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Grief & At-Risk Behavior: A look at the effectiveness of grief counseling groups for adolescents in public schools

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Grief & At-Risk Behavior: A Look At The Effectiveness of Grief Counseling Groups in Public Schools

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March 2016

National Youth At-Risk Conference

Savannah Georgia

Endorsed by the International Association of Social Work with Groups, Inc.

Significance

- ❖ Charles and Anita Clayborn (My Parents)
- ❖ Grief (My Story)
- ❖ Adult vs. Adolescent
- ❖ School Social Work (My Experience)

“Can I participate in this group again?”

“Can we make group 1 hour and more than 8 weeks?”

“Can we bring in a photo of our parent(s)?”

My Parents

Charles & Anita Clayborn



Significance

- ❖ Many adolescents who experience grief do not receive any form of counseling services to support them towards their grief recovery.
- ❖ In the United States, more than 2 million children and adolescents (3.4%) younger than 18 years have experienced the death of a parent.

(Christ, 2002).

At-Risk Behaviors

- ❖ Due to adolescents' level of cognitive, psychological, and social development, they may express inner turmoil through self-harm, physical complaints, or aggressive behaviors because of their reduced ability to conceptualize and verbalize distress.

(Cooper, Hooper, & Thompson, 2005).

At-Risk Behaviors

- ❖ Substance Abuse
- ❖ Suicide
- ❖ Eating Disorders
- ❖ Gang Violence
- ❖ Delinquency
- ❖ Self- Destructive Behavior
- ❖ Academic Problems

(I.C. Noppe & Noppe, 2004)

At-Risk Behaviors

- ❖ Adolescents who experience grief may struggle with understanding “who they are” in the absence of a parent, due to death.
- ❖ Adolescents who experience the death of a parent may struggle with issues of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

(Thomas 2011)

Grief & Adolescents

- ❖ Grief is the normal psychological, social, and physical reaction to loss.
- ❖ Grief is also viewed as loss and bereavement.
- ❖ Grief is expressed through feelings, thoughts, and attitudes.

(Rando, 1988)

(Dune, 2004)

(Worden, 2009)

Grief & Adolescents

Stages of Grief:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

Grief is understood as a cyclical process

(Kubler-Ross, 1969)

Theoretical Framework

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory

- ❖ Attachment Theory describes the state and quality of an individual's attachments, to feel safe and secure.
- ❖ Attachment initially occurs between a child and parent and later between adult and adult.
- ❖ This theory rests on the belief that a secure attachment contributes to a healthy development.

(Bowlby, 1973; Dunne, 2004)

Grief Counseling Groups

- ❖ Few resources are available for grieving adolescents.
- ❖ Grief counseling groups are positive interventions for adolescents.
- ❖ Grief counseling groups help adolescents process their grief in a positive way.
- ❖ Grief counseling groups can assist adolescents in developing healthier coping skills.

(Lee & Swenson, 2005)

(Slyter, 2012)

Grief Counseling Groups

- ❖ The preferred intervention for grieving students is a support group.
- ❖ Group counseling is an effective intervention when working in a school setting.

(Perusee & Goodnough, 2009)

(Whiston & Sexton, 1998)

Grief Counseling Groups in Public Schools

- ❖ Group counseling can increase the number of students served in school counseling programs.
- ❖ Group counseling is an efficient intervention compared to individual counseling in a school setting.
- ❖ Group counseling supports student growth and development.

(Gladding, 2008; Greenberg, 2003)

(Perusee, Goodnough, & Lee, 2009)

(Sells & Hays, 1997).

Barriers to Grief Counseling Groups

- Academic Culture
- School Climate
- Scheduling Problems
- School Policies
- School Culture
- Administrative Support
- Student Caseload
- Time

(Dansby, 1996; Greenber, 2003; Ripley & Goodnough, 2011)

School Social Workers

- ❖ School social workers are excellent resources for grieving adolescents.
- ❖ 5% of social workers work in the public school setting.
- ❖ School social workers are responsible for providing clinical interventions at school when loss occurs.

(NASW, 2014) (Strobe et al., 2005)

(Rowling, 2005)

Summary

- ❖ 95 percent of respondents agreed that grief impacts and interferes with teaching and learning.
- ❖ 97 percent of respondents agreed that grief counseling groups are effective interventions for adolescents.
- ❖ 96 percent of respondents agreed that a comfort level with the topic of grief is required in order to conduct grief counseling groups.

