HOW TO START AND RUN A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

A GUIDE FOR NEWBIES
(OR "OLDIES" NEEDING A REFRESHER)

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Introduction

Casual conversations with key people at different systems of care sites around Oklahoma revealed a shared frustration concerning the development of family peer support groups. The consensus among those we talked with was that support groups for hurting families are valuable. Potentially, they offer families emotional and educational support, a safe place to discuss problems, and an opportunity to build new informal supports.

However, despite the potential values, many sites have difficulty starting and sustaining healthy peer support groups. Attendance is sometimes low and sporadic despite the publicity efforts of providers. Organizers scramble from month to month looking for the "perfect" program for the meetings. In our survey, it was not unusual for organizers to expend numerous "people-hours" each month to design flyers, call families, enlist program leaders, and arrange for childcare only to be disappointed in the turnout.

On the other hand, peer support groups at other sites in the state, appear to be strong month in and month out. Participants are committed to attendance often rearranging their schedule to attend meetings. Participants at these sites take ownership of the meetings and consistently proclaim the importance of group meetings for their lives, their relationships, and their growth.

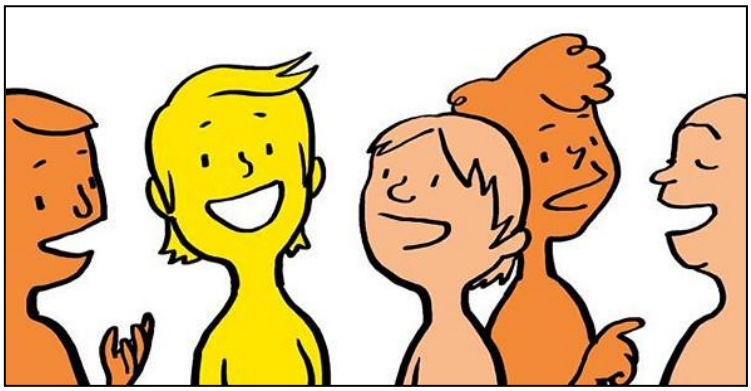
So what's the difference? Why do some support groups struggle while others have consistent vitality? Are there specific key elements we need to build into all groups to make them healthy and if so, what are they? To answer these questions, we turned to a combination of techniques. First, the content of this manual comes from research into family peer support groups in general in order to glean what is working in other places beyond the systems of care context. Second, we believe the experts on peer support groups are those who are actually doing it. Therefore, we took the time to interview individuals in the field in Oklahoma who are trying to build healthy peer support groups—both organizers and family participants.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

One of the things we discovered was that one size does not fit all when it comes to peer support groups. That is, every

community, and every systems of care site, is different. Each has its own unique culture, resources and challenges. For example, a rural area will have different transportation issues than an urban area where the people live in close proximity. A site with enough funds to serve pizza to their families during the meeting every month may have a better response than a site that lacks those funds.

In developing the manual, we've tried to identify those key elements that every peer support group should have to be healthy. However, it has also been our intent to be sensitive to the varied contexts in which each support group is developed. We let you know what other sites are doing. Some of these will be very important—key elements toward which each site should strive. Other ideas, however, will not be mandatory. Rather they will serve as suggestions for something you may want to try if you think it will fit your situation. These ideas may also serve as catalysts for the development of your own new ideas.



Pick and choose. If something fails, don't get discouraged. Instead, try something else until you can find the right combination for your community. The development of a healthy peer support group often takes patience and persistence. Don't give up. It is worth the effort.

What You'll Find in this Manual

The first section, *Why Have a Peer Support Group*, explores the purpose of support groups. Organizers of peer support groups need to believe groups are important and worth the effort. This section will outline six important benefits of having a healthy peer support group. It will also discuss the need for a mission or understanding of what the group is trying to accomplish. Groups that meet with a fuzzy purpose always struggle because participants come with contradictory expectations.

For those who are new to peer support groups, this manual will describe a step-by-step process for organizers to follow. Again, each site will be different. Some steps will come easily while others may take a bit of work.

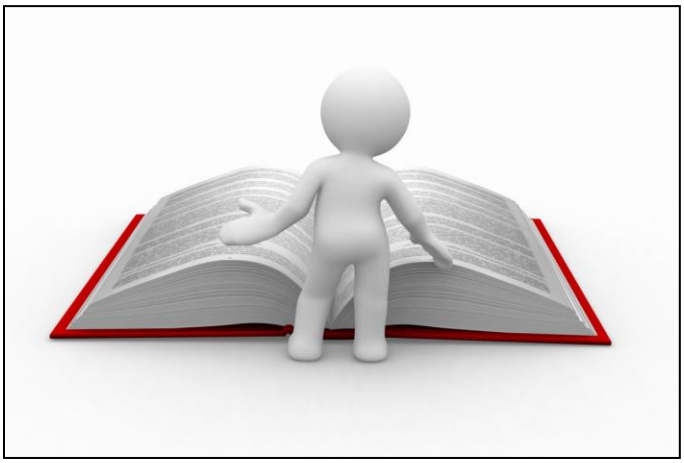
The section on *The First Meeting* addresses the atmosphere and organization of the first meeting as well as specific things the group needs to accomplish at that first meeting.

It's one thing to start a group; it's quite another to sustain it and keep it healthy. The fourth section, *How to Keep Your Existing Peer Support Group Alive and Healthy*, will deal with seven common

challenges peer support groups face in the areas of leadership and group dynamics. Practical helps and ideas will be offered to address these challenges in healthy ways.

A systems of care site can have the best planning for their support group possible. They can have the best organization and programs planned. However, if the person facilitating the meeting doesn't know how to engage the group, listen to their concerns, and pull them into the conversation, the group will not work. *How to Facilitate Your Peer Support Group*, section six, will address these concerns by outlining important skills group facilitators need in order to make your support group work.

What to Talk about at Your Peer Support Group Meetings will focus on the content of meeting sessions. That content will vary greatly depending upon what the group has decided its purpose is and what the specific needs of the participants are at any given time. Content might include a guest speaker/educator to share new information with families. On the other hand, the content of a meeting might focus on building better relationships among group members through interactive exercises intended to build camaraderie and informal friendships. The possibilities are numerous. This section will give specific session ideas that other groups have found to be successful in their setting.



Finally, successful peer support groups will require regular evaluation. Support groups are not static. Each time a new participant joins the group it changes—new needs and ideas are introduced into the system of relationships. That dynamic nature requires continual evaluation and adjustments to make the group stay healthy. The last section of the manual, *How to Evaluate Your Peer Support Group*, will answer questions such as, "What constitutes a healthy support group?" and "How do we know when we are succeeding?" You'll find in this section a simple evaluation checklist tool to visually see the strengths and weaknesses of your efforts.

How to Use the Manual

We have designed this manual to be as user-friendly as possible. It's not likely you will start at the beginning and read every word in order (though a few of you might). More likely, you'll turn first to that section that interests you most. If you want to start a group, then you'll turn to that section. If you're looking for content ideas, you'll probably turn first to the section on *What to Talk About*. That's okay.

However, we urge you not to overlook other important sections that will outline essential issues that every support group must wrestle with regularly. Spend some time thinking through the purpose of your support group by reading *Why Have a Peer Support Group*. Make sure facilitators study the section on facilitation. Finally, every group needs to work through the last section on evaluation. We recommend you do this with other organizers and group participants.

In fact, consider using the entire manual as a resource for a group to work through. When several people are working on a project simultaneously, you have the benefit of new ideas, mutual support, and increased buy-in.

Why Have a Peer Support Group?

At a peer support group, participants shared about their families. Afterwards a single mom said, "I come to these groups because there are people here who understand. Before I came, I felt alone; I didn't think anyone else was having the same difficulties I was having." A grandmother raising her grandchildren said through tears, "I don't know what to do. I need help."

Indeed, isolation and the cries for help are common themes for families trying to raise emotionally and behaviorally challenged children. Their children have special needs that other children don't have. Their children don't respond to typical parenting skills like most other children.

As a result, these parents and grandparents often feel like failures. Other parents, and even teachers, counselors, and other professionals, sometimes treat these parents in condescending fashion. It makes it easy for parents of children with mental health challenges to withdraw from social life in order to protect themselves and their children from hurtful comments. Sometimes they begin to believe those suggestions that they are not fit parents.

Thus, the need for peer support groups is huge. They provide hurting parents with support and help. They offer a place to socialize and break the barriers of isolation.

In that same group meeting mentioned earlier, the participants developed a profile of things their families had in common. The list included:

- Children with mental health diagnoses
- Children on medications
- Children on Individual Education Plans (IEPs)
- Children involved in systems like the Office of Juvenile Affairs (OJA) or the Child Welfare division of the Department of Human Resources (DHS).
- Children with defiance issues
- Children with inappropriate sexual or social behavior
- Children that use alcohol or drugs
- Children with psychiatric hospitalizations

Not every family shared all these characteristics, but there was enough overlap to include them on the list. The joint cry from all the participants was, "I need help." How do I parent this kind of child? What do I do when my children lie, steal, runaway, take drugs, abuse their siblings, cut on themselves, or start fires? These are complex issues generated by complex needs within individual children and within stressed families.

