiences and peer feedback. It is effective in treating anxiety, depression and stress among the adolescents

Support Groups aims to provide emotional support and sense of belonging and participants share experiences, offer encouragement and validate each other's feelings. These groups are particularly effective for adolescents experiencing loneliness, grief and chronic emotional stress

Skill training groups are designed to teach specific behavioural and interpersonal skills. The skills taught are emotional regulation, communication skills, problem solving and stress management. Research indicates that skills training groups significantly improve coping abilities and reduce maladaptive behaviours among adolescents. These groups are highly structured and goal-oriented.

Mindfulness Based Group Interventions focus in increasing awareness of the present moment and reducing emotional reactivity. These are derived from mindfulness practices. The participants learn mindful learning, emotional awareness and acceptance strategies. Studies show that mindfulness groups reduce anxiety, depression, and stress while improving emotional regulation. For adolescents, mindfulness enhances concentration and resilience.

Expressive therapy groups use creative mediums such as art, music, drama, and writing to facilitate emotional expression. These groups encourage non-verbal communication, promote self-exploration and reduce emotional inhibition. Creative modalities are particularly effective for adolescents who may struggle to articulate their emotions verbally. Art and drama therapy have been shown to improve self-esteem and emotional expression

Trauma-focused group therapy is designed for individuals who have experienced traumatic events. These groups integrate elements of CBT, psycho- education, and emotional processing. They key components includes trauma narration, cognitive restructuring and emotional support. Trauma-focused groups help adolescents process traumatic experiences and reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

The advancement of technology, online group interventions are used for the adolescents. Research suggests that online group therapy is effective in improving mental health outcomes, especially among adolescents who are comfortable with digital communication.

In practice, many group interventions adopt an integrative approach, combining elements from different modalities. This flexibility allows practitioners to tailor interventions to the specific needs of participants. An integrative approach enhances effectiveness by addressing multiple dimensions of emotional problems

For adolescents, group interventions are particularly effective due to their developmental need for peer interaction and social learning. The use of diverse group modalities enables practitioners to design holistic interventions that promote emotional well-being, resilience, and social competence. As mental health challenges among adolescents continue to rise, the importance of utilizing multiple group intervention modalities becomes increasingly evident.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An in-depth review of literature was done on the topic of the research. All the findings of the research and its details are presented. Yu et al. (2025) conducted an RCT examining the combined effects of group therapy and pharmacological treatment for adolescent depression. The study found that adolescents receiving group therapy alongside medication showed significantly greater improvements in depressive and anxiety symptoms compared to those receiving medication alone. Furthermore, participants demonstrated improved emotional functioning and reduced relapse rates. Burley et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review on group-based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for adolescents and reported significant reductions in anxiety symptoms and psychological distress. The study highlighted that ACT enhances psychological flexibility, enabling adolescents to better manage emotional challenges. Similarly, Duagi et al. (2024), in a meta-analysis published in *The Lancet EClinicalMedicine*, found that group psychosocial interventions yield moderate to strong effect sizes in reducing depression and anxiety symptoms. Importantly, these interventions demonstrated sustained long-term benefits, indicating their effectiveness beyond the immediate treatment period. O'Connor et al. (2023) reviewed school-based group interventions and reported improvements in emotional well-being, resilience, and social competence. These findings suggest that group therapy is particularly effective when delivered in naturalistic settings such as schools.

Dunning et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis and reported significant reductions in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among adolescents participating in mindfulness programs. Ebert et al. (2022) reported that digital CBT interventions are effective in improving adolescent mental health. Grist et al. (2021) found that online group interventions effectively reduce anxiety and depression while increasing accessibility. These interventions are particularly relevant in the post-pandemic context, where remote access to mental health services has become essential. Grist et al. (2021) examined digital mental health interventions and found that online group therapy significantly reduces anxiety and depression among adolescents, highlighting the adaptability of group therapy to technological advancements. Additionally, Zhou et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis on cognitive behavioural group therapy (CBGT) and concluded that it is highly effective in treating adolescent depression, with outcomes comparable to individual therapy. Hetrick et al. (2021) highlighted its effectiveness for mild to moderate depression and Araya et al. (2021) evaluated group interpersonal therapy in low-resource settings and found significant reductions in depressive symptoms among adolescents. This study demonstrates the global applicability of group therapy, particularly in resource-limited contexts. Ng et al. (2022) reported improvements in emotional regulation and social functioning among adolescents with anxiety disorders. The effectiveness of CBGT is further enhanced in group settings, where adolescents benefit from peer interaction, shared experiences, and mutual support. Similarly, Caele et al. (2021) found that school-based CBGT programs significantly improved emotional resilience and reduced depressive symptoms among adolescents. Merry et al. (2020) also reported that group CBT interventions implemented in school settings