Summary

- ❖ Frequency data reveals that grief counseling groups are not being conducted at higher percentages by school social workers for adolescents.
- ❖ 56 percent of respondents have never conducted grief counseling groups.

Georgia public school social workers who are members of the School Social Workers Association of Georgia recognize the importance of grief counseling as an effective intervention for adolescents, however grief counseling groups continue to be underutilized.

Additional Resources

Coalition to Support Grieving Students



COALITION TO SUPPORT
GRIEVING STUDENTS

MODULE SUMMARY

Talking With Children

Take-Home Message

Making contact and talking with grieving students helps them cope with their loss. But some teachers aren't sure what to say. They're afraid they'll cause the child more pain. It's important to remember that a student's grief and pain are caused by the death or loss, not by talking about it.

This handbook provides practical suggestions to school professionals on how to initiate a conversation with a student who has recently experienced the death of a close family member or friend.

Why It's Vital to Speak Up

School personnel are often concerned about the possibility that they will upset children by raising the topic of death. They may worry that they will make matters worse. They may choose to say nothing.

Saying nothing actually communicates a great deal to children. It tells them that you may be:

- *Inensitive.* You don't realize they are confused and struggling.
- *Uncaring.* You don't care about this important event in their lives.
- *Incapable.* You don't believe you are capable of providing the support they need.
- *Unconfident.* You feel the child is unable to adjust and cope even with your assistance.
- *Unapproving.* You believe it is wrong to talk about death.

No one wants to communicate these messages to grieving children.

Speaking up lets grieving children know you recognize their situation and want to be supportive.



What Children Are Often Thinking

Children learn from an early age that conversations about death make people uncomfortable. If they ask questions, people may look away or not continue the conversation. If they speak to grieving family members after a death, adults may cry or show distress. Children sometimes conclude they have done something wrong and avoid raising the subject again. They may hold in their feelings as a way to support their family. They may try to look fine and reassure family they are okay when they really need support.

School professionals can play a powerful role in reaching out to students, acknowledging their loss, and offering to speak with them and answer their questions. Staff who already have a trusting and genuine relationship with the grieving student are in the best position to offer this support.

Initiating the Conversation

These steps can help get the conversation started.

1. *Express concern.* Let students know you've heard about their loss and are available to listen and offer support.
2. *Be genuine.* Children can tell when adults are authentic in their communications. For example, don't tell a child you will miss her uncle if you did not know the man. Do tell the child you are sad she has experienced this loss.
3. *Invite the conversation.* Use simple, direct, open-ended questions. For example, ask, "How are you and your family doing?"
4. *Listen and observe.* Listen more and talk less. Share observations about students' behavior or responses in a nonjudgmental manner.
5. *Limit personal sharing.* You can draw on personal experiences to help you better understand students, but do not need to share this with them. Keep the focus on the student.
6. *Offer practical advice.* For example, discuss ways to respond to questions from peers or adults about the death.
7. *Offer reassurance.* Without minimizing their concerns, let students know that over time they will be better able to cope with their distress, and that you will be there to help them.
8. *Maintain contact.* At first, children may not accept your invitation to talk or offers of support. Their questions will evolve over time. Remain accessible, concerned, and connected.

(Continued)

Additional Resources

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

 COALITION TO SUPPORT GRIEVING STUDENTS

MODULE SUMMARY

Peer Support

Take-Home Message

Children who are uninformed or unprepared may unintentionally isolate or tease a classmate after a death. This can worsen the isolation grieving students already feel.

But children naturally want to help their friends. Teachers can equip their students with the skills to support a peer. This can make a profound difference for a grieving student. There is probably no more important lesson or life skill for an educator to teach.

Grieving Students' Relationships With Peers

After the death of a close friend or family member, children are likely to experience a range of confusing and strong feelings, including guilt and shame. They may worry that something is wrong with them, or be embarrassed about being associated with a death. They may worry about their appearance, or expressing too much emotion.

They may not know what to say or how to act, even with their friends. They may withdraw from peers.

When a Peer Experiences a Death

Like adults, children often have limited experience supporting a friend who is grieving. They may be afraid to say or do the wrong thing. The death may create uncertainty in their own lives—"Could my father also die?"

