

# PROGRAMME PLANNING IN SOCIAL GROUP WORK

*A Detailed Study Note in Simple Language with Examples*

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## 1. Introduction

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Social group work is a method of social work in which a professionally trained worker helps a group of people grow, learn, and meet their needs by working together. A very important part of this method is Programme Planning — the process of deciding WHAT the group will do, HOW it will do it, WHEN and WHERE it will be done, and WHY.

In simple words: a programme is everything that happens inside and outside a group session — the activities, the discussions, the trips, the art projects, the games, the role-plays, and even the celebrations. Programme planning means carefully thinking about and organising all of this in advance, so that every activity has a purpose and helps the group members grow.

**Note:** Programme in social group work does NOT mean just entertainment or fun activities. Every programme activity must be purposefully chosen to meet the needs and goals of the group members.

## 2. Meaning and Definition of Programme

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The word 'programme' in social group work has a much wider meaning than just a list of activities. It includes everything that the group experiences — conversations, outings, creative work, problem-solving exercises, discussions, performances, and even informal interactions between members.

**Grace Coyle (1948) defined programme as:** "Everything that takes place within the group setting — all the activities and experiences in which the group engages."

**Harleigh B. Trecker (1955) stated:** "Programme is the sum total of all the experiences, activities and relationships that the members have as they work together toward their goals."

From these definitions, we can understand that programme has three essential components:

- Activities — games, art, drama, sports, discussions, outings, music, etc.
- Experiences — what members feel, learn, and gain from participating in those activities.
- Relationships — the bonds, trust, and interactions that develop between members through programme activities.

## 3. What is Programme Planning?

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Programme Planning is the deliberate, thoughtful, and professional process of designing the activities and experiences of a group so that they serve the needs, interests, and goals of both the individual members and the group as a whole.

It is not enough to simply 'do something' with the group. A social worker must ask:

- Why is this activity being chosen? What need does it address?
- Is it right for the age, ability, culture, and interest level of the members?
- Will it help the members grow socially, emotionally, or in terms of skills?
- Is it appropriate for this stage of the group's development?
- Are resources available to carry it out?

**Example:** A social worker running a group for adolescent boys with anger management issues does NOT plan aggressive competitive games. Instead, she plans activities like cooperative art, team cooking

*challenges, and role-play of conflict situations — because these activities help develop patience, empathy, and communication, which are the specific goals of the group.*

## 4. Purpose and Importance of Programme Planning

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Programme planning is not a formality — it is the backbone of effective group work. Here is why it matters:

### 4.1 Gives Direction and Purpose

Without planning, a group session can become aimless — members sit together but nothing meaningful happens. Planning ensures that every session has a clear objective and that activities move the group closer to its goals.

**Example:** *A social worker plans a session on 'expressing emotions through art' for a trauma support group. Without this plan, the session might have just been unstructured talk. With the plan, members create paintings expressing their feelings, which opens up deep sharing and healing.*

### 4.2 Meets Individual and Group Needs

Good programme planning is based on a careful assessment of what each member needs and what the group as a whole needs. It ensures that no one is left behind or overlooked.

**Example:** *In a group for persons with disabilities, the worker plans activities at different levels of difficulty so that members with varying abilities can all participate and succeed — some members do the painting, others narrate, others organise materials.*

### 4.3 Ensures Progressive Development

A good programme starts simple and gradually becomes more complex and challenging — matching the growing capacity of the group. This is called the Principle of Progressive Programme Experience (Trecker, 1955).

**Example:** *A group of unemployed youth begins with basic communication workshops. As confidence grows, the programme progresses to mock interviews, resume writing, and finally a live interaction with local employers.*

### 4.4 Respects Members' Interests and Culture

Planning allows the worker to choose activities that are culturally appropriate, age-suitable, gender-sensitive, and interesting to the members. A programme imposed on the group without considering their preferences will fail.

**Example:** *A group of elderly women in rural Rajasthan may not connect with a PowerPoint presentation on health. But a discussion over chai while listening to traditional health songs, followed by a demonstration of healthy cooking — that they will love and learn from.*

### 4.5 Builds Relationships and Group Cohesion

Programme activities — especially cooperative ones — create opportunities for members to interact, laugh, struggle, and succeed together. These shared experiences build trust, friendship, and group identity.

**Example:** *A team cooking challenge in a juvenile rehabilitation group requires boys to cooperate, delegate tasks, and problem-solve together. By the end, they are proud of their meal and proud of each other — relationships that were hostile at the start are now warm and cooperative.*

## 4.6 Makes Evaluation Possible

When a programme is planned with clear objectives, it becomes possible to evaluate whether those objectives were met. Without a plan, there is nothing to measure against.