When parents take the risk of telling their story, other parents can nod their heads and say, "I've experienced that, too."

These families need support groups that help them deal with their real issues in ways that other support groups may not be able to help. These parents need a place to come and share openly where people understand and don't judge them harshly.

Important Benefits of Support Groups

Support groups developed for families with special needs, as the ones described above, are unique in the needs and families they address. Despite, their uniqueness, however, they share some important benefits with other support groups.

1. Peer support groups provide participants the recognition that they are not alone. When my child was young and began acting out in unexpected and sometimes bizarre ways, I didn't know where to turn. He was not acting like other "normal" children. At first, I felt guilt, shame and frustration. Over time, however, I began to hear from other parents with children like mine that acted out in behaviorally unacceptable ways. Then a light went on in my head—I am not alone. Others deal with similar issues. That insight was freeing beyond explanation. Although I still dealt with guilt and frustration, I no longer felt burdened. It was no longer so oppressive that I could not function. I was able to accept where my child was and where I was and begin the process of small steps toward health for our entire family.

When parents take the risk of telling their story, other parents can nod their heads and say, "I've experienced that, too." The result is that everyone's experiences begin to feel validated. With great relief, participants begin to think they are normal after all, that their problems are not unusual or exaggerated.

2. Peer support groups provide participants with mutual support. The issues surrounding children and youth with mental health issues are so complex that many families fragment. I've heard parents share how they are no longer welcome in their own parents' home because of the

destruction their child has caused. Others have talked about how their former spouse refuses to have anything to do with the children. It's not uncommon to hear stories of neighbors or even churches that tell parents not to bring their "problem child" back.

As a result, the parents left raising these children and youth desperately need support. Peer support group meetings give parents the opportunity to offer and receive empathy, acceptance, encouragement, hope, genuine concern and caring that they may not receive anywhere else. This emotional support gives parents strength to continue the Herculean efforts necessary to raise their children.

In a healthy peer support group, this support often goes beyond emotional support to physical support. A parent having a transportation issue during the week may call a fellow support group member with whom she has built a relationship for help. Families in the wraparound process sometimes ask support group members to be on their family teams. These support group members become surrogate family members investing themselves in others' lives.

3. Peer support groups offer a safe place for disclosure. Sometimes parents are afraid of counseling or group sharing settings because they "don't want anyone to know their business." Our culture tells us that if we need help, we have somehow failed. In a recent group session of my own, I admitted, with great difficulty I might add, that it was hard to share my personal failings because of some internal voice that tells me that people with problems are weak. This voice is so strong and common that even those of us who know better still wrestle with it regularly. The facilitator reminded me in his gentle, caring way that "sharing weakness and failure is a sign of tremendous strength."

Families dealing with troubled children and teens need a safe place to share their weakness and failures. Voicing them is a sign of great strength and a huge step toward resolution. In a setting with other parents who have gone through similar experiences, there is no fear of judgment or condemnation. Rather the opposite occurs. Parents are encouraged, validated, and even praised for their efforts. Disclosure opens the door for understanding.

4. Peer support groups empower personal responsibility. Boundary issues are often difficult for parents, particularly if they are raising difficult children. Two extremes tend to occur. First, some parents throw up their hands and take a victim approach. They think, "This is the way things are and nothing I do is going to change it, so why bother." These individuals look for places to lay blame for

the family's problems on events, circumstances, or people other than themselves. There is a lot of blame going on in these families.

At the other extreme are parents who take responsibility for everything. They start thinking everything is their fault. They may play the "if only" game. "If only I had done something different, our family wouldn't be in this mess. If only I had acted sooner, I could have prevented my child's problem." When their child acts out at school, they blame themselves. When their teen runs away from home, they look for the problem in themselves first.

Neither of these extremes is healthy. Parents need to learn to develop healthy boundaries, to accept responsibility that is theirs, and give to others the responsibility that belongs to them. Peer support groups help members differentiate between what is their responsibility and what belongs to others. Clear boundaries are essential not only for taking charge of one's life, but also for good self-care.

5. Peer support groups help participants develop new skills. At one support group meeting a parent said, "I read all these books on parenting and some of the techniques sound like really good ideas. So I try them on my child. They usually work for the first couple of times. Then they stop working. I need something that is going to work more consistently." Other parents shared similar experiences. Out of that discussion came the decision to spend some time in future sessions talking about techniques that might be more productive with children dealing with behavioral and emotional health challenges.

Parents want new skills that will help them be more successful. Mutual conversations around a table with like-minded parents offer that possibility. One month it might be new parenting techniques. Other months the skills may be more about handling internal emotions or rebuilding relationships with estranged family members or drawing clear boundaries. Between sessions, participants can "try out" their new skills, then come back and talk about their successes or failures in a safe place.

6. Peer support groups provide information for participants. Sometimes family members simply need new information to make their tasks easier. At one point in our parenting journey, my wife and I were part of a support group that helped families with teens dealing with drug issues. We had several informative meetings where experts shared with us about the different kinds of drugs popular at the time, how to recognize them if we saw them, and even typical hiding places teens use. At other meetings individuals shared

about counseling and rehab facilities we would not have known about otherwise. Sometimes parents just need information.

It's important to note here that if organizers are not careful, support groups can turn into nothing more than education/information sessions where the "expert of the month" speaks to participants. Unfortunately, these sessions have the undesired result of silencing the voices of participants. Attendees become passive, listen to the expert talk, and leave without ever engaging in meaningful conversation. At the same time, information is important. Therefore, organizers and facilitators must work hard at incorporating information into an ongoing opportunity for sharing, discussion, and personal storytelling.

The first key element of a healthy peer support group is a purpose statement that gives organizers and families clear direction for the group.

Developing Your Purpose Statement

The first key element of a healthy peer support group is a purpose statement that gives organizers and families clear direction for the group. It is the answer to the question, "What are we trying to accomplish?"

Family members come to support groups with many different expectations. They form these expectations from previous experiences with support groups, personal needs, and things they've heard from others. It's impossible for organizers to meet all these needs simultaneously. The target is too fuzzy and keeps on shifting. However, with a clear purpose statement that is publicized and reviewed frequently, groups can stay focused and consistently meet the needs of every participant.

In the last session of this manual, we will talk about evaluation. For now, know that a clear, concise purpose statement is the driving force behind good evaluation. Evaluation involves asking the question, "Are we accomplishing what we set out to accomplish?" If we don't know what we've set out to accomplish, then evaluation is impossible.

Creating Your Purpose

- ☐ Listen to your group members or potential group members to hear what they want to get from the group. Allow them to voice their expectations and hopes for the group.

- ☐ Review the six benefits listed in this section with the group. Write them on a sheet of paper and ask members to rank-order them according to how important each is to them. Try to come to some consensus in the group.

- ☐ Identify the top three or four most important outcomes you and your group want to see happen consistently each month. List them here.

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- ☐ Using the key elements listed above, create a short statement that incorporates the essence of these elements. Resist the urge to make your purpose statement long and elaborate. If you do, no one will remember it or care about its existence. Make your statement thirty words or less. Use active words to give it life. Write your group's statement below.

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- ☐ Check your purpose statement with the support group and get their approval. Talk about what it means so that everyone is clear. If the group suggests revisions listen to them; it is their group.

How to Start a Peer Support Group

A support group starts as a seed planted in the minds of a few people, and it can grow to a mighty forest of strength and support for the families in your community. It begins when a few individuals plant the seed of an idea to others and talk enthusiastically about the benefits as discussed in the last section.

When you begin to talk about the possibility of a peer support group in your area, you'll be surprised how many people say, "Oh, we need that!" or "I know of a family that would love that." "Talking it up" is not a specific step outlined here, but it is an underlying current that must become part of your normal conversation from the very beginning. Unless there are advocates for the support group, it will never happen.

There are nine specific steps you can take to start your group. These have been gleaned from a vast amount of literature about support groups. More importantly, these are steps other Systems of Care sites have used successfully in the past.

At the end of this chapter, you'll find a helpful checklist for starting a group that incorporates the ideas found in these nine steps. Refer to the checklist often to remind yourself what needs to be done next.

Step One: Make the decision

The most successful startups take the time to educate, inform, and get the full support of others in their community. First, this means gaining a strong commitment from the Systems of Care host agency. The host agency is the organization responsible for managing the wraparound staff and funding. As such, it will often be contributing personnel as well as financial assistance to your support group endeavor. Every host agency of a successful support group mentioned the importance of their commitment as a key ingredient. Support for the group must begin with the systems of care project director and be realized in every care coordinator, peer support provider, and behavioral health aid working with wraparound families.