They may make insensitive comments, ask repetitive or detailed questions about the death, or even tease the grieving student. They may distance themselves from the grieving student to cope with their own anxieties.

They may want to say, "I worry my father might also die someday. Can you let me know what the experience is like

and help me understand it better so I can prepare myself?" But what they may say instead is, "Your daddy died. You can't make a Father's Day card!"

Equip Students With Skills

When teachers take the following steps, students are more likely to provide effective support to a grieving peer.

1. *Provide information. Help students understand, at a very basic level, what has happened.* They will be less likely to burden a grieving peer in the immediate aftermath of a death with repetitive questions.
2. *Give students an opportunity to ask questions.* Students are likely to have questions about what death is and the effect it has on children and their families. They will want to know how to be helpful to someone who is grieving. Teachers can often discuss this information with a class before the grieving student returns to school. This helps everyone feel more prepared.
3. *Provide a safe environment for students to share thoughts and feelings.* Invite students to talk about their own losses or the fears they may have about someone in their own life dying.
4. *Offer concrete advice and practical suggestions.* For example, talk about ways to start a conversation with someone who is grieving. Discuss helpful things to say, and what not to say.

Most of the advice in *Talking With Children and What Not to Say* will also be helpful to students.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS

 NATIONAL CENTER FOR School Climate & Environment

 NEW YORK LIFE FOUNDATION

FOUNDING MEMBERS

 ASBA

 NEA

 NASD

 NASP

 NAASSP

 NEA

 NASD

 NASP

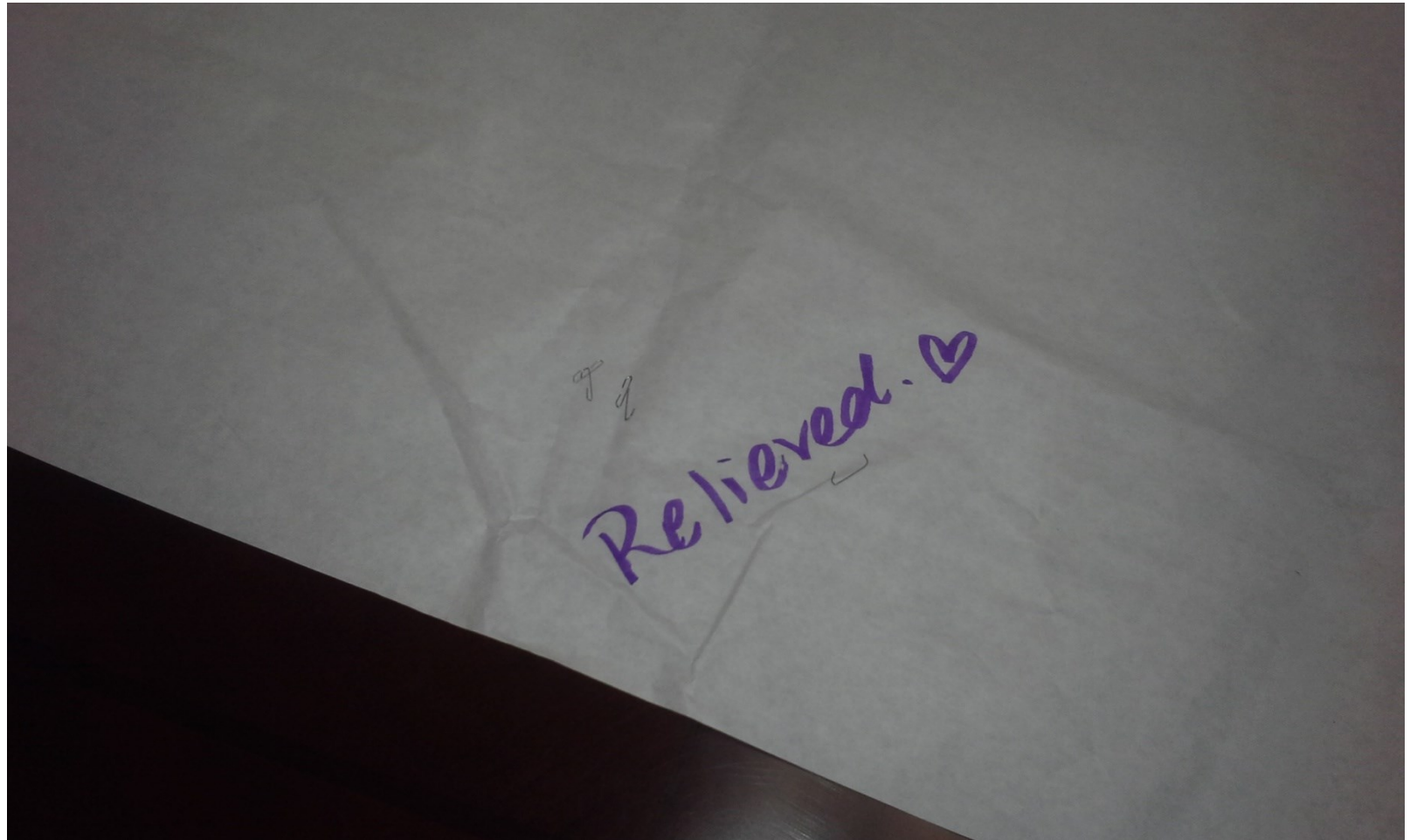
 NAASSP

Additional Resources

- ❖ The Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation www.ekrfoundation.org
- ❖ The Doughty Center www.doughty.org
- ❖ Hello Grief www.hellogrief.org
- ❖ Center for Grieving Children www.grievingchildren.org
- ❖ National Association of Social Workers www.helpstartshere.org
- ❖ The Renew Center (Dr. Judy Keith) www.renew.net

