

Models of Group Work

A Complete Exam Answer — All Standard Models Explained with Examples

Social Group Work | Department of Social Work

Introduction

Group work is one of the three primary methods of social work — the other two being casework and community organisation. In group work, a social worker uses the dynamics of a group to help individuals grow, solve problems, and bring about positive change in their behaviour and social functioning. Over the years, various scholars have proposed different models of group work to guide practitioners in their work with different types of groups and in different settings.

A model in group work is like a blueprint — it tells the social worker what the purpose of the group is, what role the worker plays, and what methods and techniques should be used. Different models are suited to different goals: some focus on healing and therapy, others on recreation and growth, and still others on bringing about social change. Understanding these models helps a social worker choose the right approach for the right group in the right situation.

Memory Tip — All Models at a Glance

The 5 Main Models — Remember: R S M R T

"Real Social Workers Must Reach Targets"

R — Remedial Model (Vinter)

S — Social Goals Model (Papell & Rothman)

M — Mediating / Reciprocal Model (Schwartz)

R — Recreational Model

T — Task-Centred Model

Papell & Rothman (1966) — The Most Important Classification:

They grouped all group work models into 3 major categories:

1. Social Goals Model 2. Remedial Model 3. Reciprocal Model

Remember these 3 as: S R R → "Students Remember Regularly"

Part A: Papell & Rothman's Classification (1966) — 3 Models

About Papell & Rothman (1966)

Catherine Papell and Beulah Rothman are American social work scholars who, in 1966, published a landmark paper classifying group work into three major models — the Social Goals Model, the Remedial Model, and the Reciprocal Model. Their classification is the most widely accepted and taught framework for understanding group work models in social work education worldwide.

Model 1: The Social Goals Model

Simple Idea	Use groups to develop socially responsible, active citizens who can contribute to society and bring about social change.
Meaning	The Social Goals Model is based on the belief that group work should aim beyond just helping individual members — it should develop democratic citizens who are aware of their social responsibilities and can work for the betterment of society. The group is seen as a training ground for democracy and civic participation. Members learn to take collective decisions, respect differences, and work for social justice. The social worker acts as an 'influencer' who guides the group towards socially desirable values and goals.
Goal	To develop social consciousness, democratic values, civic responsibility, and social action capacity among group members.
Worker's Role	The worker is a 'values influencer' and enabler — guiding the group towards socially desirable norms and goals without imposing personal views.
Best for	Youth groups, community groups, citizenship programmes, scout/guide groups, student unions, voter awareness groups.
Example	An NSS (National Service Scheme) unit in a college organises a group of students. The social worker facilitates discussions on communal harmony, gender equality, and environmental responsibility. Students plan and execute a village cleanliness drive and a voter registration camp. Through the group experience, they develop social consciousness and civic responsibility — the hallmark of the Social Goals Model.
Remember	Think of a Scout troop — the goal is not just to learn camping, but to develop character, teamwork, and a sense of duty to society. Social Goals Model is all about making good citizens through group experience.

Model 2: The Remedial Model

Simple Idea	Use the group as a tool to treat, rehabilitate, and restore individuals who have social, emotional, or behavioural problems.
Meaning	The Remedial Model, developed primarily by Robert Vinter (1967), treats the group as a 'vehicle' for changing individual behaviour. It is the most clinical of the three models and is heavily influenced by medical and psychotherapeutic traditions. The assumption is that some group members have specific problems — addiction, delinquency, mental illness, anti-social behaviour — and the group is used as a deliberate treatment

	tool to bring about change in those individuals. The worker takes an expert, directive role and sets specific treatment goals for each member.
Goal	To rehabilitate, treat, or restore the social functioning of individuals with specific problems through planned group intervention.
Worker's Role	The worker is a 'change agent' and expert clinician — highly active, directive, and goal-focused. The worker diagnoses problems and prescribes group activities as treatment.
Best for	Rehabilitation centres, de-addiction centres, juvenile correction homes, psychiatric hospitals, groups for survivors of abuse or trauma.
Example	A social worker at a de-addiction centre runs a group of 10 men recovering from alcohol dependency. The worker designs structured sessions — members share their triggers, role-play how to resist peer pressure, and practice coping skills. Each member has an individual treatment goal within the group. The group is the method through which individual rehabilitation is achieved — this is the Remedial Model.
Remember	Think of a physiotherapy class — each patient has a specific injury (problem), the doctor/therapist (worker) prescribes specific exercises (group activities), and the goal is individual healing and restoration. The group setting makes it more effective and supportive.