As important as host agency is, the support must go beyond that to the local systems of care coalition. Typically, this means making a presentation at your monthly team meeting. You can use the

information in this manual as part of your pitch. Another possibility is to enlist family members from established groups in neighboring communities who would be willing to share their positive experiences to your coalition.

Securing community support is more than getting a vote to proceed. You want coalition members to commit ongoing support. For example, you will want them to invite families they know and work with. You may ask some of the professionals on your coalition to be a guest speaker or provide resources for the group.

Finally, making the decision to have a peer support group in your community necessitates a discussion about finances. From where is the money going to come? Although the cost for a support group can be minimal, there will be costs. For example, you might be paying for food, supplies, childcare workers, and employee time to plan and organize. The most successful groups make the peer support group a high priority in their systems of care budget.

If the systems of care host agency doesn't have the budgetary resources, it's up to the community team or other organizers to be creative in securing the necessary funds. Other ideas include fund raising events, asking for monetary donations, and securing donations of food and supplies. This, obviously, takes effort, but can be rewarding.

Step Two: Designate initial organizers

One person can organize and promote a new peer support group, but that is not the ideal. It can be a great deal of work for one person. In addition, family members and others may view the group as belonging to the original promoter thus making it more difficult to transfer ownership of the group to its members.

Whatever the makeup of the original planning team, family members must be involved. From the outset, you need family input into the purpose and organization of the group. In addition, when family members are involved from the beginning, they feel immediate ownership of the group. Professionals on your community team might know a family or two they could help recruit for this task.

Another logical candidate for this start-up team is a wraparound family support provider. By nature of this position, these individuals typically understand the struggles of families based on first-hand experience. They are family support providers because they can relate to families with complex needs.

The rest of the planning team should be made up of interested individuals, people with a passion for this way of serving families. For example, in one coalition I

attended, a school counselor volunteered for this organizing team because she understood the need and wanted to help.

One of the most common mistakes in family group organization is for the community professionals to plan and organize the group ***for*** the families rather than ***with*** the families. When that happens, family members attend with the expectation that this is one more service to be provided for them over which they have little input. Of all places, the value of family voice must be held highest here. Peer support providers and other professionals can aid in organization, give support, and share ideas but ultimately, the group needs to belong to the families. Make sure they are a vital part of the early organization and decision-making process.

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Step Three: Make basic decisions

When the organizing team meets, they should lay out a timeline and make the following important decisions. Make sure to give plenty of time to prepare for the first support group meeting.

1. **What will be the purpose of the group?** Spend some time studying the second session of this manual on *"Why Have a Systems of Care Peer Support Group."* Poll some potential family members that might attend the group and complete the exercise, "Creating Your Purpose," located at the end of the previous chapter.

2. **Who will the target audience be?** Some systems of care sites limit their target audience to those families currently in wraparound and wraparound graduates. Others open the group to anyone in the community who have children with complex emotional and behavioral needs. Some start with a limited audience (such as wraparound families) to begin with in order to target their publicity and work out the kinks in the group before expanding to a larger audience.

   My personal feeling on this is that systems of care is larger than wraparound. The wraparound families clearly have specific needs, but there are numerous other families in the community that can benefit from a peer support group as well.

   Be careful, however, about making the target audience too broad. If, for example, all families in the community are invited then the needs of those with severe emotionally and behaviorally problematic children may not be addressed sufficiently.

3. **When will the group meet?** Most groups meet on a weeknight once a month, but you are not confined to that alternative. I know of one group, for example that meets once a month for a late breakfast. These particular family members don't work in the morning and their children are in school during this time. It provides a perfect opportunity for them to spend time together.

Another consideration is whether or not you

are going to have a meal (see "food" below). If you decide to meet around a meal the meeting may begin at 6:00 or 630 p.m. If you are not going to have a meal, you may want to start a bit later so families will have time to eat before they come. Don't make the meeting end too late, however, because families need to maintain the structure of regular bedtimes for their children.

It is possible for a group to meet more than once a month. My wife and I were members of a group a few years ago that met twice a month. The first meeting each month was given to relationship building and sharing of problems. The second meeting typically had a speaker and the focus was educational. We'll talk more about meeting content later.

4. **How long will the meeting last?** The length of the meeting is entirely up to the group. Factors to consider include availability of the room, childcare costs, and schedules of families. Typically, a support group will last one to two hours. Those scheduling 1½ to 2 hours typically have a meal or snack that takes some of the time, but also gives opportunity for informal conversation during the meeting.

Whatever you set as the time parameters, stick to them. Families will make their plans based on the times you advertise. If you go over the designated time, family members start looking at their watches and losing interest, childcare workers become agitated, and you as organizers lose trust points with the families. One of the reasons my wife and I stopped attending the group I mentioned earlier is that they had no set ending time. Sometimes the meeting would go for three hours—way too long for my needs.

5. **What will you call the group?** The obvious answer to this question is "Peer Support Group." That relays the essence of the group for publicity purposes. However, it may not relay the specific target audience you are after. Similarly, some families feel

"support group" has a negative connotation. As a result, your planning team may want to explore other alternatives. One community, for example, calls their group a "Family Network." Another calls theirs a "Family CareNet." Whatever you call it, don't make it too long or complicated. On the other hand, make sure it conveys the purpose of the group in some fashion.

Step Four: Find a location

While interviewing people involved in successful support groups for this manual, I asked the question, "What is the most important element to consider in starting a group?" Several surprised me by responding with, "location, location, location." When I pressed further, they elaborated.

You need a place, they said, that is convenient for family members. It should be consistent, so family members don't forget from one month to the next where they are meeting. It needs to be centrally located. One systems of care site that covers three counties began their family group in the county where most of their wraparound families live. As they expand their services, they plan on beginning additional groups in the other counties. Another group in a big city holds their meeting on a bus line that is convenient for families.

You also need a place that can accommodate your families well in an undistracted environment. I attended a meeting once that was held in a private room of a restaurant. Unfortunately, there weren't any doors to close the room off from the larger restaurant and the room was situated next to the kitchen where waitresses and kitchen staff continually talked and banged pots. I noticed several group participants looking out the door at the commotion throughout the meeting.

The most important thing to consider about location, however, is childcare facilities. There are many places that will provide a room for adults to meet, but far fewer have additional rooms where children can burn off their excess energy. If families feel cramped in their meeting space or children complain to their parents about inadequate room, the families are not likely to continue coming.

Where should you have your meeting? Ask your families or coalition members for ideas. Several heads working together on

this challenge is always better than one or two. Here are some suggestions others have used.

- Community center
- Church
- Synagogue
- School
- Private room in a restaurant

- Library
- Social service agency

The important thing is to know what you're looking for and keep searching until you find it. Also, don't be afraid to think creatively. One group started their meetings in a local park where the children had room to play. The obvious downside to this is the frustration of bad weather. Another group met for a long time at a local indoor children's play area that had a private room for parties. They rented the room each month and had a great place for children to spend an hour (under adult supervision, of course).

Here are some places you might want to avoid.

- **"Toxic" places.** These are locations that make people feel uncomfortable because of negative connotations that place might have for them.
- **Public places.** Several groups do meet in public places like restaurants, but most of them have secured a private room where group members can talk freely.
- **Places that cost the family members money.** I attended a group meeting in a private room at a fairly expensive restaurant once and felt uncomfortable because the expectation of purchasing a meal was uncertain. As it turned out, some group members ate and others who couldn't afford it, didn't.

- **Places with fixed seating.** Groups should have the freedom to move chairs into a circle if they choose. Often, fixed seating places chairs in rows that force participants to look at the back of someone's head rather than face-to-face.

Step Five: Provide Childcare

Unless your group meets at a time when children are in school or being taken care of by some other existing service, you need to provide childcare. Peer support groups are for families. It must not be a burden for a parent to attend a meeting. Nor should only one spouse get to come because the other needs to stay home and watch the children. If you don't provide quality childcare, it's not likely your group will survive.

The question is, "How do you do this?" There are basically three approaches to childcare. First, it can be a supervised time of play for the children. If your group meeting is at a community center or church with a large play area and gym for the children, this may be the direction you take. Second, the childcare can be highly structured with learning centers, crafts, and

structured play. If your space is limited and you have staff skilled in these areas, this is a great option as well. The third possibility is a combination of these two. The structured time is an opportunity to teach the children in fun ways and keep them from becoming too rowdy. The playtime means less preparation for workers and an opportunity for the children to enjoy themselves and each other. If children are having fun, they will want to come; thus, their parents will be more likely to come as well.

You can see now more clearly the importance of location for your group. If your space for children is limited and there is not sufficient structure and planned activities, the children can quickly get out of control in the cramped space. On the other hand, if children have large spaces to play without sufficient supervision, it could become a dangerous situation.