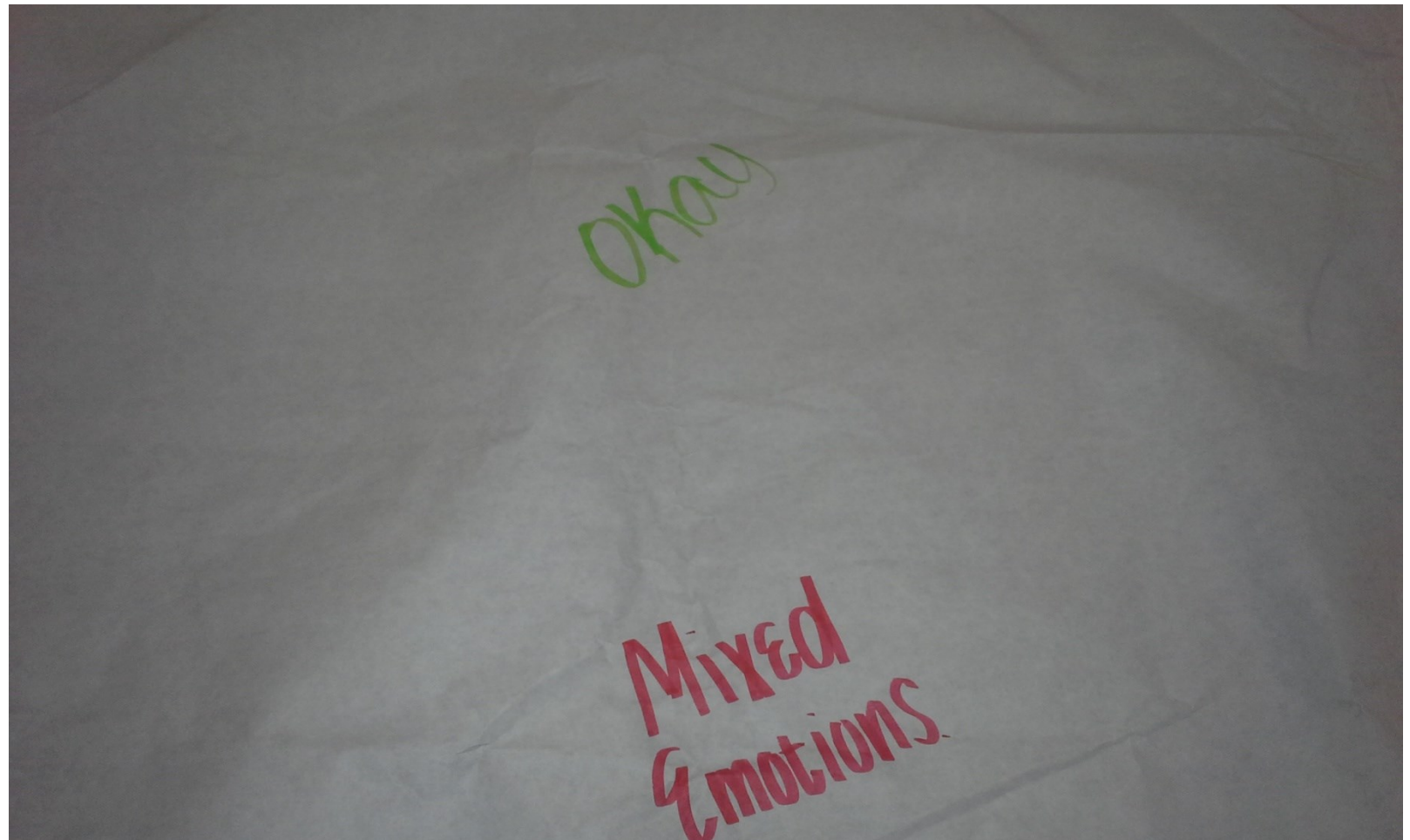
Group Pictures

“Free Association Paper”



Group Pictures

“Free Association Paper”