## 5. Principles of Programme Planning

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Social work scholars, especially Trecker (1955), have outlined key principles that guide programme planning in group work:

- 1. Principle of Individual Differences:** No two members are alike. The programme must accommodate different abilities, interests, needs, and backgrounds within the same group.
- 2. Principle of Group Interest:** Activities must be chosen based on what the group finds meaningful and relevant — not what the worker personally prefers.
- 3. Principle of Progression:** The programme should move from simple to complex, from easy to challenging, matching the group's growing capacity over time.
- 4. Principle of Flexibility:** Plans must remain open to change. If a planned activity is not working or the group's mood/needs shift, the worker must adapt quickly.
- 5. Principle of Balance:** A good programme balances different types of activities — physical and mental, individual and group, creative and analytical, structured and free.
- 6. Principle of Democratic Participation:** Group members must be involved in planning the programme — they are not just recipients but active co-designers of their own group experience.
- 7. Principle of Resource Awareness:** Planning must be realistic — activities must match the resources (time, money, space, materials, skills) available to the group and the agency.
- 8. Principle of Purposefulness:** Every activity chosen must have a clear and conscious purpose linked to the goals of the individual members and the group.

## 6. Steps in Programme Planning

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Programme planning is a step-by-step process. The following are the key steps a social worker follows:

### Step 1 Assessing Needs and Interests of Members

Before planning any activity, the worker must understand who the members are — their age, background, interests, problems, strengths, and goals. This is done through initial interviews, intake forms, observations, and informal conversations.

**Example:** Before forming a group for adolescent girls in a slum, the social worker spends two weeks talking to girls, their parents, and teachers. She finds that the girls are interested in dance and cooking but are also struggling with self-confidence and awareness of their rights. This assessment guides all programme planning.

### Step 2 Setting Clear Goals and Objectives

Based on the needs assessment, the worker — in consultation with the group — sets specific, measurable, and achievable goals for the programme. Goals may be individual (e.g., improve communication skills of each member) or group-level (e.g., develop a community awareness campaign together).

### Step 3 Selecting Appropriate Activities

Activities are chosen based on: (a) the goals of the group; (b) the age, culture, and ability of members; (c) the stage of group development; (d) available resources; and (e) the interest and preference of members.

Types of activities commonly used in group work include:

- Creative activities — art, craft, music, drama, dance, writing
- Physical activities — sports, games, yoga, cooking
- Educational activities — discussions, workshops, lectures, field visits
- Social activities — outings, community service, celebrations
- Therapeutic activities — role-play, psychodrama, storytelling, group discussions
- Vocational activities — skill-building workshops, training, practice sessions

### Step 4 Sequencing and Scheduling Activities

Activities must be arranged in a logical sequence — from simple to complex, from individual to group, from less sensitive to more sensitive topics. Scheduling means deciding when, how often, and for how long each session will happen.

**Example:** Week 1: Ice-breaking games and introductions. Week 2-3: Discussions on self-identity. Week 4-5: Role-play on real-life challenges. Week 6-8: Creative art project. Week 9-10: Planning a community event. Week 12: Celebration and closure.

### Step 5 Preparing Resources and Materials

The worker ensures that everything needed for the programme is arranged in advance — venue, materials, permission letters, guest speakers, transport, funding, etc. Poor resource planning is one of the most common reasons good programmes fail.

### Step 6 Implementing the Programme

The planned programme is carried out. During implementation, the worker is actively facilitating — observing, guiding, encouraging participation, managing conflict, and adjusting on the spot if something is not working.

### Step 7 Evaluation and Review

After each session and at the end of the programme, the worker evaluates: Were the goals met? What worked and what didn't? What do members feel they have gained? How did individuals grow? This evaluation feeds into the planning of future sessions or programmes.

## 7. Factors Affecting Programme Planning

A social worker must consider the following factors when planning a programme:

| Factor              | What it means for planning                                                                                             |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Age of Members      | Children need play-based, short, colourful activities. Adults need discussion, skill-based, and purposeful activities. |
| Gender              | Some groups may need gender-sensitive activities. Mixed groups need activities that are inclusive and safe for all.    |
| Cultural Background | Activities must respect religious, linguistic, and cultural norms of the                                               |

|                            |                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                            | group members.                                                                                                  |
| Stage of Group Development | Early stages need ice-breaking; later stages can handle complex, sensitive, or challenging activities.          |
| Physical / Mental Ability  | Activities must be adapted to the abilities of members — no activity should exclude or embarrass anyone.        |
| Agency Resources           | The programme must fit within the budget, staff, time, and space available in the organisation.                 |
| Duration of the Group      | A short-term group (6 sessions) needs a compact, focused programme. A long-term group has more time to explore. |
| Community Context          | The programme must be relevant to the local environment, problems, and opportunities of the community.          |

## 8. Role of the Social Worker in Programme Planning

The social group worker plays several critical roles in programme planning:

**Planner:** The worker designs the overall programme framework — goals, activities, sequence, resources — based on careful assessment.