Model 3: The Reciprocal / Mediating Model

Simple Idea	The group is a mutual aid system — members help each other, and the worker acts as a bridge between the individual and society.
Meaning	Developed by William Schwartz (1961), the Reciprocal Model (also called the Mediating Model or Mutual Aid Model) sees the group as a system of mutual aid where members help and support one another. Schwartz believed there is a natural connection between people and society, but sometimes this connection breaks down. The social worker's role is to mediate — to act as a bridge between the individual and the group, and between the group and society — to restore this natural connection. Unlike the Remedial Model, the worker is not a director or expert — instead, the worker is a fellow participant who helps the group find its own way.
Goal	To restore the relationship between individuals and their social environment through mutual aid, and to help members support each other in their growth and problem-solving.
Worker's Role	The worker is a 'mediator' and 'enabler' — a fellow traveller who helps the group help itself. The worker does not lead — they facilitate the natural helping process within the group.
Best for	Support groups, self-help groups, groups for people with shared experiences (grief, divorce, illness), parent groups, groups of people in transition.
Example	A social worker facilitates a support group for widows in a rural community. She does not come with a treatment plan or a fixed agenda. Instead, she creates a safe space and gently helps the women open up.

	The women begin sharing their experiences, supporting each other, exchanging practical advice about legal rights and financial management, and building friendships. The group itself becomes the source of healing — the worker only mediates the process. This is the Reciprocal Model.
Remember	Think of a WhatsApp family group — no one person is the 'expert', everyone helps everyone else, information is shared freely, and the connection among members is the source of support. The social worker is like the group admin who keeps discussions on track but does not dominate.

Comparison of Papell & Rothman's 3 Models

Feature	Social Goals Model	Remedial Model	Reciprocal Model
Focus	Society & citizenship	Individual treatment	Mutual aid & mediation
Worker's role	Influencer / enabler	Expert / change agent	Mediator / facilitator
Goal	Social responsibility	Rehabilitate individual	Restore connection
Group used as	Training ground for democracy	Treatment tool	Mutual aid system
Best setting	Community / youth groups	Clinical / rehab settings	Support / self-help groups
Scholar	Papell & Rothman	Vinter (1967)	Schwartz (1961)

Part B: Other Important Models of Group Work

Model 4: The Recreational Model

Simple Idea	Use leisure, play, sports, and creative activities to promote healthy development and well-being in individuals.
Meaning	This is one of the earliest models of group work, rooted in the settlement house movement and youth organisations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Recreational Model uses leisure and recreational activities — sports, arts, crafts, games, cultural programmes — as the medium through which individuals develop physically, emotionally, and socially. The assumption is that play and recreation are not mere entertainment — they build character, develop skills, promote health, and provide an outlet for stress. There is a sub-variant called the Recreational Skills Model, which focuses specifically on teaching specific skills (like painting, carpentry, or music) to give members a productive use of leisure time.
Goal	To promote physical and mental health, develop skills, build character, and provide productive use of leisure time through group-based recreational activities.
Worker's Role	The worker is a 'programme director' and activity facilitator — organising activities, teaching skills, and using the group process to ensure positive outcomes.

Best for	Youth clubs, summer camps, old age homes, community centres, rehabilitation settings, children with disabilities.
Example	A social worker at a community centre organises a group of teenagers from poor backgrounds who spend evenings on the streets. She starts a cricket group on weekends and an art club on weekdays. Through these activities, the youth develop discipline, teamwork, creative expression, and a sense of belonging — and their involvement in petty crime reduces significantly. Recreation becomes the vehicle for positive development.
Remember	Think of what sports does to children in school — it is not just about playing cricket, it is about developing discipline, teamwork, and confidence. Recreational Model uses this same power of play as a tool for social work.

