

GROUP WORK PRACTICE IN DIVERSE SETTINGS

A Detailed and Easy-to-Understand Study Note with Examples

What is Social Group Work?

Social Group Work is a method used in social work where a professional social worker (called a group worker) helps a small group of people to grow, learn, solve problems, and meet their needs — by working together as a group.

Think of it this way: Just like a team works better than one person alone, a group gives people a chance to share their feelings, support each other, learn new things, and change their behaviour — all with the guidance of a trained social worker.

Simple Definition: Group Work is a method of social work in which the group itself is used as a tool to help individuals meet their personal needs and achieve social goals, with the help of a professionally trained worker.

What Does 'Setting' Mean?

A 'setting' in social work means the place or type of organisation where the social worker works. Different settings have different kinds of people, different problems, and different goals. That is why the way we do group work changes depending on the setting.

For example, group work done in a hospital (with patients) looks very different from group work done in a school (with students) or a prison (with inmates). The same core method is used, but the approach, activities, goals, and challenges change with each setting.

Why is Group Work Done in Different Settings?

Group work is practised in many different settings because:

- Human problems are varied — poverty, addiction, illness, trauma, disability, crime — and they appear in different places.
- Each setting has a specific population with specific needs.
- Group work is one of the most cost-effective and emotionally powerful methods to help people.
- A group gives people a sense of belonging, support, and hope — things that are needed everywhere.

Group Work Practice in Diverse Settings

Below, we look at each major setting in detail — what kind of group work is done there, how it is done, what challenges arise, and real-life examples to make it easy to understand.

1. Hospital / Medical Setting (Healthcare Setting)

What is this setting?

Hospitals and health centres deal with people who are sick, disabled, or recovering from surgery, accidents, or serious illness. Group work in this setting focuses on helping patients cope with their illness, understand their condition, and support each other emotionally.

Who are the members of the group?

- Patients with chronic diseases like diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDS, heart disease
- Patients recovering from accidents or surgeries
- Family members and caregivers of patients
- People with mental illness (in psychiatric hospitals)
- Patients preparing for discharge

Types of Groups Formed

- Patient Support Groups – where people with the same illness share experiences
- Health Education Groups – to teach patients about their condition and treatment
- Psychiatric Group Therapy – for people with depression, anxiety, schizophrenia
- Caregiver Groups – for family members who care for sick loved ones
- Rehabilitation Groups – for patients recovering from stroke, surgery, or injury

What does the Group Worker do?

Educates: The worker teaches the group about their illness, medicines, diet, and lifestyle in simple language.

Provides emotional support: Being sick can be scary. The worker creates a safe space for people to express their fears and sadness.

Motivates: The worker uses peer stories — hearing that someone else survived the same illness gives hope.

Links to resources: The worker connects patients to financial aid, disability benefits, or counselling services.

Example: *In a government hospital in Delhi, a social worker forms a group of 10 women who have all been diagnosed with breast cancer. Every week, the group meets in the hospital's counselling room. Women share their fears about treatment, talk about side effects of chemotherapy, and comfort each other. One woman says she felt like giving up, but hearing another woman say she completed treatment two years ago and is now*

healthy gave her the courage to continue. The social worker also invites a doctor once a month to answer the group's questions. This reduces fear, improves treatment adherence, and builds a strong sisterhood of support.

Role of Worker: The hospital social worker acts as a facilitator, educator, and emotional anchor. They are non-judgmental and help the group stay focused on healing.

Challenges in this Setting

- Patients may be too sick or tired to attend regularly
- Hospital environment can feel clinical and cold — not conducive to opening up
- Confidentiality about medical records must be strictly maintained
- Language and literacy barriers in diverse patient populations

2. School Setting (Educational Setting)

What is this setting?

Schools are one of the most important settings for group work because children and adolescents spend most of their time there. Problems like bullying, peer pressure, learning difficulties, poor self-esteem, family issues, and substance abuse can affect a child's education and overall growth.

Who are the members of the group?

- Children with learning disabilities
- Adolescents going through puberty and identity issues
- Students who are victims of bullying
- Children from broken or abusive families
- Teenagers at risk of dropping out
- Students with anxiety or exam stress

Types of Groups Formed

- Social Skills Groups – to teach children how to make friends and communicate
- Anti-Bullying Groups – to address and prevent bullying behaviour
- Life Skills Groups – decision making, saying no to peer pressure, hygiene
- Self-Esteem Building Groups – for shy or low-confidence students
- Study Skills Groups – to help struggling students improve academically
- Adolescent Guidance Groups – career choices, puberty, relationships

What does the Group Worker (School Counsellor) do?