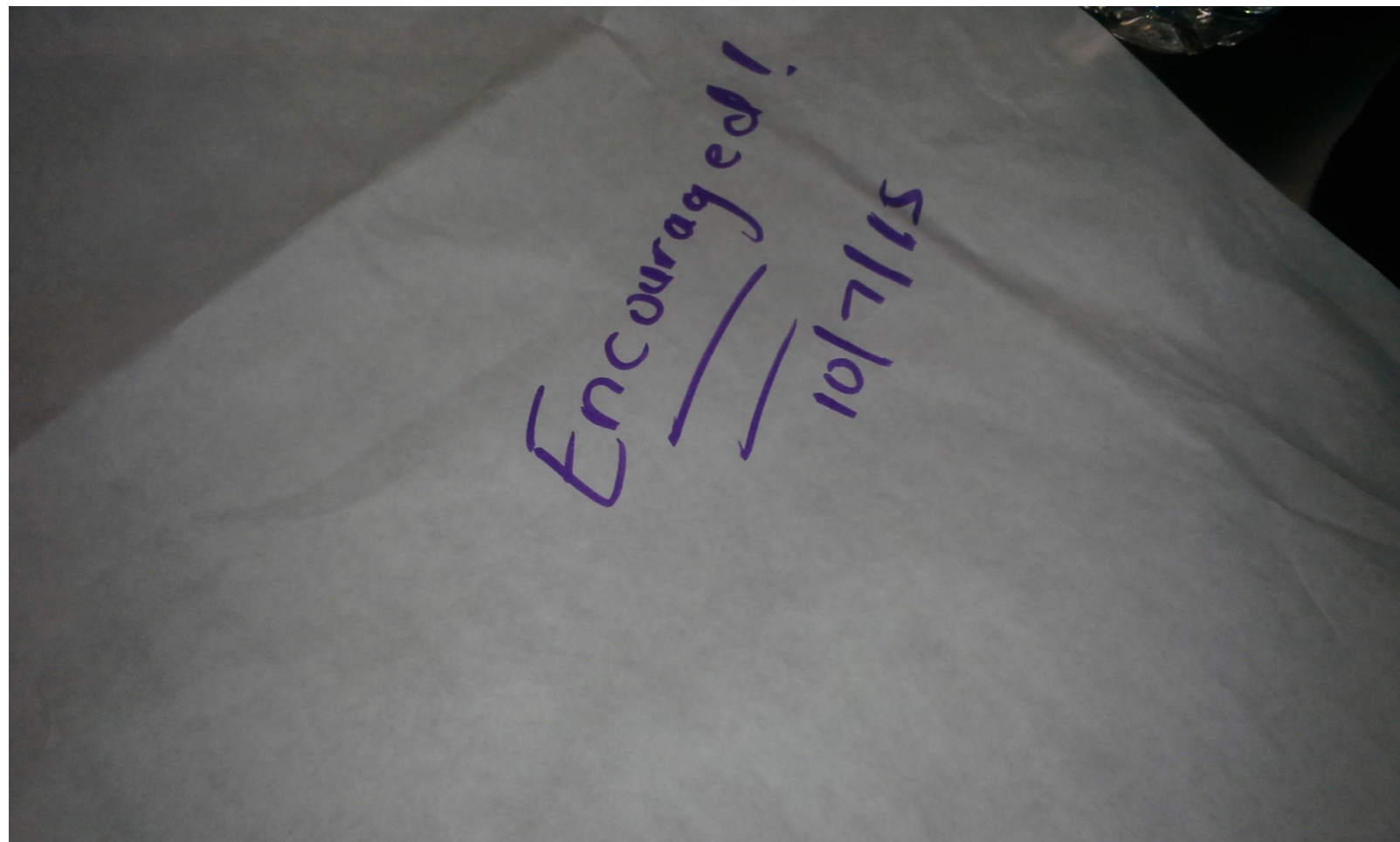
Group Pictures

“Free Association Paper”