Model 5: The Task-Centred Model ✓

Simple Idea	The group focuses on completing specific, concrete tasks within a fixed time period to solve members' problems.
Meaning	The Task-Centred Model, developed by Reid and Epstein (1972), is a short-term, structured, and highly focused approach. In this model, the group works together to complete specific, clearly defined tasks that are directly related to the members' problems or goals. The tasks are concrete and achievable, and the work is time-limited (typically 8–12 sessions). Members are actively involved in identifying the tasks they want to accomplish. The model emphasises efficiency, accountability, and measurable outcomes. It is highly practical and problem-solving in nature.
Goal	To help group members solve specific, identified problems by completing clearly defined tasks within a limited time frame.
Worker's Role	The worker is a 'task facilitator' and coach — helping the group identify tasks, plan steps, track progress, and overcome obstacles.
Best for	Groups with specific, shared problems (job seekers, students with academic difficulties, groups preparing for life transitions, discharge planning groups in hospitals).
Example	A social worker at an employment exchange runs an 8-week group for unemployed youth. In each session, the group works on a specific task: Week 1 — writing a CV, Week 2 — mock interview practice, Week 3 — online job search skills, and so on. Each week there is a clear task, clear outcome, and clear accountability. By Week 8, most members have completed job applications. This structured, task-based approach is the Task-Centred Model.
Remember	Think of a to-do list — task-centred group work is exactly that. The group comes together, makes a list of specific tasks to solve the problem, and ticks them off one by one in a fixed time. Simple, focused, and measurable.

Model 6: The Developmental Model

Simple Idea	Groups, like people, go through stages of development — and the worker helps the group grow through each stage.
Meaning	The Developmental Model focuses on the natural stages that a group passes through as it grows and matures over time. Scholars like Garland, Jones & Kolodny (1965) proposed that groups move through five stages: (1) Pre-affiliation — members are hesitant and cautious, (2) Power and Control — members test boundaries and the worker, (3) Intimacy — members develop trust and closeness, (4) Differentiation — members respect each other's individuality, and (5) Separation — the group comes to an end and members prepare to move on. The worker's role changes at each stage — providing safety in the beginning, facilitating trust in the middle, and helping members deal with separation at the end.
5 Stages	(1) Pre-affiliation → (2) Power & Control → (3) Intimacy → (4) Differentiation → (5) Separation
Goal	To help the group mature through its natural developmental stages so that members can achieve their individual and collective goals.
Worker's Role	The worker is a 'guide through stages' — providing structure, safety, and appropriate facilitation at each stage of the group's development.
Example	A social worker starts a new support group for first-generation college students from rural backgrounds. In the first sessions, students are shy and silent (pre-affiliation). By week 3, some students challenge the worker's methods (power and control). By week 6, students are sharing personal struggles openly (intimacy). By week 10, each student is pursuing their own individual goals while supporting others (differentiation). In the final session, the worker helps students celebrate progress and prepare for independence (separation). The worker adapted her approach at every stage.
Remember	Think of a flower growing — seed (pre-affiliation), sprout (power), bud (intimacy), bloom (differentiation), fall (separation). Every stage is natural and necessary. The worker is the gardener who supports growth at each stage.

Master Summary Table — All Models of Group Work

Model	Scholar / Origin	Worker's Role	Goal	Best Used For
Social Goals	Papell & Rothman (1966)	Influencer / Enabler	Social citizenship	Youth, community groups
Remedial	Vinter (1967)	Expert / Change agent	Individual treatment	Rehab, clinical settings
Reciprocal	Schwartz (1961)	Mediator / Facilitator	Mutual aid	Support, self-help groups
Recreational	Settlement houses	Programme director	Health & character building	Youth clubs, old age homes
Task-Centred	Reid & Epstein (1972)	Task coach	Solve specific problems	Employment, transition groups

Developmental	Garland et al. (1965)	Stage guide	Group growth & maturity	Long-term therapy groups
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Conclusion

The various models of group work reflect the rich diversity of situations in which a social worker may use groups as a method of intervention. From the Social Goals Model that aims to build democratic citizens, to the Remedial Model that rehabilitates individuals with specific problems, to the Reciprocal Model that fosters mutual aid, to the Recreational, Task-Centred, and Developmental Models — each offers a unique perspective and strategy.

A skilled social worker does not mechanically follow just one model. In practice, models often overlap and complement each other. The choice of model depends on the nature and needs of the group, the setting of practice, and the goals of the intervention. What remains constant across all models is the central belief of social work: that the group experience, when thoughtfully facilitated, has the power to heal, empower, and transform individuals and communities alike.