



## Networking Activities

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When developing a network of family support activities and practice, many communities look for ways to start by having some sort of get-together with a relaxed atmosphere that does not intimidate parents. For various reasons, many parents don't seem willing to participate in more structured events such as support groups or trainings as they begin their role as parents of a child with a disability. What seems to be more successful for parents who are entering the system is a casual and relaxed gathering, either for parents or whole families, to meet one another and begin to network.

Networking activities are valuable for parents as a non-threatening, undemanding place to begin to connect with others and learn. With new diagnoses and new parents entering the system all the time, it should remain as one family support strategy communities use in an ongoing way. However, family support teams should take the responsibility to move past this beginning type of activity, and use it as a way to expand to the other elements of family support, not as the only ongoing core family support function.

When approached in this way, networking activities offer tremendous potential as a family support resource tool. Consider these possibilities to ensure that the gatherings are worthwhile and have meaningful outcomes to:

- offer access to pertinent information; brochures, flyers, books, videos
- build a parent database to communicate directly with parents
- provide a needs assessment opportunity; a simple survey or a focus group discussion to find out about their needs
- recruit parents to be part of family support or policy work
- be part of the family support planning subcommittee or the IEIC
- inform or motivate with a speaker
- create linkages by co-sponsoring an event with another group in order to bring older and younger families together

The goal for this kind of event is that parents and families make connections with one another for mutual support and/or have access to information. It is not primarily to entertain, or to provide respite from the children, although those things may certainly happen in a secondary way. Because the family support work of Minnesota's IEICs and family support subcommittees uses public funds, there are rules about its use. Any use of public funds must be fiscally responsible and avoid extravagant spending. Events that are purely recreational or social in nature, with no desired goals or outcomes are not an acceptable use of public funds. It is not acceptable for liquor to be served or paid for at networking activities. If the goal or idea is networking or bringing people together, avoid sponsoring an

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opportunity that doesn't allow people to come together, such as going to the movies or out shopping. Find creative ways to structure the environment of this activity in order to meet these goals.

The key is creating an atmosphere that is relaxed enough that people, through these informal connections, share what is important for them. Once that happens, the group can brainstorm creatively and together develop a plan that invigorates, without draining the energy of those involved.

### **Questions to Guide Planning:**

*Are parents and professionals involved in the planning?*

*What are the specific outcomes we would like to see as a result of this activity?*

*How will we record or document the results of this activity?*

*What proportion of eligible parents do we hope will participate?*

*Who are our partners to strengthen and broaden this effort?*