Identifies problems early: A worker spots a child who has started skipping classes and forms a small group of at-risk students before the problem worsens.

Uses activities: In schools, group work uses games, role-play, art, storytelling, and discussions to engage children in a fun and meaningful way.

Builds peer support: Students often listen to each other more than to adults. Group work harnesses this power of peer influence positively.

Involves parents and teachers: The worker coordinates with teachers and parents to support the child beyond the group sessions.

Example: *In a government school in Mumbai, a school social worker notices that several girls in Class 8 are frequently absent and performing poorly. After individual meetings, she finds out that these girls feel unsafe while travelling to school because of harassment on the street. She forms a 'Safety and Confidence Group' with 8 such girls. Over 12 weekly sessions, they learn self-defence basics, role-play how to seek help, discuss their rights, and build confidence. By the end of the programme, attendance improves significantly, the girls feel empowered, and three of them form a peer support squad to help younger girls.*

Example: *In a school in Bengaluru, a counsellor forms an anti-bullying group. Instead of just punishing the bully, she includes both the bullied students AND the bullies in separate groups. The bully group works on understanding why they hurt others (often they are hurt themselves at home). This restorative approach reduces bullying incidents by 60% in one term.*

Role of Worker: The school social worker is both a friend and a guide. They create a safe, non-judgmental space and use child-friendly methods to help students grow emotionally and socially.

Challenges in this Setting

- Children may be shy or reluctant to share personal problems in a group
- Teachers and school management may not always cooperate
- Parents may not believe in counselling or consider it a waste of time
- Group sessions must be scheduled without affecting the child's academics

3. Psychiatric / Mental Health Setting

What is this setting?

Mental health settings include psychiatric hospitals, mental health clinics, community mental health centres, and de-addiction centres. People here struggle with conditions like depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety, PTSD, and drug or alcohol addiction. Group work in this setting is both therapeutic (healing-focused) and rehabilitative (helping them return to normal life).

Who are the members?

- People with depression, anxiety, or mood disorders
- Patients with schizophrenia or psychosis
- Survivors of trauma (violence, rape, abuse, war, disasters)
- Individuals addicted to drugs or alcohol
- People with eating disorders

Types of Groups

- Therapy Groups – led by a mental health professional to work through emotional trauma
- Reality Orientation Groups – for patients with dementia or schizophrenia to stay connected to reality
- Psycho-education Groups – to teach patients and families about mental illness
- Self-Help Groups – like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA)
- Anger Management Groups – to help people control violent or destructive behaviour
- Grief Support Groups – for people who have lost a loved one

What does the Group Worker do?

Creates safety: People with mental illness can feel very vulnerable. The worker establishes ground rules — no judgement, no mockery, complete confidentiality.

Uses therapeutic techniques: Techniques like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), mindfulness, storytelling, psychodrama, and art therapy are used in group settings.

Reduces stigma: One of the biggest benefits is that when people see others with the same condition living and coping, they feel less ashamed and more hopeful.

Monitors safety: The worker is trained to watch for signs of crisis — suicidal thoughts, self-harm, or psychotic episodes — and take immediate action.

Example: *At a de-addiction centre in Pune, a social worker runs a weekly group for 12 men recovering from alcohol addiction. The group uses the 12-step model (similar to Alcoholics Anonymous). Every week, members share how many days they have stayed sober, what triggered their urge to drink, and how they handled it. One man says he felt like drinking after his wife argued with him, but he called another group member instead of going to the liquor store. The group applauds him. This peer accountability and encouragement is more powerful than any lecture. After 6 months, 8 of the 12 members maintain sobriety, and all 12 report feeling less alone.*

Example: *In a psychiatric hospital in Chennai, a social worker conducts a 'Psycho-education group' for the families of patients with schizophrenia. Family members often think the patient is 'acting out' or being 'possessed.' The group teaches them in simple terms what schizophrenia is, why it happens, and how they can support their loved one without enabling harmful behaviour. Families who attend the group are three times more likely to ensure their loved one takes medication regularly.*

Role of Worker: In mental health settings, the group worker must be highly skilled — part therapist, part educator, part crisis manager. Patience, empathy, and strong professional boundaries are essential.

4. Correctional / Prison Setting (Juvenile Homes & Jails)

What is this setting?

Correctional settings include jails, prisons, juvenile detention centres, observation homes, and remand homes. People here have committed crimes or are awaiting trial. Group work in this setting focuses on rehabilitation — helping people understand the impact of their actions, change their behaviour, develop skills, and eventually reintegrate into society.