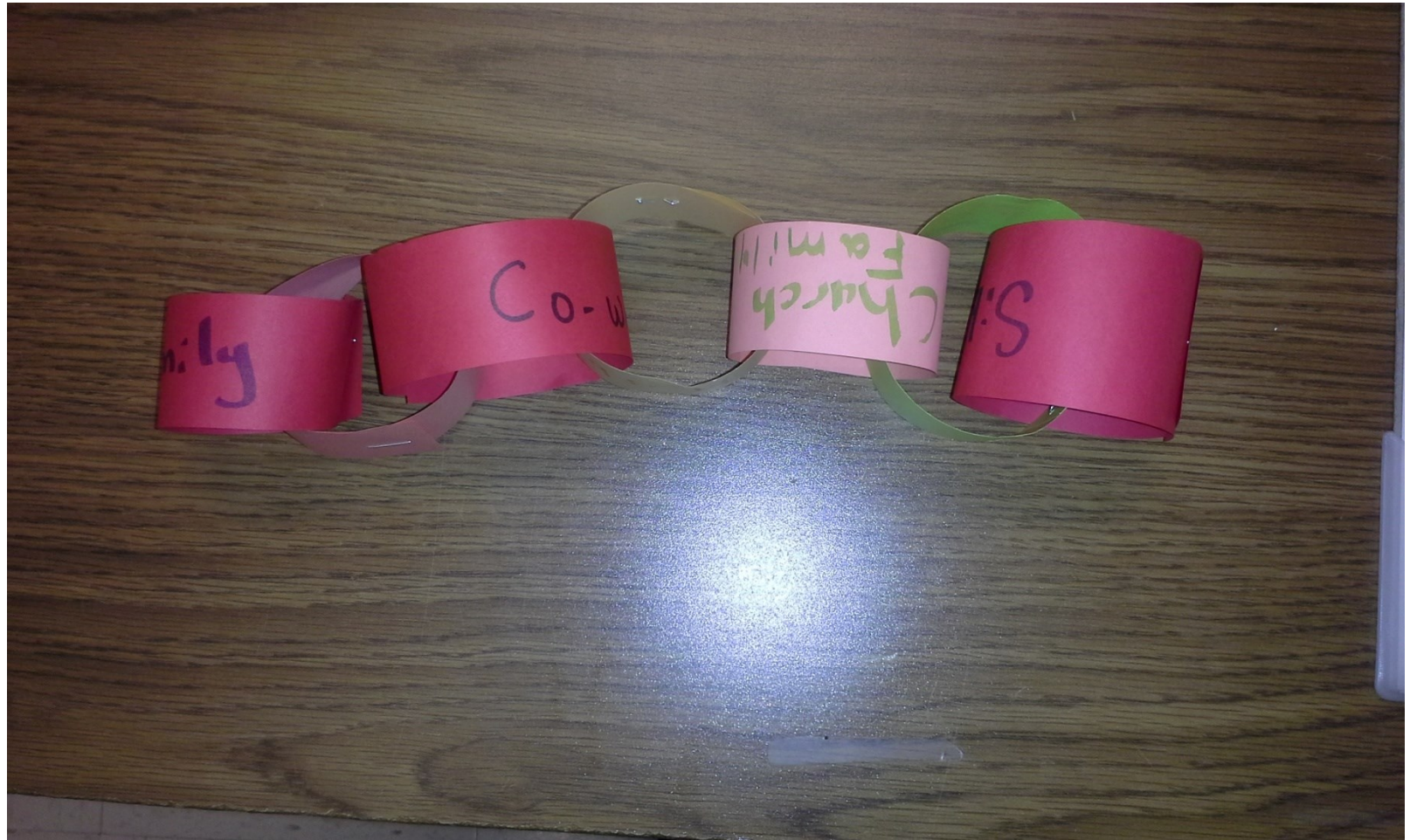


Group Pictures

“Free Association Paper”