Finding qualified childcare workers is often a difficulty. Many systems of care sites use their professional staff to care for the children while the adults meet. Care Coordinators, Peer support Providers, and Project Directors all pitch in to help because they are committed to the families they serve. The downside to that, of course, is that these individuals are often overworked as it is.

Some groups use family group members to care for the children on a rotating schedule. These parents are very familiar with the difficult emotional needs of these children because they deal with similar problems in their own homes every day. The problem with this solution is that a family member you were counting on to watch children may not show up that month leaving you without sufficient childcare.

Some groups look beyond their families and the staff that serve these families and hire regular childcare workers. Possibilities include students from the local college working toward a social work degree or childcare workers from daycares or churches that are looking for a little extra money,

Step Six: Plan for food

Here's another decision you'll need to make along the way. Some of the people we interviewed for this manual were insistent about food. They said, "You **must** provide a meal for the parents if you want good attendance." It becomes a great incentive to come to the meeting. Parents don't have to prepare the meal that night. Plus, they get a free meal for their family which helps greatly on the tight budgets that many families live on.

If you choose to provide a meal for the parents and children, it can be as simple as pizza or sandwiches from a local deli. Other sites provide a restaurant meal

like a buffet or an entrée chosen ahead of time so that the cost is contained. Another option is to provide part of the meal, such as the meat, and ask family members to each bring something like chips, drinks, bread, etc. That way, families share the responsibility for the meal without it being too burdensome. If you take this route, it will require more coordination and follow-up to make sure family members bring their assigned contributions.

The other side of the food argument is that it costs too much for some sites to feed families every month, and the funds simply may not be available. In that case, several groups offer light refreshments for the parents and children—things like cookies, chips, and soft drinks. Again, family members can help by bringing something to share.

The meal proponents I talked to said you should provide a meal even if the funds aren't there. That's how important it is. This means being creative and doing things like asking local restaurants or grocery stores for donations. Another option would be a hotdog cookout. Hot dogs and chips can go a long way. Meal proponents also said project directors should work toward making food a priority in next year's systems of care budget.

Step Seven: Decide on content of your first meeting

You can begin your group in a high-profile or a low-profile manner. In the high-profile approach, you will want to decide on an important topic that would attract many families in your community. Then, enlist a highly qualified facilitator to lead this discussion. The hope is that the interesting, well-publicized topic will attract families.

In this approach, the first meeting will focus primarily on the advertised topic. After the presentation, the group organizers should talk briefly about the desire to begin an ongoing group that meets the needs of families with children dealing with emotional and behavioral issues.

In a low-profile approach, the first meeting will be more of an organizational meeting rather than an informational meeting. Those who attend will get down to the business of talking about the importance of a support group, what they would like to see happen in a support group, and how the group might proceed in developing one.

Both approaches are legitimate ways to begin a group. If you start in a high-profile way, you may have many people attend the initial meeting because they are drawn to the topic. All of these will not be interested in attending a support group regularly, so your attendance at subsequent meetings may not be as great. Be prepared for a let-

down as attendees decide whether they will "buy in" to a regular group.

Step Eight: Publicize the initial meeting

People need to know about your meeting in order to attend. That sounds obvious, but many times we assume people know when they don't. Proper publicity is a necessity.

At least a couple of weeks before the first meeting, flyers about the meeting should be distributed to as many places as possible where families with emotional and behaviorally challenged children might be. Make several copies of your flyer and give them to community team members to share with families they know. Hand deliver flyers to school counselors, counseling centers, psychiatrist offices, and other places these families frequent. Sometimes local newspapers have a list of community events. You can list the pertinent information about your group there.

After the group is established you might want to produce a nicer brochure, but for now the important thing is to get the information out. The flyer should be simple and informative. If you make it too busy with graphics and excessive words, readers may miss the main point. Include the name of the group, the target audience, time, place, and other information like childcare and meal arrangement. Include a phone number and a contact name.

Peer support Group Meeting

For families facing the challenges of raising children with complex emotional and behavioral needs

Tuesday
June 2, 2020
6:30 – 8:00 p.m.

Wilson Community Center
9317 West 3rd. St

Childcare and meal provided
Call Nancy at 555-5555 for more information

Try not to advertise this first meeting as an "organizational meeting" even though it may be that in many ways. For most people, however, "organizational meeting" carries a negative connotation. Personally, I avoid those meetings like the plague because I'm afraid they'll ask me to do something simply because I showed up.

If you're concerned that you will not know how many people to prepare for, you might put a note on the flyer to call for food and childcare reservations. However, many people will not take the time to make that phone call.

Step Nine: Recruit for the initial meeting

The public announcement of the meeting is not why most attendees will come. You may get a few with the flyers, but most initial group members will come through personal invitation. People will come to the peer support group when they are invited by someone they know and trust. This may be another family member, a teacher, a caseworker, a family support provider, a behavioral health aid, or someone else they've come to trust.

One plan that worked well for one site included sending letters of invitation to both graduated and current systems of care wraparound families. The letters were followed up with personal phone calls the day before the meeting with the excuse of needing to know how much food to provide.

Care coordinators and peer support providers can also hand a flyer to families personally when they meet with them for family team meetings. Urging from the wraparound team goes a long way toward getting families there.

This is where other community team members can have an active part in the group's success as well. Many community team members have contact with families everyday that would benefit from such a group. They, too, can hand a flyer directly to a family and urge them to attend. Remind your community team members of their prior commitment to support the group and encourage them to recruit families.

Finally, family members involved in the early decision-making process know other families they can invite. Full ownership of the group comes easier when family members are involved in recruitment of members. Personal contact is the key. The more personal contact you have with potential family members, the better off the group will be.

Even with all the publicity and recruitment, organizers need to have realistic expectations about the first meeting. There may only be a few family members present. That's okay. Do not get discouraged. Those who show up have demonstrated a deep need in their lives and

have taken a large risk. Affirm them and rejoice in this positive step. You only need a core group of committed families to make a support group work. Once a strong foundation is built, it can grow.

CHECKLIST FOR STARTING A GROUP

Activity	Date Completed
❑ Secure host agency support	_____
❑ Secure Coalition support	_____
❑ Decide how the group will be financed	_____
❑ Develop a planning team	_____
❑ Decide on the group's purpose	_____
❑ Decide on the group's target audience	_____
❑ Decide on when and how often the group will meet	_____
❑ Decide on the length of group meetings	_____
❑ Decide on what to call the group	_____
❑ Locate a place for the group to meet	_____
❑ Arrange for childcare	_____
❑ Arrange for food	_____
❑ Decide on the content of the first meeting	_____
❑ Publicize the first meeting	_____
❑ Recruit participants for the initial meeting	_____

The First Meeting

As the first meeting of your family group approaches, you may be both excited and apprehensive. Seeing the carefully laid work come to fruition is exciting. In addition, anticipating the families that will be helped by this effort is gratifying. On the other hand, you may also feel nervous about how the first event will go. You may ask yourself, "Will anyone show up? Did I cover all the details?"

My response is one simple word—***RELAX***. If you have properly laid the foundation by following the suggestions in this manual, there is nothing more for you to do. You may have many families attend the first meeting or you may have a small number. However many attends, rejoice in their presence knowing that you have begun. Most groups don't start with large numbers of families. That's okay. They begin with a few families who are seeking help. When they find a safe place where they can share their struggles and learn new important things that will help their children, they will tell others. Your best publicity will come through word of mouth.

The first evening, your major task is to make sure those that attend find something worthwhile so they will want to come back. This chapter contains specific actions you can do to assure success for your first meeting. Like the last chapter, this chapter also contains a quick checklist at then end to help you remember all the small details.

Action One: Arrive early

As organizer of the group, you need to arrive at least 30 minutes early to make sure the room is open and ready for attendees. Prior to arriving, you should have made arrangements regarding access to the building, temperature controls, and light switches. Once you arrive, check the room temperature to assure it is at a comfortable level. Set up the room so that those attending can sit around a table or at least be able to see the faces of other attendees. If you have nametags, place them on the table or be prepared to hand them to family members as they enter. Prepare the snacks or food so that they are easily accessible. Make sure your childcare workers are in place and ready to receive children.

Action Two:
Act as host

Greet the family members as they arrive. Your task this first evening is to do everything you can to make all who attend feel welcome and relaxed. Show them where the childcare rooms are so they can hand off their children. Introduce them to each other. Instruct them to make a nametag so that everyone can know who they are. Most people have difficulty walking into a strange place where they may not know anyone in attendance. Assure them they are in the correct place and you are thrilled to have them.