Who are the members?

- Adult prisoners or undertrials
- Juveniles (young people below 18) who have been in conflict with the law
- First-time offenders vs. repeat offenders
- People imprisoned due to drug-related offences

Types of Groups

- Behaviour Modification Groups – to help inmates understand and change criminal thinking patterns
- Vocational Training Groups – to teach skills like carpentry, tailoring, cooking, computer use
- Substance Abuse Recovery Groups – for drug or alcohol dependent inmates
- Restorative Justice Circles – where offenders face the impact of their crime on victims/community
- Release Preparation Groups – to help inmates plan their life after prison (job, family, housing)
- Juvenile Life Skills Groups – for young offenders to develop decision-making and social skills

What does the Group Worker do?

Builds trust: Prisoners are often suspicious of authority figures. The worker must be consistent, honest, and non-punitive to earn trust.

Addresses root causes: Most crimes are linked to poverty, trauma, addiction, or family breakdown. The group addresses these underlying issues.

Focuses on strengths: The worker helps inmates recognise their strengths and talents, not just their mistakes.

Prepares for release: Groups help inmates plan practical steps for reintegration — getting identity documents, finding work, reconnecting with family.

Example: *In a juvenile home in Lucknow, a social worker runs a group called 'New Path' for 10 boys aged 14-17 who have been caught in petty theft and drug use. Over 20 weeks, the group meets three times a week. They learn about why they made wrong choices, how their actions affected their families, and what they want their future to look like. One boy says he stole because his family had no food. The worker connects him to a government food scheme and a vocational training programme for tailoring. Six months after release, 7 out of 10 boys do not reoffend.*

Role of Worker: The correctional group worker is a change agent and an advocate. They believe in human dignity and the capacity for change in every person, regardless of what they have done.

Challenges in this Setting

- Authoritative environment of prisons can conflict with the democratic principles of group work
- Members may be manipulative, withdrawn, or aggressive
- High turnover as inmates are transferred, released, or put in solitary confinement
- Safety concerns — the worker must be vigilant at all times

5. Community Setting (Neighbourhood / Rural / Urban Slums)

What is this setting?

The community is perhaps the broadest and most natural setting for group work. Social workers work directly within neighbourhoods — especially in slums, rural villages, tribal communities, and urban low-income areas — to organise people, address common problems, and build community strength.

Who are the members?

- Women in Self-Help Groups (SHGs)
- Unemployed youth in a locality
- Marginalised groups — Dalits, tribals, minorities, sex workers
- Elderly people who are isolated
- Families affected by poverty, displacement, or natural disasters

Types of Groups

- Self-Help Groups (SHGs) – women pool small savings and support each other financially and emotionally
- Youth Clubs – young people work on community improvement projects
- Neighbourhood Action Groups – community members collectively solve local problems (drainage, safety, water)
- Disaster Relief Groups – organised during floods, earthquakes, or epidemics
- Awareness Groups – on issues like sanitation, health, child marriage, domestic violence

What does the Group Worker do?

Organises: The worker identifies natural leaders in the community and helps them form and sustain groups.

Conscientises: The worker helps community members understand their rights and the systemic reasons for their problems (not just personal failures).

Links to government schemes: The worker connects groups to government programmes like PM Jan Dhan Yojana, MGNREGA, Ujjwala Yojana, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, etc.

Empowers: The goal is to help communities solve their own problems without depending on outsiders.

Example: *In a village in Rajasthan, a social worker from an NGO brings together 15 women who are all facing domestic violence and financial dependence. She forms a Self-Help Group called 'Shakti Sangam.' Every week the women meet, save Rs. 50 each, discuss problems, and share information about government schemes. Within one year, three women use the group's savings fund to start small businesses (selling pickles, stitching clothes). They also collectively approach the village panchayat to complain about a husband who beats his wife publicly. The panchayat acts. The group transforms from a savings circle into a powerful community institution.*

Example: In a flood-affected village in Bihar, a social worker helps form a 'Disaster Recovery Group' of 20 affected families. The group meets weekly to assess damage, access relief funds, and plan reconstruction. The worker trains the group to advocate for themselves with the district authorities, resulting in faster compensation payments. The group later converts into a permanent 'Disaster Preparedness Committee' to protect the community from future floods.

Role of Worker: In community settings, the worker is an organiser, catalyst, and advocate. They believe deeply in the strengths and wisdom of local communities.

