



Parent Support Groups

September, 2001

A support group (or self-help group) is a group of people with a common life situation or set of challenges, meeting together to help themselves by sharing their experiences, ideas, frustrations, successes, and hopes. Parents of children with disabilities often find they need to talk with other parents and share concerns and information in a group setting. Some parents find support and comfort in knowing that they are not the only person experiencing a particular problem. Others enjoy the give and take and interaction that occurs in a group. As parents help and learn from one another, a sense of involvement in a group, as well as feelings of encouragement and friendship, can develop.

Parent support groups can provide:

- emotional support, encouragement, and comfort to help themselves and their children
- a chance to communicate openly and effectively
- information and education on related topics and resources available
- a chance to help others while receiving help
- friendship and social opportunities
- advocacy when parents work together for a mutual goal

Support groups can be formed about a specific disability, age, or geographical location. They can be topical, such as coping with change and loss, treatment options, behavior, toileting, communication, or transition. They can be an informational series, such as six weekly sessions regarding local resources or funding options, etc. Support groups may be ongoing or they may be designed for a limited period of time, such as discussing a specific curriculum, or the chapters of a book. Parents may be more willing to attend if they know it will be a short term commitment.

Often creating activities or initiatives occurs with more energy than maintaining them. There is a natural ebb and flow to support groups. The need for them and their ongoing success will vary as time passes. When a group is that is no longer needed or well attended, this does not indicate that it has not been successful. It may simply reveal that something has changed and it is time to try a new approach. There seems to be a life cycle for support groups: after a time many groups lose their vitality. When that happens, let the group die or disband. When it becomes needed again, re-create it.

Consider an alternate name, rather than “support group.” Many people don’t like the term “support group” because it sounds needy. The words “discussion,” “resource,” etc., may not have such a negative image. Sometimes an existing group, like the family support subcommittee, which meets for a specific task, will incidentally become a network and

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Parent Support Groups

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support group for those involved.

Chat rooms or online support groups offer an alternative support system, one that in certain situations may provide a better match of situations due to responsibilities at home and time restraints, geography, or financial restrictions. They also come with their own set of risks, so the user must be aware and take responsibility for that.

Things to Consider in Setting up Your Group:

Self-help does not mean you do it all yourself. Find a few other parents who share an interest in helping to start (not simply joining) a support group. Check what other support groups exist in your area. Make whatever linkages are logical.

1. From the core group, designate a contact person.
2. Find a suitable meeting place and time.
3. Decide how to recruit and how to spread the word.
4. How will it be facilitated — self-facilitated, or from outside the group? If the group will be facilitated by someone within the group, training and facilitator materials may be helpful. Facilitators need a helpful attitude, a sense of accurate empathy, a sense of warmth, affirmation, and positive regard, genuineness, relevance and concreteness.

Core skills as facilitators are:

- structuring-defining what the group is here to do, the purpose, limits, and scope
 - listening
 - linking
 - intervening – avoid excessive negativity, system bashing, domination by one “loudest voice”
 - recognition when a professional referral is appropriate – mental health, chemical dependency
5. Plan the meetings carefully. It can be helpful if the meeting dates are set well in advance, then included on the school or organizational calendar. Decide what kind of support is targeted:
 - emotional
 - esteem
 - informational
 - companionship
 6. Develop ground rules. Some possibilities:
 - Confidentiality - Avoid gossip, agreeing that what is said in the room stays in the room. Encourage trust-building. To build connections,

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Parent Support Groups

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no one should remain nameless or anonymous.

- Nonjudgemental
- Respect those who are speaking
- Avoid side conversations
- Everyone has an opportunity to speak
- End on time

Research on support groups reveals that only 30 percent of the population will choose to join a support group. Attending to the needs of that large a percentage of a group is significant and worthy of the effort, yet it excludes enough people that there are obviously more elements of family support to consider. Other studies conclude that support groups are particularly effective at meeting the needs of white, middle class, well educated women.

Although support groups are just one of a broad range of family support options, they have served an important function for many years around a multitude of topics, and will continue to play an important role in the spectrum of family support .

References:

Hauser-Cram, P., Erickson Warfield, M., and Wyngaarden Krauss, M. 1997. "An Examination of Parent Support Groups: A Range of Purposes, Theories, and Effects." *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy* 6:99-124.

MELD Special, MELD, 219 N. 2nd St., Suite 200, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 332-7563. email: info@meld.org

Starting and Operating Support Groups, A guide for parents. National Resource Center for Family Support Programs, Family Resource Coalition, 200 S. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1520, Chicago, Illinois 60604

Facilitator's Guide to Parent Support Groups, Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health. MN Association for Children's Mental Health (MACMH), 165 Western Avenue, Suite 2, St. Paul, MN 55102, (651)644-7333, www.macmh.org