Action Three:
Develop an agenda ahead of time

Knowing exactly what you want to accomplish this first meeting is very important. Developing a written agenda helps keep you and the group on target. However, you also need to be flexible enough to allow participants to speak freely. Remember, although you may be the group organizer, the group belongs to the members. Listen carefully to what they say. In addition, you don't want to be so rigid that you take all the fun out of the meeting. This first meeting needs to be fun and relaxed. If you focus too much on business and not enough on helping members connect, you will discourage people from returning. A typical agenda for the first meeting may look like this:

1. Greet and eat (20 min.)
2. Open the meeting (3 min.)
3. Introduce participants (10 min.)
4. Discuss family group purpose (45 min.)
5. Business (10 min.)
6. Close the meeting (2 min.)

1. Greet and eat. As participants arrive show them where the food is. Ask them to sign in if they want. This should be voluntary. Some participants may be reluctant to share anything until you have built trust with them. Be friendly and tell each person how happy you are they chose to attend. To keep early arrivers busy while waiting on others, you may want to have participants do a small paper and pencil activity or non-threatening "getting to know you" activity.

2. Open the meeting. Call the meeting to order. Develop early the habit of starting the meeting on time. Participants will adapt their arrival times to how precise you are in starting meetings. Tell everyone how happy you are they are attending this first meeting. If only a few people show up, focus on the positive. Don't talk about how many didn't show up. Let those who came know they have made a good decision to attend.

3. Introduce participants. Never force anyone to participant in a formal introduction, but always give the opportunity. I like to have members share

their name, a little about their family, and

something positive. I have had members tell a fond memory from their childhood. Then I talked briefly about how our children are developing fond memories themselves. At other times, I've asked participants to share one positive thing that happened in their child's life this week. There will be plenty of time to talk about negative issues later, but I want to set the tone that our children are more than their diagnoses and problems. They have strengths and dreams of their own.

4. Discuss family group purpose. This part of the agenda will take most of the meeting time. See the section below titled "Discuss important topics" for a full discussion about what to include in this section of the meeting.

5. Business. If there is any business to discuss, this is the time to do that. During the first meeting, the business may be nothing more than announcements like when the next meeting is. However, this section could involve other business like deciding who will be responsible for food next time or who will type up the list of names of the people present for distribution. The more you involve participants, the quicker they will take ownership of the group. Throughout the evening, look for ways to involve participants. At the end of a recent start-up meeting I attended, one of the participants volunteered to contact local businesses for donations for the group. That's great.

Set the tone that our children are more than their diagnoses and problems. They have strengths and dreams of their own.

6. Close the meeting. End the meeting on time. Thank everyone for coming and remind them of the next meeting date. Mention what you will talk about at the next meeting and encourage them to come back. Some family members may want to stand around and talk. Encourage this relationship building if it happens and resist the urge to hurry them out the door. They are building important friendships that will become the foundation for the group.

Action Four: Encourage family voice

I believe the first meeting needs to have a good mixture of information sharing and personal sharing. That is, you will want to talk about the purpose of the family group as you and other organizers have envisioned it. You will want to begin outlining guidelines for the group and perhaps discussing future agendas. You might want to discuss how you will be organized as a group or who will do what. If you stand in front of the group and share all this information, you will never get participant engagement.

That's why it is important that you build into your agenda activities that will involve group participation. For example, at a recent meeting I divided the participants into two groups and gave each group a pad of sticky notes. I asked them to come up with as many benefits as they could for having a peer support group. I asked them to write each new idea on a separate sticky note. Afterwards someone

from the groups stood up and shared what they came up with by sticking their notes one at a time on the wall and talking about them. The group named the benefits rather than me telling them what those benefits were. In the end, they came up with a lot more benefits than I would have.

At that same meeting, I used a flip chart to record the things the family members thought might be necessary to build a strong family group. The list they generated gave me the opportunity to talk about a well-defined purpose and what our purpose was. It also gave me the opportunity to talk about guidelines like confidentiality.

A key ingredient for a successful first meeting is interaction. Successful family groups abide by the value of family voice. The earlier participants experience that value, the quicker they will take ownership.

Action Five: Discuss important topics

In the previous chapter we talked about the decision you must make about the first support group meeting. Should it be a high-profile meeting with a well-advertised topic and the enlistment of a qualified facilitator in order to attract a large group, or should it be a low-profile meeting that focuses on organizational issues? If you choose the high-profile approach, the majority of the first meeting needs to be given to the topic advertised. Avoid talking organizational issues. At the end of the meeting, talk about the desire to organize a group and set a time to do these "organizational" items with those who are interested.

Here are several topics you can cover in your first "organizational" meeting. If you can get participants to share their ideas and talk openly, covering all these topics may take more than one meeting. Don't be alarmed if you don't cover all of this in the first meeting. That's probably a good sign.

1. Benefits of a Family Group. You can use the material in the first chapter of this manual as a beginning point to talk about "Why have a family group?" Make sure you get input from participants.

2. Purpose of the group. As an organizer, you may have already developed a clear purpose for the group that you can share with participants and get their feedback. Or, you could use the exercise at the end of the first chapter to help the group develop their own purpose statement.

3. Group Guidelines. Guidelines are the group's agreed upon statements of conduct. Again, allow the group to come up with these on their own. In the chapter on "Keeping Your Group Alive and Healthy," you'll see that having clearly defined guidelines is a major step toward avoiding future problems. Here are sample guidelines other groups have used.

- We do not prescribe, diagnose, judge or give advice. We suggest.
- We know that what we share is confidential and will not repeat it outside this group setting.
- We have the right to stay anonymous or not share personal matters if we choose.
- We share the responsibility for

Having clearly defined guidelines is a major step toward avoiding future problems.

making the group work.

- We will be active listeners as others share their stories and comments. We will avoid interrupting.
- We have the freedom to explore options and express our feelings in a manner that does not demean others.
- We will each avoid dominating the conversation and provide an opportunity for everyone to participate.
- We observe and respect the right to disagree.

4. Future Topics. If you have time, you might want to engage in an activity in which the group begins to share ideas about what to discuss in future meetings. I usually use a flip chart to write down these topics as they are mentioned.

Action Six: Prepare for Subsequent Meetings

You will probably not be able to accomplish everything you want in the first meeting. That's okay. In fact, if participants leave with a sense of anticipation for the next meeting, they are more likely to come back. In meetings after the initial meeting, continue to work on the topics mentioned above. Don't feel pressured to have it all resolved and tied up in a neat bundle. A group is a living, dynamic entity. They need space to think and consider as well as to change their mind along the way. Additional topics to consider after the first meeting include:

1. Leadership identification. Many groups elect leaders to fill positions they identify as important.

2. Group goals. Over time, the group may decide to develop short-term goals like creating a resource pamphlet, developing a calling list of participants, or organizing a picnic.

3. Responsibility Assignments. As the group develops projects and goals, participants need to do the work to make them happen. Resist the urge to do things for the group. Allow them ownership by insisting they take responsibility. You don't have to be the one to organize the picnic or type the calling list.

4. Statements of Philosophy. Many groups develop a statement of philosophy that outlines what they believe as a group. The national Federation of Families statement of philosophy can be used as a guideline. They outline five such statements.

All children and youth:

- *Have strengths and make valuable contributions to their families.*
- *Are people first and deserve the same love, care, and attention as any other person.*
- *Have a right to safely participate in community life, live with their families, and attend school.*
- *Come from diverse backgrounds and must be treated with dignity and respect.*

- *Must receive all the services and supports necessary to achieve their potential.*

PREPARING FOR YOUR FIRST MEETING

Setting Up

- ❑ What arrangements have you made to get into the building?
- ❑ Whom should you call in case of a facility emergency?
- ❑ What set up instructions have you given the facility managers?

Greeting and Eating

- ❑ What food arrangements have you made?
- ❑ Who will get the name tags?
- ❑ What time do you need to arrive?
- ❑ What kind of "Getting to Know You" activity will you use?

Opening the Meeting

- ❑ What time will the meeting begin?
- ❑ How will you get participants talking to each other?

Important Topics

- ❑ How will you get participants to discuss the benefits of peer support groups?
- ❑ How will you get participants to discuss the group's purpose?
- ❑ How will you help the group define its guidelines?
- ❑ How will you help the group decide on future topics?

Closing

- ❑ What are your closing comments?
- ❑ How will you end the meeting in a way that encourages future attendance?

How to Keep Your Existing Peer Support Group Alive and Healthy

Healthy support groups give members regular and consistent emotional support. They provide unconditional warmth and acceptance to those who attend. They help members develop bonds that result in commitment and promotion of the group. Getting to that point of health, however, often takes time. Groups are living entities that, like people, mature slowly through uneven bursts of insight often followed by periods of floundering. You can expect your group to have its ups and downs as members come and go and obstacles are confronted and addressed.

If your group is facing challenges, don't get discouraged. Instead, see them for what they are—normal growing pains. At the same time, however, don't ignore the challenges you face in hopes they will go away. Typically, they won't. Unless you address problems proactively, they may grow to the point that they damage the group process. Healthy groups address problems quickly and creatively.