6. Family Service / Child Welfare Setting

What is this setting?

Family service organisations and child welfare agencies help families going through problems like domestic violence, child neglect, divorce, child labour, single parenthood, or poverty. Group work here focuses on strengthening families and protecting children.

Types of Groups

- Parenting Skills Groups – to teach parents how to raise children positively without violence
- Single Parent Support Groups – for mothers or fathers raising children alone
- Domestic Violence Survivor Groups – for women who have experienced abuse
- Foster Care Support Groups – for children in foster care and their foster parents
- Child Abuse Survivor Groups – for children who have experienced abuse

Example: At a Childline-affiliated centre in Kolkata, a social worker conducts a 'Positive Parenting Group' for 10 parents who have been referred after complaints of child abuse at home. Instead of blaming or punishing the parents, the group explores WHY they use harsh punishment — many of them were beaten as children and think it is normal. Over 10 sessions, they learn new ways to discipline children, how to manage their own anger, and how to build a loving relationship with their child. Eight out of ten parents report a significant reduction in physical punishment at home within three months.

Role of Worker: In family and child welfare settings, the worker must balance child protection with family support — protecting the child's safety while also trying to keep the family together where possible.

7. Youth Club / Settlement House / Recreational Setting

What is this setting?

Settlement houses, community centres, and youth clubs are places where people — especially young people — come voluntarily to participate in activities. This is one of the oldest settings for group work. The focus is on positive development, recreation, leadership, and civic participation.

Types of Groups

- Sports and Physical Fitness Groups
- Cultural and Arts Groups (dance, music, theatre, painting)
- Leadership Development Groups
- Civic Action Groups (neighbourhood cleanliness, tree plantation, voting awareness)
- Hobby Groups (reading clubs, gardening, cooking)

Example: *At a community centre in Dharavi (Mumbai), a social worker forms a 'Young Leaders Club' of 15 youth aged 16-22. They work on a neighbourhood project to clean and beautify a local park. Each member takes a responsibility — one organises volunteers, another collects donations for plants, another documents the work for social media. Over three months, the park is transformed. More importantly, the youth develop leadership, teamwork, communication, and civic responsibility — skills that will serve them lifelong. Two members later become elected ward representatives.*

Role of Worker: In recreational settings, the worker is primarily a facilitator and motivator. The group has maximum freedom to choose and plan its own activities. The worker guides from behind.

8. Disability / Rehabilitation Setting

What is this setting?

Persons with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities face unique challenges — barriers in mobility, communication, education, employment, and social acceptance. Group work in this setting focuses on building abilities, breaking social isolation, and advocating for rights.

Types of Groups

- Independent Living Groups – to help persons with disabilities live independently
- Peer Support Groups – where persons with similar disabilities support each other
- Disability Rights Advocacy Groups – to fight for accessibility and equal opportunities
- Vocational Rehabilitation Groups – to prepare persons with disabilities for employment
- Family Education Groups – to help families support rather than overprotect their disabled member

Example: *At a rehabilitation centre in Hyderabad, a social worker forms a group of 8 young people with physical disabilities (wheelchair users or those with limb impairment) who feel hopeless about employment. Over 16 sessions, they explore their skills (one is great with computers, another loves writing), learn how to access government disability employment schemes, practice job interview skills through role-play, and support each other emotionally. By the end of the programme, five members secure part-time or full-time employment. They also form a permanent 'Disability Rights Forum' to advocate for accessible public transport in their city.*

Role of Worker: The worker must have a deep understanding of the social model of disability — which says that disability is created by social barriers, not by the person's condition. The worker empowers, not pities.

9. Gerontological Setting (Elderly / Old Age)

What is this setting?

As people age, they face unique challenges: retirement, loss of a spouse, health decline, isolation, dependency, and fear of death. Old age homes, day care centres for the elderly, and geriatric wards of hospitals are important settings where group work can dramatically improve the quality of life of older adults.

Types of Groups

- Reminiscence Groups – where elderly people share memories of their past life, giving them a sense of meaning
- Social Activity Groups – indoor games, yoga, cultural celebrations to reduce isolation
- Health Management Groups – for managing chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension
- Grief Groups – for those who have lost a spouse or close friend
- Life Review Groups – structured conversations about their life story, achievements, and legacy

Example: *At an old age home in Ahmedabad, a social worker starts a 'Memory Lane Group' for 12 residents aged 70-85. Every Tuesday evening, members are invited to bring one item — a photograph, a recipe card, a trinket — that holds a special memory. Each person shares the story of their item. One 80-year-old man brings the first wristwatch he ever bought with his salary. He talks about his career and what he built. The room fills with laughter and tears. Research shows such groups reduce depression, improve cognitive function, and increase life satisfaction among the elderly. The sessions also help staff understand residents better, improving overall care.*

Role of Worker: The elderly group worker must show deep respect for elders, patience for slower pace of communication, and sensitivity to issues of grief, dignity, and mortality.