significantly reduced depressive symptoms and improved emotional well-being. These RCTs collectively demonstrate that group therapy is effective both as a treatment and preventive intervention for adolescent emotional problems. Carsley et al. (2020) found that mindfulness-based group interventions improve attention, emotional awareness, and psychological well-being. These approaches are especially effective for adolescents struggling with emotional dysregulation and stress and According to Stice et al. (2020) after conducting preventive intervention trials and found that adolescents participating in group-based programs had a significantly lower risk of developing major depressive disorders. This highlights the preventive potential of group therapy. Weersing et al. (2020) found that group CBT significantly reduces depressive symptoms, while James et al. (2020) found that group CBT significantly reduces symptoms of social anxiety and generalized anxiety disorder. Similarly, Hudson et al. (2021) reported improvements in emotional regulation and coping skills. The literature from 2020 to 2025 provides strong evidence that group therapy is an effective intervention for adolescent emotional problems. It significantly reduces anxiety and depression, improves emotional regulation, and enhances social functioning. Group therapy is also cost-effective, accessible, and developmentally appropriate, making it an essential component of adolescent mental health interventions. Future research should focus on expanding its application in diverse cultural contexts and integrating innovative approaches such as digital and mindfulness-based interventions.

3. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this discussion is to provide a thematic synthesis of the literature reviewed (2020–2025) on the effectiveness of group therapy for adolescent emotional problems. The reviewed studies, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs), systematic reviews, and empirical research, reveal several recurring patterns and insights. Through thematic analysis, the findings have been organized into key themes that explain the effectiveness, mechanisms, and contextual relevance of group therapy.

Theme 1: Effectiveness of Group Therapy in Reducing Emotional Problems

A dominant theme across the literature is the overall effectiveness of group therapy in reducing adolescent emotional problems, particularly anxiety and depression. Multiple systematic reviews and meta-analyses consistently report moderate to strong effect sizes for group-based interventions (Duagi et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2020).

RCTs such as Yu et al. (2025) demonstrate that adolescents receiving group therapy show significant improvements in emotional functioning compared to control groups. Similarly, preventive studies (Stice et al., 2020) highlight that group interventions reduce the risk of developing depressive disorders.

This theme establishes that group therapy is not only effective in treating existing emotional problems but also plays a preventive role, making it a comprehensive intervention strategy.

Theme 2: Group Therapy as Comparable and Cost-Effective Alternative to Individual Therapy

Another significant theme emerging from the literature is that group therapy is comparable in effectiveness to individual therapy, while being more cost-effective and accessible (Hofmann et al., 2012).

Studies indicate that:

- Group therapy achieves similar clinical outcomes as individual therapy
- It allows simultaneous treatment of multiple individuals
- It reduces the burden on mental health services

This finding is particularly relevant in low-resource settings, where access to mental health professionals is limited. The cost-effectiveness and scalability of group therapy make it a practical solution for addressing adolescent mental health issues at a larger scale.

Theme 3: Central Role of Peer Interaction and Social Learning

A key strength of group therapy identified in the literature is the role of **peer interaction and social learning**.

Adolescents are developmentally inclined toward peer relationships, and group therapy leverages this by creating an environment where participants:

- Share experiences
- Provide mutual support
- Learn from each other

This aligns with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986), which emphasizes learning through observation and imitation. The concept of universality, as described by Yalom and Leszcz (2020), is particularly important, as adolescents realize that others share similar problems, reducing feelings of isolation.