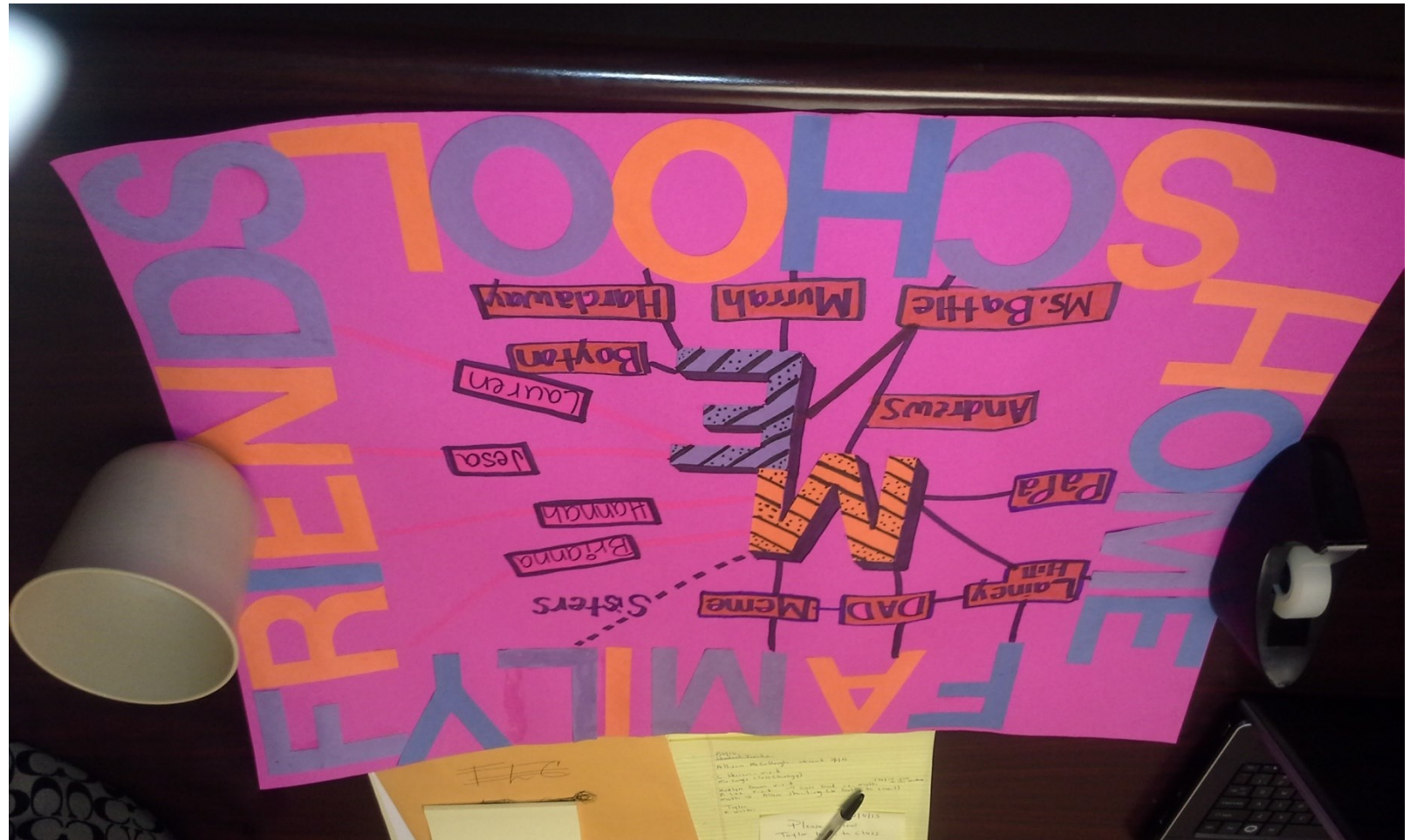


Group Pictures “Support Chain”



