



What Style of Group Are You?

September, 2002

As part of Minnesota's Early Intervention system for young children with disabilities and their families, there is clear direction that parents need to be perceived and welcomed as full partners in the decisions that affect the child's programming, as well as in the ongoing development of the system itself. Parents who choose to participate in working on various aspects of the system find that there are many groups that need parent involvement, such as IEICs (Interagency Early Intervention Committees, SEACs (Special Education Advisory Committee, PACs (Parent Advisory Committee), Family Service Collaboratives, as well as other grant funded projects.

This step outside of individual family concerns into more generalized, universal thinking can be very rewarding and can meet personal needs and goals. It can also be confusing and energy draining unless there is adequate information and understanding about the various styles of groups, their function, and the role parents play as part of that group. Depending on the group style, participation in them can feel like an opportunity to make a difference and for growth and learning, or it can seem like an exhausting waste of time.

CONSIDER THESE GROUP STYLES

Participatory. This group style reflects the full partnership model that is the spirit of the Minnesota systems, such as IEICs and Family Service Collaboratives. As a framework for community planning groups, this is a challenging model because it requires ongoing effort and determination.

The model assumes that:

- parents need not initially have the same level of information or skill as those who are professionally trained
- professionals in the system have responsibility to orient and mentor
- parents take responsibility to learn and gain more information, so they function as an informed partner
- parent voice or vote carries equal weight to that of the other members

Administrative. A group that functions administratively may invite parents to participate, but the power to make decisions is in the hands of those in administrative positions. This model occurs fairly often among various interagency efforts and systems in Minnesota.

Parents who participate:

- may have an advisory role with their perspective sought on various topics.
- sometimes feel they have a token role, invited to meetings because the law says so and funding depends on it.
- find their perspective and opinions are largely irrelevant because decision makers are accountable to their own boards.

Activity Based. Working together around a specific activity or event is another type of group opportunity. This style of group that includes a range of options for involvement opportunities for parents is often found in IEIC Family Support Subcommittees.

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This type generally needs the participation of parents in two different ways:

Planners. For a successful outcome, it is essential that parents play a strong role planning any event or activity that is designed for other parents and families, i.e. planning a training or a newsletter. Their guidance:

- keeps the effort grounded and practical for families
- increases the circle of ownership.

Doers. Any successful event also needs the help of those who are willing to help out in small ways without having to take on more responsibility. For example:

- tabulating data in a needs assessment
- helping set up or take down for an event
- helping collate packets of materials.

While it is important that parents have a range of roles that include varying degrees of responsibility, beware of those groups that assume that parents are only capable of performing mundane tasks such as baking brownies, and working on bulletin boards while all the thinking and deciding is left to the more “capable.” That is a disrespectful attitude toward parents and how they may participate.

Also, be aware of the message given by groups that function by simply jumping through the hoops of rules and regulations without holding themselves accountable to uphold the letter and spirit of the law. That leaves the role of parents to be watchdogs who are knowledgeable and vigilant, and results in relationships based on suspicion and lack of trust.

Developing and maintaining genuine parent involvement is one of the biggest challenges reported by groups from all around the state for years. Some say, “We don’t have parents at the table.” Others report parent involvement as a revolving door, with parents coming to the process and then disappearing. Being open and forthright, and perceiving this as a real problem is the beginning of the solution. It is true that everyone’s lives are too busy and complex. It is also true that parents vote with their feet, so no parent involvement is indeed a cause for concern. Groups who want to address this concern may find some hints about the nature of the problem by closely examining the working style of their group and the message it gives to parents.

Questions to consider:

What is the working style of our group?

What message does it give to parents?

What changes would we like to see in that message?

How will we do that?