The Robert Wood Johnson AIDS Program (RWJAP) has provided psychosocial support and therapeutic groups for children and young adults infected with HIV for over nine years. These groups, led by Gail Burack, Ph.D. and Manuel Castaneda, BA, provide a much needed resource for youth who are often socially isolated and apprehensive about disclosing their diagnosis to others. The support groups allow HIV+ youth to interact with peers who are struggling to meet the challenges of living with HIV. In addition to helping participants deal with their medical condition, the groups focus upon various topics essential to develop appropriate socialization, coping, and daily living skills. To get an idea of the kinds of issues the groups address please read about two patients who have experienced and benefited from the group experience.

**Preteen Group Experience**

The patient is a 10 year old girl who was perinatally infected. She lives with her mother and three siblings and is the only child in the family who has HIV. The patient’s diagnosis was recently disclosed to her during a clinic visit. Upon learning her diagnosis, the patient became upset but asked appropriate questions about HIV/AIDS. Following the time of disclosure, the patient’s mother reported that she seemed to be tearful at home and frequently asked why she was the only child in the family with HIV. She also began to get into trouble in school and began to “forget” to take some of her medication. As part of her multidisciplinary treatment plan, which included medical case management, social work, counseling, and specific medication adherence strategies, the patient was invited to participate in the preteen group. The group provided the patient with the opportunity to meet other children with HIV/AIDS and to share her feelings about HIV. The patient was also able to ask questions relative to her diagnosis, and learn how other group members have dealt with issues such as disclosure of diagnosis to others, tips for taking medication, dealing with side effects, etc. The patient looks forward to coming to group and has formed relationships with the other group participants. She has gained a better understanding of her diagnosis and the need to remain adherent with her treatment. Although she continues to struggle in school, the group provides a forum for her to express and discuss her feelings with her peers.

**Teen/Transition Group Experience**

This group deals with the problems faced by older teens living with HIV/AIDS as well as with the challenges they face in transitioning to adulthood. The group has focused upon many different issues including sexual behavior and relationships, safe sexual practices (“Prevention for Positives”), preparing resumes, interview techniques, self help skills, bereavement, communication with health care professionals, making appropriate vocational choices, and establishing long term goals. The group participants look forward to group meetings and having the opportunity to meet others with HIV/AIDS. This experience reduces their sense of isolation and helps them deal with the challenges of living with HIV/AIDS and the demands of their medical treatment. In the case of one particular patient who is a 17 year old man, the group has also helped him to come to terms with his learning difficulties and to make appropriate vocational decisions. As a result of his group experience, this patient has been able to identify a specific vocational program he would like to attend and has outlined goals to be accepted into this program. He is also performing better in school. Another young man was encouraged by group members to participate in a therapeutic group experience, which helped provide him with additional services and support.

There are approximately 6-8 participants in each group which meet on a monthly basis. These groups are unique to these age groups and this population and have been very effective in providing these children and youth with coping skills for living with HIV. RWJAP provides transportation, as well as meals, to all participants in order to engage them in the group process.