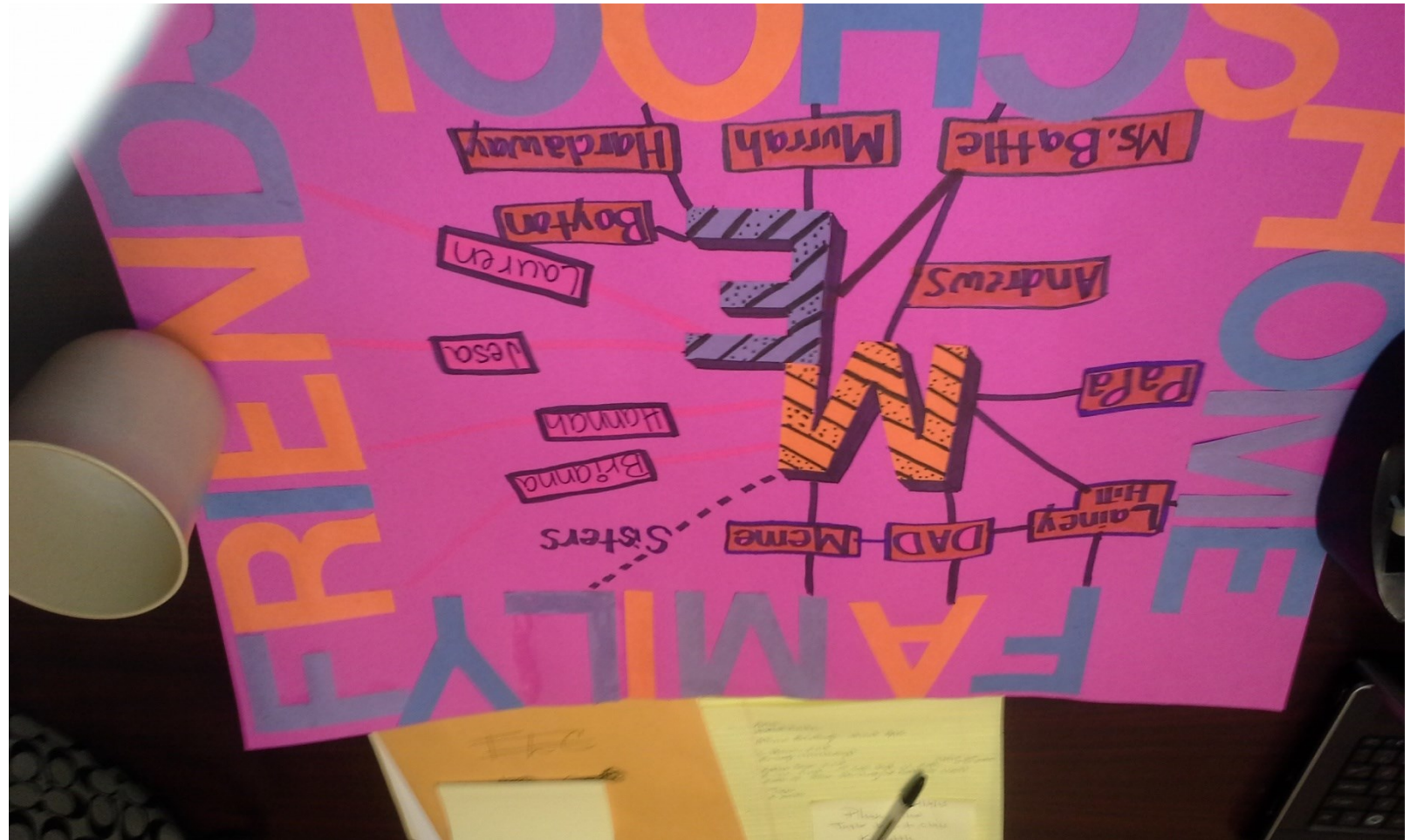
Will Your Name Be Listed????

“Support System Activity”



Will Your Name Be Listed????

“Support System Activity”



Thank You

Remember, **all** youth and young adults can be successful. The key is helping them to find success their own way and in their own time!

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“Success is to be measured not so much by the position one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed”.

Booker T. Washington