Thus, the effectiveness of group therapy is deeply rooted in its interactive and relational nature, which distinguishes it from individual therapy.

Theme 4: Effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioural Group Therapy (CBGT)

Cognitive Behavioural Group Therapy (CBGT) emerges as one of the most consistently supported modalities across studies.

Research indicates that CBGT:

- Reduces depressive and anxiety symptoms
- Improves cognitive restructuring
- Enhances coping skills

Studies such as Caelear et al. (2021) and Ng et al. (2022) demonstrate significant improvements in emotional regulation among adolescents participating in CBGT programs. The structured and skill-based approach of CBT, combined with peer interaction, enhances its effectiveness in group settings.

This theme highlights that CBGT remains the gold standard in group therapy interventions for adolescent emotional problems.

Theme 5: Emerging Importance of Third-Wave Therapies

A growing body of literature emphasizes the role of third-wave therapies, particularly Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and mindfulness-based interventions.

Burley et al. (2024) found that ACT-based group therapy significantly improves psychological flexibility and reduces anxiety. Similarly, Dunning et al. (2022) reported that mindfulness-based group interventions reduce stress and enhance emotional regulation.

These therapies differ from traditional CBT by focusing on:

- Acceptance of emotions
- Present-moment awareness
- Value-based action

The increasing popularity of these approaches reflects a shift toward holistic and experiential methods in adolescent mental health interventions

Theme 6: School-Based and Community-Based Group Interventions

Another prominent theme is the effectiveness of school-based and community-based group interventions.

School-based programs are particularly effective because:

- They are easily accessible
- They reduce stigma
- They integrate into adolescents' daily environments

O'Connor et al. (2023) and Shinde et al. (2020) found that school-based interventions significantly improve emotional well-being, academic performance, and peer relationships.

Community-based interventions also play a crucial role in reaching underserved populations, highlighting the importance of contextual and ecological approaches.

Theme 7: Digital and Online Group Therapy as Emerging Trend

The literature from 2020–2025 reveals a growing trend toward digital and online group therapy, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Studies (Grist et al., 2021; Ebert et al., 2022) indicate that online group therapy:

- Reduces anxiety and depression
- Increases accessibility
- Provides flexibility

This theme highlights the evolving nature of group therapy and its adaptation to technological advancements. Digital platforms offer new opportunities for expanding mental health services, especially for adolescents who are comfortable with technology.

Theme 8: Mechanisms Underlying Effectiveness

The effectiveness of group therapy is explained through several underlying mechanisms identified across studies:

- Universality: Reduces isolation (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020)
- Social Learning: Promotes adaptive behaviour (Bandura, 1986)
- Group Cohesion: Enhances engagement and belonging
- Catharsis: Facilitates emotional expression

- Skill Development: Improves coping strategies

These mechanisms demonstrate that group therapy works through both psychological processes and social interactions, making it a multidimensional intervention.

Theme 9: Preventive and Developmental Role of Group Therapy

The literature also highlights the preventive role of group therapy. Studies such as Stice et al. (2020) show that group interventions reduce the risk of developing mental health disorders among at-risk adolescents.

Additionally, group therapy supports:

- Identity formation
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity

This theme emphasizes that group therapy is not only a treatment method but also a developmental intervention that promotes overall well-being.

Theme 10: Limitations and Research Gaps

Despite strong evidence, the literature reveals several limitations:

- Lack of longitudinal studies
- Small sample sizes
- Cultural bias toward Western populations
- Variability in intervention designs

There is a need for:

- More research in developing countries
- Culturally adapted interventions
- Studies on long-term effectiveness

This theme highlights the importance of addressing research gaps to enhance the applicability of group therapy.

12. Integrated Synthesis of Themes

The thematic analysis reveals that the effectiveness of group therapy is influenced by a combination of factors:

- Therapeutic techniques (CBT, ACT, mindfulness)
- Group processes (peer interaction, cohesion)
- Contextual factors (school, community, digital platforms)

The integration of these elements creates a holistic intervention model that addresses emotional, cognitive, and social aspects of adolescent development.

The thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature (2020–2025) confirms that group therapy is a highly effective and versatile intervention for adolescent emotional problems. The identified themes highlight its strengths, including peer support, cost-effectiveness, and adaptability across different contexts and modalities. At the same time, the analysis underscores the need for further research to address existing gaps and enhance the cultural relevance of group therapy interventions. Overall, group therapy emerges

as a comprehensive, evidence-based, and developmentally appropriate approach that plays a crucial role in promoting adolescent mental health.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this review reaffirm group therapy as a core intervention method in social work practice for addressing the psycho-social needs of adolescents. Social workers play a pivotal role in promoting mental health, preventing psychological disorders, and facilitating resilience among young people.

Group therapy offers a structured, cost-effective, and evidence-based approach that enables adolescents to develop coping skills, improve interpersonal relationships, and receive emotional support from peers facing similar challenges.

The reviewed literature suggests that group therapy is comparable in effectiveness to individual therapy for many mental health conditions, particularly anxiety and depression (Hofmann et al., 2012). This makes group-based interventions a practical alternative in resource-constrained settings where access to individualized mental health services may be limited. By serving multiple participants simultaneously, group therapy increases service accessibility while maintaining therapeutic effectiveness.

Another important implication is the growing potential of digital and online group therapy. Technology-enabled group interventions can help overcome barriers related to geographical location, shortages of mental health professionals, and stigma associated with seeking psychological support. Integrating secure digital platforms into mental health services can substantially expand access to evidence-based interventions, particularly for adolescents living in rural and underserved communities. The literature also provides strong evidence supporting school-based group interventions as effective strategies for promoting emotional well-being, reducing psychological distress, and enhancing social functioning among adolescents (O'Connor et al., 2023). Schools provide an ideal environment for early identification of mental health concerns and the implementation of preventive and therapeutic group programmes. Consequently, collaboration among schools, mental health professionals, and social workers should be strengthened to ensure timely and accessible psychosocial support. Given the increasing prevalence of adolescent mental health problems worldwide, there is a pressing need for comprehensive mental health policies that prioritize group-based interventions as an integral component of adolescent mental health services. Policymakers should invest in training qualified facilitators, developing standardized intervention protocols, and integrating evidence-based group therapy programmes into educational institutions, community settings, and healthcare systems.

The review further highlights the effectiveness of diverse group therapy approaches, including Cognitive Behavioral Group Therapy (CBGT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs), and Interpersonal Group Therapy (IPT). The availability of multiple evidence-based modalities enables mental health professionals and social workers to select interventions that best address adolescents' developmental needs, symptom severity, and psycho-social contexts.

Beyond individual outcomes, group therapy has significant implications for families. Improvements in adolescents' emotional regulation, communication skills, and coping abilities often contribute to healthier family relationships, reduced caregiver stress, and enhanced family functioning. Family

involvement and psycho-education can further strengthen treatment outcomes and promote sustained recovery.

Finally, the review underscores the importance of developing culturally sensitive group interventions, particularly in culturally diverse countries such as India. Group therapy programmes should be adapted to reflect local languages, cultural values, family structures, and community norms to maximize participant engagement and therapeutic effectiveness. Culturally responsive interventions are more likely to reduce stigma, improve acceptability, and ensure equitable access to mental health services for adolescents from diverse backgrounds.

5. CONCLUSION

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage marked by rapid psychological, emotional, and social transitions. During this period, individuals are particularly vulnerable to emotional problems such as anxiety, depression, stress, and behavioural disturbances. The findings of this review clearly indicate that group therapy is a highly effective intervention for adolescent emotional problems. Across multiple studies, group therapy has consistently demonstrated significant reductions in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, while also enhancing emotional regulation, self-esteem, and social functioning. The evidence suggests that group therapy is not only comparable to individual therapy in terms of effectiveness but also offers additional benefits such as peer support, shared learning, and cost-efficiency. The group environment also promotes social learning, where participants observe and adopt adaptive coping strategies from peers. Furthermore, group cohesion and mutual support contribute to increased engagement and positive therapeutic outcomes.

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E-resources

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