**Facilitator:** During sessions, the worker facilitates activities — creating a safe space, encouraging participation, and managing group dynamics.

**Observer:** The worker carefully observes how members respond to each activity — who thrives, who struggles, what feelings emerge.

**Adapter:** If an activity is not working, the worker adapts on the spot — changes the format, adjusts the pace, or switches activities entirely.

**Evaluator:** The worker continuously assesses whether the programme is achieving its goals and adjusts future planning accordingly.

**Co-creator:** The best group workers involve members in the planning process — asking for input, incorporating suggestions, and giving members ownership of the programme.

**Example:** *At a group for single mothers in Chennai, the social worker initially planned a session on financial literacy using charts and numbers. But she noticed the women were disengaged. She quickly switched to a storytelling activity where each woman shared how she manages her monthly budget. The stories were rich, real, and deeply educational. Members started advising each other. The worker adapted the plan in real time — and the session became one of the most memorable for the group.*

## 9. Programme Media and Methods

Programme media refers to the different tools and methods through which programme activities are delivered. Common media used in social group work include:

**Arts and Crafts:** Painting, drawing, collage, clay modelling — used to express emotions, develop creativity, and build confidence. Very effective with children and trauma survivors.

**Drama and Role-Play:** Members act out real-life situations — a job interview, a conflict with a parent, asking for help. Develops empathy, communication, and problem-solving skills.

**Music and Dance:** Songs, rhythms, and movement release energy, build cultural identity, reduce stress, and bring joy. Especially useful with children, elderly, and rehabilitation groups.

**Sports and Games:** Team games build cooperation, discipline, and sportsmanship. Individual games build focus and self-confidence.

**Field Visits and Excursions:** Visits to courts, hospitals, markets, NGOs, or community sites that help members connect learning with the real world.

**Discussions and Debates:** Structured conversations about real issues help members develop critical thinking, listen to different views, and build communication skills.

**Storytelling:** Members share personal or fictional stories. A powerful tool for emotional expression, cultural connection, and group bonding.

**Community Service Projects:** The group works together on a project that benefits others — a cleanliness drive, a tree plantation, a food donation campaign. Builds civic responsibility and group identity.

**Example:** *In a group for juvenile boys in a remand home in Hyderabad, the social worker uses a combination of media: Monday — sports and team games. Wednesday — drama and role-play of court situations and family conflicts. Friday — art therapy where boys draw their 'dream life.' Over 12 weeks, the boys become more open, less aggressive, and more future-focused. The varied programme keeps them engaged and ensures different aspects of their development are addressed.*

## 10. Programme Planning and Stages of Group Development

A skilled group worker plans different types of activities depending on which stage of development the group is at (Tuckman's Model). The table below summarises this:

| Group Stage          | Appropriate Programme Activities                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Forming (Stage 1)    | Ice-breaking games, introductions, simple activities, non-threatening discussions, getting-to-know-you exercises.                                          |
| Storming (Stage 2)   | Structured discussions on conflict, role-play on disagreements, team challenges that require cooperation, activities that surface and resolve differences. |
| Norming (Stage 3)    | Collaborative projects, shared creative work, group problem-solving activities, open-ended discussions on deeper personal topics.                          |
| Performing (Stage 4) | Complex community projects, skill-intensive tasks, self-led activities, peer mentoring, leadership challenges.                                             |
| Adjourning (Stage 5) | Reflection activities, scrapbooks, farewell ceremonies, letters to self, celebration of achievements, future planning.                                     |

**Example:** *In a women's empowerment group that the worker knows is in the Storming stage (members are disagreeing and forming cliques), she plans a cooperative cooking activity where every sub-group MUST depend on the other to complete the meal. The shared task forces cooperation and, over lunch, conversations happen naturally that begin to heal the divisions.*

## Conclusion

Programme planning is the heart of social group work. It is the process through which a social worker translates the needs, goals, and potential of a group into meaningful, purposeful, and progressive experiences. A well-planned programme respects the uniqueness of each member, builds on the strength of the group, and moves systematically toward individual growth and social change.

As Trecker (1955) rightly said, the programme should always begin where the members are — their interests, their level, their culture — and progressively challenge them to grow. The social worker is not an

entertainer or a teacher imposing lessons. They are a thoughtful co-creator who walks alongside the group, designing experiences that help people discover their own strength, voice, and potential.

Whether it is a game that teaches cooperation, an art session that unlocks grief, a cooking activity that builds friendship, or a community project that ignites civic pride — every programme activity, when planned with care and purpose, becomes a powerful vehicle for human growth and social transformation.

— End of Notes —