10. Migrant / Refugee and Displaced Persons Setting

What is this setting?

Millions of people are displaced every year — due to war, natural disasters, communal violence, or poverty-driven migration to cities. Migrants and refugees face language barriers, cultural shock, discrimination, poverty, and psychological trauma. Group work in this setting provides both practical support and emotional healing.

Types of Groups

- Cultural Orientation Groups – to help migrants understand the new environment and access services
- Language Learning Groups – to help refugees learn the local language

- Trauma Healing Groups – for those who have experienced violence, displacement, or loss
- Economic Survival Groups – to help migrants pool resources and find livelihood opportunities
- Identity and Community Groups – to maintain cultural connections and reduce alienation

Example: *In a resettlement camp on the outskirts of Delhi, where families displaced by Cyclone Amphan from West Bengal are staying, a social worker forms a group of 10 women. The women have lost their homes, their savings, and in some cases, family members. The social worker conducts weekly sessions where women share their grief, help each other with childcare, learn about their entitlements under government relief schemes, and eventually form a savings circle. Within four months, three women have secured daily wage work nearby. The group becomes a micro-community of support — a substitute family in a strange place.*

Role of Worker: The worker in this setting must be culturally sensitive, linguistically adaptable, and trauma-informed. They must never impose their own cultural values on the group.

Quick Comparison: Group Work Across Settings

Setting	Main Focus / Type of Group Work
Hospital / Healthcare	Support groups, health education, psychiatric group therapy
School	Life skills, anti-bullying, self-esteem, peer support groups
Psychiatric / Mental Health	Therapy groups, self-help groups, psycho-education
Correctional / Prison	Rehabilitation, behaviour change, vocational training groups
Community	Self-help groups, youth clubs, awareness groups, disaster groups
Family Services	Parenting skills, domestic violence survivor, child welfare groups
Youth Club / Settlement	Recreational, leadership, civic action, cultural groups
Disability / Rehabilitation	Independent living, peer support, rights advocacy groups
Elderly / Gerontological	Reminiscence, health management, grief, activity groups
Migrant / Refugee	Cultural orientation, trauma healing, economic survival groups

Key Roles of a Group Worker in Any Setting

Regardless of the setting, a social group worker plays the following roles:

- 1. Enabler:** Helps group members identify their own strengths and use them to solve problems.
- 2. Mediator:** Resolves conflicts within the group and prevents destructive interaction.

- 3. Educator:** Shares information, teaches skills, and raises awareness.
- 4. Advocate:** Speaks up for the group's rights and needs when they cannot do so themselves.
- 5. Facilitator:** Guides group discussions without controlling them — creates space for all voices.
- 6. Resource Linker:** Connects the group to external resources — government schemes, NGOs, hospitals, legal aid.
- 7. Evaluator:** Continuously assesses whether the group is achieving its goals and adjusts accordingly.

Common Challenges in Group Work (Across Settings)

- Maintaining confidentiality — members may share secrets that others might misuse
- Managing conflict — disagreements between members can disrupt the group
- Dropouts — members may stop attending for various reasons
- Cultural and language barriers — especially in diverse groups
- Stigma — some people are ashamed to be seen attending a mental health or support group
- Power imbalance — some members may dominate the group and silence others
- Institutional resistance — organisations may not always support group work activities
- Emotional burnout of the worker — dealing with trauma and pain of many clients

Conclusion

Group work is one of the most powerful and versatile methods in social work. It can be used almost anywhere — in hospitals, schools, prisons, communities, old age homes, refugee camps — because human beings are fundamentally social. We heal in community. We grow in community. We find hope in each other.

A skilled social group worker understands that every setting is unique — it has its own population, its own problems, its own rules, and its own possibilities. The worker adapts the principles and tools of group work to fit the context, always keeping the dignity and the potential of every member at the centre.

Whether it is a cancer patient finding courage in a hospital group, a juvenile offender finding purpose in a correctional group, a rural woman finding financial independence through a self-help group, or an elderly person finding joy in a reminiscence group — group work touches lives and transforms communities. It is not just a method. It is a philosophy that says: together, we are stronger.

— End of Notes —