Healthy groups also don't let problems cloud the positive things that are happening in the group. It's easy to get caught up in a cycle of negativity when things are not going well. Address problems when they arise, but never lose sight of the positive ways your group is affecting its members. Don't assume that because there is a problem, the group is not being beneficial to others.

The kinds of obstacles groups face are varied, and this chapter may not address your particular problem. However, most challenges fall in to two major categories: leadership challenges and group challenges. This chapter will address several of the typical issues your group may face in each of these categories.

At the end of the chapter, you'll find a worksheet to help you evaluate the challenges you currently face. Use it to help think through possible solutions you might try to move your group toward health.

Leadership Challenges

Without effective leadership your group will flounder. The easy answer to this challenge is to say, "Find the right leaders and everything will be fine." There are two problems with that solution. First, it takes special people with special skills to lead a group successfully, and these people may not be readily available. For the most part, leadership must be developed over time. The good news here is that you can teach the skills necessary to lead a group through patience and good mentoring.

The second problem to the easy solution of finding the right leaders is that having skilled people already in easy reach doesn't guarantee your group will be problem free. Those "obvious" leaders may not want to assume leadership roles like you want them to, or others in the group may reject that leadership for some reason.

Leadership Challenge #1:
We can't find anyone willing or able to lead our group.

First, don't get discouraged. Second, be patient. Third, start the process of building leaders. Often, Systems of Care wraparound staff are the ones who initiate peer support group development. Since project directors and family support providers see the benefits for families, they are sometimes the ones to call a meeting of families, plan the program, get speakers, provide food, organize childcare, and provide space for the meeting. There is nothing left for family members to do. In the chapter on beginning groups, we emphasized the importance of involving families from the beginning if possible.

Sometimes the issue is not that there are no possible leaders. Rather, the issue may be that group members have become comfortable in letting you take the lead. When you do everything for them, why should family members step up and take responsibility? First, they may think you want to be in charge. Second, they may feel overwhelmed with responsibilities in their lives already and are therefore very happy for you to continue to provide for them in this area.

Doing everything for the families promotes dependence and robs members the opportunity to build new skills and take charge of significant areas of their lives.

Although you may see your efforts as a way to aid families, doing everything for the families promotes dependence and robs members the opportunity to build new skills and take charge of significant areas of their lives. So, if your problem is developing leaders, how do you do it?

1. **Recognize Strengths.** Take the time to evaluate each member of your group. What are their strengths? What does each person bring to the group? Everyone in your group has abilities they can use to benefit the group. Help

members discover those strengths and make sure they see them as well.

2. **Encourage Through Small Steps.** People who play the guitar well didn't start with complex chord progressions and difficult fingering. They began with basic chords and easy rhythms. We can't expect those unaccustomed to leadership to take on large responsibilities quickly or easily.

3. **Give Away Responsibility in Bite-Sized Increments.** For example, if you have identified one of your group members as having an organizational strength, you might want to invite him or her to sit down with you and develop an attendance system to make sure members are contacted when they miss a session. Perhaps another member is very outgoing and sociable. Invite that person to help you make phone calls to prospective group members after you show him or her how. Maybe a third member speaks out a lot during meetings. Ask them to come to the next Systems of Care coalition meeting to give a report about the group. Then sit down with them before hand and help them develop that report.

You get the idea. If you are carrying the burden of keeping your group running without help from family members, then stop doing it alone. Everything you do from arranging childcare to providing food to introducing speakers should be done with a group member at your side. That's how they learn. That's how they develop leadership skills of their own.

Rather than complaining about the lack of leadership in your group, see it as an opportunity to help grow your family members. Yes, it takes time and energy on your part to teach. Honestly, it may be easier to do it yourself rather than invite someone else to do it with you. However, if you do it yourself, you will never have help from families who need to be taking ownership. Take the long view and invest in developing leaders.

Some people who find themselves in a leadership position desperately want help and would love for you to teach them the skills they need to be more effective.

Leadership Challenge #2: *Our Designated Leader is Ineffective or Dominates All the Decisions*

In some ways this challenge is related to the first, only in this case you already have a recognized leader in place. If you have an ineffective leader, he or she needs mentoring and tutoring just like one who hasn't taken a leadership role yet. If your leader will allow it, begin

the process of identifying strengths, encouraging small steps, and giving away responsibility in bite-size increments. Some people who find themselves in a leadership position desperately want help and would love for you to teach them the skills they need to be more effective. Don't assume they will not accept your mentoring.

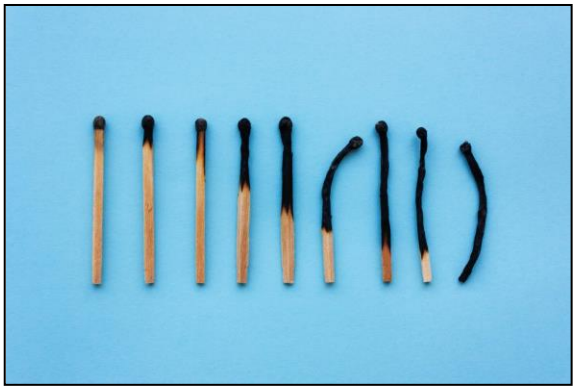
There are, however, situations in which a family member has been "elected" leader of the group and is not providing positive leadership. Perhaps this person doesn't follow through with things that need to be done. Perhaps he or she dominates all decisions without giving others any input. These are both recipes for disaster. If things go undone, members will become frustrated at the disorganization and stop coming. If one person constantly dominates all decision, members will no longer feel ownership of the group and find other things to do with their time.

The solution to both these dilemmas is the same. You need to get other group members involved. Others need to help make decisions; others need to be given responsibility so one person doesn't have to do it all. The best way I know to do this is through the development of a philosophy and guidelines for the group if you haven't already done so.

The previous chapter talked about developing guidelines for the group. One of the suggested guidelines a group might adopt was, "*We share the responsibility for making the group work.*" You might also put a similar statement in your group's philosophy. Talk about the importance of this openly. With this type of statement in your guidelines and statement of philosophy, the group can make demands of the ineffective or domineering leader. You, as the group organizer, can use this as your platform to make sure decisions are made by everyone and that new leaders are developed to replace those that are stubbornly ineffective.

Leadership Challenge #3: *Our Leaders are Burning Out and Quitting*

By now, you should know what I'm going to say. Your leaders are burning out because they are trying to carry too large of a load. Perhaps you or the group have given them leadership responsibilities for which they are not yet ready. Perhaps you're expecting them to do complex chord progressions when they have barely mastered the basics. Similarly, perhaps they are trying to carry the load by themselves because you are not actively developing other leaders in the group.



Often, burnout happens in leaders who want to do everything themselves and won't relinquish responsibilities. Perhaps they do this because it makes them feel needed and gives them a sense of importance. Other times leaders carry the burden themselves

because there is a lack of new leaders stepping up to help.

Like Challenge #2 the answer is two-fold. First, develop new leaders through the three-step process of recognizing strengths encouraging small steps, and giving away responsibility in bite-sized increments. Second, play the "shared responsibility" card. That is, continue to preach that the group belongs to everyone and everyone has a responsibility to make it work. Insist the leader give up some of his or her responsibilities. Help them see that this will help them have a healthier group in the long run.

Group Challenges

A second sphere of challenges your group may face has to do with the changing dynamics every group experiences. Every time a new person enters your group, the interchanges are altered. New people add new perspectives, new needs, new personal frustrations and new baggage. At the same time, they bring new strengths and possibilities.

Groups are comprised of imperfect people. If a group member's imperfections are harming others or destroying an atmosphere of hope and care, then the group and its leadership must address those imperfections. Here are a few of the group challenges you may face.

Group Challenge #1: *Our Group Members Seem to be Disconnected*

I have attended support groups in which members arrived, took their seats, listened to what was said, and left without saying anything to anyone else. Sometimes this disconnect has to do with the individual. Some people come to support group meetings so overwhelmed with the burdens of their lives, they don't even know where to start to verbalize it. They feel shame and failure that they don't want to share with others. Many people are simply private. Others don't want to invest in building new relationships because they don't feel they can handle one new thing in their lives at that moment.

Just because one or a few people who attended your group seem disconnected, doesn't mean the group is not meaningful to them. If they continue to come, they are getting something out of it. They are hearing others' stories that give them strength to live their lives in the coming week. They are learning new things to help them make better decisions or raise their children in healthier ways.

Be cautious about forcing attendees to share or reflect on their situation aloud. That may put them in an uncomfortable position they will choose to avoid in the future by not coming to the meetings.

On the other hand, I have also been to meetings in which members wanted

desperately to connect, to share their lives, but they didn't. Normally, this disconnection is caused by the wrong group atmosphere or the wrong focus in the group meetings. For example, the group may be too focused on getting speakers to fill the time. Groups need to build in time for members to share their stories, ask questions, and find common solutions.

- Go around the room and ask members to talk about something positive happening in the lives of their children.
- Break up into groups and ask members to find three things they have in common with the others in their group.
- One support group I know about asks members to write down something they need help with on one side of a card and a strength they have on the others side of the card. On "open forum" nights, they draw several of these cards to talk about.
- Another group provides pads of paper for each member to write questions on while a speaker is talking. It's a way to encourage participation and connection with what the speaker is saying.
- Another idea that several groups use successfully is to hold an annual or semi-annual satisfaction survey. This is a meeting where they take the time to hear from the members: what is working, what's not working, what kind of topics they want to address in the future and so forth.

Every group meeting ought to have some built-in, preplanned, intentional efforts at getting members to talk to each other. It may be something very simple that will take only a few minutes, or something quite elaborate that may take the entire meeting time.

Another reason groups sometimes feel disconnected is that we expect too much of strangers. This is particularly true of new groups where most of the members may not know each other well. A group of strangers is intimidating to most people. Preplanning intentional efforts to connect will help. However, you also may need to plan additional events that are more relaxed—a group picnic, a game night, or Christmas party, for example. In relaxed settings, family members are much more likely to be open and free in their conversation.

Group Challenge #2: *We Have a Few Members that Monopolize the Time or Cause Problems*

In this case, you need two things. First, you need clear guidelines in place that the whole group has approved. For example, in the previous chapter I listed some sample guidelines a group may adopt. One of those was, *"We will each avoid dominating the conversation and provide an opportunity for everyone to participate."* With this kind of forethought, the group can gently remind the offender of the rule.

Second, you need a leader willing to enforce the rule. Most of us are hesitant to interrupt someone else, even when they are monopolizing the conversation. It appears rude. We need to remind ourselves in that incident, however, that the one who won't allow others to speak is being rude to others in the room.

The enforcement need not be direct or confrontational. A leader may say something like, "Thanks for that perspective. Now let's hear from others in the group." I have even said more directly, "Let's hear from someone besides Mary. We want everyone to have a turn." This subtly tells Mary she's talked too much.

It's also helpful to post your group's guidelines and rules and spend a little time each meeting reviewing one or two. This is a good way to reinforce to everyone what is and is not acceptable.

Post your group's guidelines and rules and spend a little time each meeting reviewing one or two.

It may not be that your member is simply monopolizing time. Perhaps he or she is attacking others, talking while others are trying to speak, or making insulting remarks. Whatever the problem, the same approach works. Enforce the rules. Subtle hints often help. Gentle but direct comments that refocus the group are good. Sometimes, however, a more confrontational approach is necessary. You may need to talk to the offending person outside of group time to tell him or her how disruptive their behavior is. There may even be times when you will need to call a person down during a session, but these are rare.

A few years ago, in a meeting a woman began ranting about another person everyone knew. She made very insensitive comments about his weight as part of her outrage. There was nothing else for me to do but look her straight in the eye and say, "That is not appropriate, and I won't put up with it." That was not a subtle approach, but I quickly regained control of the meeting and gained the respect of every other person in the room who was also feeling uncomfortable.

Group Challenge #3: *Some of Our Members are Extremely Negative*

Most of the members of your group deal with problems every day—problems with children, problems with service providers, problems with their jobs. They feel frustration and want to vent. There are times we all want to scream into our pillows but venting and negativity in meetings is a sure way to drive people away.

Most people come to support group meetings to find positive help, to find solutions and understanding. They have enough negativity in their lives and don't need the additional weight of someone else's problems.

At the same time, groups should not ignore the problems of its members. To disallow individuals to share their problems would be to ignore the needs of attendees. Part of the success of support groups comes through the realization that members are not alone in their frustrations and problems.

Every group walks a fine line between being too unrealistically positive and too negative. If you feel your group continues to slip into the muck of negativity, here are a few suggestions.

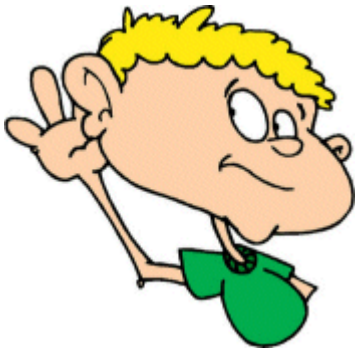
- **Play the "guidelines" card again.** If you have a rule or guideline addressing the need to be strength-based, then use it. Talk to the group about the need to find positive things in every situation.

  Not long ago at a support group meeting, a grandmother talked about all the problems her grandson was giving her. Her comments were quite brutal. Afterwards, we talked about the strengths of her grandson that were evident in her accounts. The group came up with things she had not considered.
- **Shift the group's attention away from the negative comments onto something more positive.** Some time ago, I was leading a group where a couple of members began to feed upon each other in their attacking comments regarding a service provider. Rather than confront them directly, I asked a question that refocused the group's attention on the topic at hand. When another member answered my question the conversation again began moving in a positive direction and group members forgot the negative comments.
- **Ask questions that lead to positive answers.** Instead of asking, "What would you like to change in your child?" you might ask, "What are you most proud of in your child?" Rather than saying, "Tell me your worst-nightmare story about a service provider," say, "Tell me about a helpful experience you've had with a service provider."

To simply dismiss someone's negativity as irrelevant is a mistake. We also need to be good listeners. When someone is sharing frustration through negative speech or attacks, they are crying for help. A healthy support group hears the pain beneath the tirade and offers the appropriate support. That leads us to our next challenge.

Group Challenge #4: *There is a Lack of Real Listening in Our Group*

When members feel ignored, interrupted, criticized, discounted, or lectured to, they will have little incentive to attend your group. We all feel the need to be heard. A few years ago, I found myself playing the role of a support group member rather than the role of leader to which I had become accustomed. My wife and I were having problems with our teenage son. I found myself looking forward to going to meetings where I could share my concerns with others. I wanted to tell my story and have others hear me and understand. I wanted to express my pain.



What I often found, however, was that when I shared my story, I received three different responses. First, some people listened attentively. I could see in their faces that they understood and empathized with me. That felt good. Second, there were always a few who wanted to fix my problem with their advice. They would begin with, "Oh, I had that problem once with my daughter." Then they would tell me how to fix it. I resented those responses. It was not what I needed or wanted. A third group appeared to listen

half-heartedly and as soon as I was through speaking, they would begin talking about themselves and their problems as if mine were inconsequential compared to theirs. Eventually, I stopped sharing my story because I felt dismissed.

Active listening is a skill we all must work at. Listening should become the responsibility of all group members. For example, when someone tries to offer unsolicited advice or moves on to their own story too quickly, group members can interrupt the new speaker and say, "Wait a minute. I want to hear more from the previous speaker." Valuing what everyone says is important.

Take time in your meetings to teach listening skills. These skills will not only make the group healthier, they will also help members learn to listen better in other areas of their lives such as with spouses and children.

Summary

Many different things cause poor attendance and participation. Sometimes you remedy these problems easily by changing to a new time or place that is more convenient for members. On the other hand, challenges may be more complex and involve adjustments in leadership or group dynamics.

Even if this chapter did not address your specific challenges, I hope you were able to find some pointers that will move you in the right direction. Support groups can be made healthier by developing strong leadership, setting down clear guidelines and helping the groups stick to them, and providing opportunities for input and participation for all members in positive ways. When you have these elements, you can address most challenges quickly and successfully.

Finding Solutions

Take a few moments to analyze your group. Be as honest as you can. This is not an exercise in laying blame. Instead, it is an attempt to get a realistic handle on what is happening during your meetings.

What are your leadership challenges?

_____
_____
_____

What steps do you need to make to develop new or current leadership?

_____
_____
_____

What guidelines might your group need to adopt to assure the sharing of leadership responsibility?

_____
_____
_____

What are the challenges you face with group dynamics?

_____
_____
_____

What activities do you need to build into your group time in order to engage all members?

_____
_____
_____

What guidelines might your group need to adopt to help manage group members?

_____
_____
_____

How to Facilitate Your Peer Support Group

There are two basic types of facilitators: process facilitators and content facilitators. A content facilitator may be an expert the group has invited to lead a discussion about some topic he or she knows a great deal about. This content facilitator will share information, field questions, and try to engage the group in discussions about the subject.

A process facilitator, on the other hand, is more concerned with helping the group work together and communicate better with each other. The process facilitator, therefore, is typically a member of the group or a Systems of Care staff person who wants the group to develop close bonds through good communication.

Healthy support groups need both kinds of facilitators. When you enlist someone to give content, he or she may or may not have good skills in engaging group members in discussion. If the speaker has good skills, your task as process facilitator becomes much easier. On the other hand, if your speaker drones on and on in a way that tends to numb group members, your task as the process facilitator becomes much more important.

Because we don't always have control over the skills our content facilitators bring, this chapter will focus on process facilitation. The focus here is what you can do to assure your group communicates well and builds lasting relationships through discussion of pertinent topics.

Typically, the group's facilitator designs the meeting agenda and keeps the group focused on the topic at hand. He or she may introduce the speaker for the evening if there is a special guest. In addition, the facilitator makes sure there is a smooth transition between agenda items so that everyone knows someone is in charge.

Facilitator's Tasks and Goals

Managing the meeting's agenda is only a part of the facilitator's task. Although this is important, facilitators have a much more important job—helping participants communicate in healthy ways. For example, while others are focusing on the topic of discussion and their own feelings, the facilitator is observing the group's behavior.

- Are participant's interrupting each other or listening respectfully?
- Is communication supportive or dismissive?
- Are some people monopolizing the conversation?
- Is the group staying on task or are they chasing rabbits?

Some have likened facilitators to traffic cops. That is, the facilitator must keep the conversational traffic flowing smoothly. A good traffic cop or facilitator knows when to step in and halt the flow in one direction in order to allow another direction to proceed. If the traffic lights are broken, the policeperson must be proactive in directing traffic to avoid disastrous collisions. Similarly, if emotions or problem group members get out of hand, a good facilitator must step in and proactively direct conversations in healthy ways in order to avoid conflict.

More specifically, group facilitators are continually trying to accomplish the following goals.

1. Keep the group on track and focused on the topic under discussion.
2. Create a positive, open environment that makes it easy for participants to share their own concerns, ideas, or stories.
3. Help all group members participate actively.
4. Create a safe place for sharing and exploring difficult topics.
5. Manage conflict proactively.
6. Identify and manage behavior that is hampering the group's effectiveness.
7. Help the group evaluate its behavior and health.
8. Manage time

Developing facilitation skills requires the facilitator to be self-aware. Specifically, you must be continually aware of what you are experiencing and be able to elicit responses from participants about what they are feeling as well. For example, if you are feeling uncomfortable about how a group member responded to another group member, you may need to speak up and state that. In addition, you might need to explore how others felt about the sharp words the group member spoke.

The difficulty with good facilitation is that it is quite subjective. Each facilitator will handle situations differently. Each decision to intervene and "redirect traffic" will be based on complex things you are observing and feeling. Despite its subjectivity, there are skills facilitators can develop to accomplish their objectives consistently.

Intervene Only When Necessary

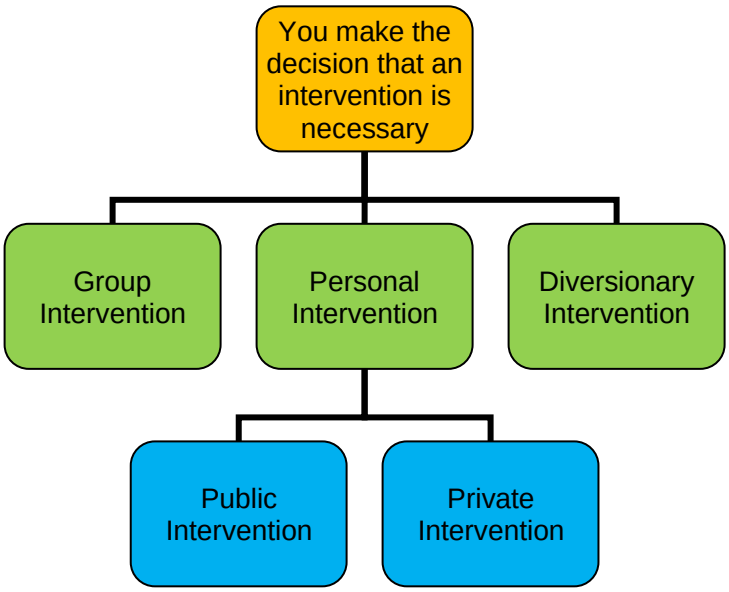
Sometimes facilitators think their job is to "help" the participants. If no one is saying anything, the facilitator feels the need to fill the silence with words or questions of their own. If someone is struggling with the right words, the facilitator may feel the need to articulate the thought for the participant. If two individuals are disagreeing, the facilitator may feel the need to step between the two rather than allowing them to work through their frustration together. If someone becomes angry or begins crying, the facilitator may feel the need to "make everything all right."

Tension, conflict, silence, and emotion can be very powerful ways to help group members grow. If facilitators are too quick to "help" or "save" participants, that growth may be hindered rather than enhanced. Before intervening, ask yourself the following questions. If your answers are yes, don't intervene.

- Does this behavior appear to be a one-time occurrence that participants will move beyond quickly?
- Is the behavior bothering only you instead of the whole group?
- Will other group members likely intervene if you keep your mouth shut?
- Will intervening discourage the group from tackling a difficult issue?
- Would taking someone aside later in private be more helpful than intervening now?

Intervene Correctly

There are appropriate times for the facilitator to help the group with their conversational flow. Once you make the decision to intervene, you must make a further decision as what type of intervention to make. You have three basic choices: a personal intervention, a group intervention, or a diversionary intervention.



1. **Group Intervention.** In a group intervention, you address your comments to the entire group without pointing out any single individual. You may need to remind the group of ground rules or agenda constraints. For example, if one member is chasing a rabbit and taking the group away from the topic at hand, you might say, "Our subject tonight is dealing with grief. I would like for us to return to that topic." Notice, that this comment uses the plural pronoun "our" and does not address any one person.

2. **Personal Intervention.** Personal interventions are comments directed to an individual rather than the group. You might speak directly to an individual to encourage him or her to stick with the agenda or to remind them of one of the ground rules they have violated. It's important in this circumstance to avoid attacking the individual personally. Maintain a calm voice and point out the behavior that needs to change.

   Once you decide a personal intervention is necessary, you must then decide if you should do that publicly or privately. **Public Interventions** address the issue immediately with the whole group listening to your conversation with the individual. Although it may bring a quick resolution, it may also embarrass the individual in front of his or her peers.

   Private Interventions wait for a time when you can talk to the individual alone. In that way, you eliminate the possibility of embarrassment. However, the delay may allow the individual to continue the inappropriate behavior.

3. **Diversionary Intervention.** Sometimes when a group is starting to sway from the topic or has begun violating a rule such as making inappropriate remarks about someone else, a facilitator might use a diversionary tactic to refocus the group. Perhaps all you need to do is ask a new question about the agenda subject. By answering the question, group members naturally move back toward appropriate conversation.

   You might also state something like, "That sounds like an important issue. Why don't we put that on our list to talk about at a later meeting?" In the diversionary intervention, you don't need to directly address a rule violation or overtly call attention to troublesome behavior. You simply need to point the group back in the right direction. If done subtly enough the group will never know they've been diverted.

Intervene at Dysfunctional Behavior

It's okay if participants get emotional during a group session. Emotions are a sign that participants care about the issues. However, if those emotions bleed over into dysfunctional or harmful behavior you need to intervene. For example, if a participant calls others names or displays negative stereotyping, you need to address the issue.

Sometimes a member may be upset with you as the facilitator. If a member becomes emotional with you, it's important to address it. First, ask yourself what prompted their behavior? Did you say or do something inappropriate or demeaning? If so, acknowledge the other person's perspective, explain your intent, and express your regret. When you respond like this, you are modeling for others how to handle conflict in positive ways.

Intervene at Cultural Insensitivity

Your group members come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and bring to the group varied expectations. As facilitator, your job is to make sure members are sensitive to the cultures and expectations of others in the group. Cultural differences cause participants to:

- Have different comfort levels with open and honest comments.
- Want different levels of formality.
- Have different perspectives on time.
- Hold varying perspectives toward the individual or group.
- Have different comfort levels showing emotion.
- Have different comfort levels with physical closeness.
- Have language differences.
- Place differing emphases on body language.

When a group member uses language offensive to others, you may need to intervene and talk about cultural sensitivity. When group members press a quiet member to "spill their guts," you may need to intervene to talk about the differences in individuals and comfort levels. You get the idea. To be a good facilitator, you must continually work toward cultural competence in your own life so you can recognize those moments that may be awkward for others.

Intervene to Encourage Participation

Remember, that just because a person doesn't speak much in a meeting doesn't mean that that person is not engaged. People come to the meetings with different comfort levels, different expectations, and different cultural backgrounds. To force people to speak may be insensitive and tend to push them away.

With that said, however, there are times when you as the facilitator need to encourage the entire group to talk more openly and freely. This may happen if your content facilitator, the speaker for the meeting, isn't doing a very good job of involving members in the discussion. Here are some specific things you can do to encourage participation.

1. **Ask Clarifying Questions.** When a speaker or group member says something, you don't understand or if you think other group members are not understanding, you might want to ask for clarification. "Bob, could you tell us a bit more about what you mean when you said…" or "I'm not sure I'm following your point. Are you saying…?"

2. **Ask for Suggestions.** Remember you are not to be the expert, nor are you expected to have all the answers as a facilitator. Your task is to help others discover solutions and give suggestions. In one group session I was facilitating, a frustrated mother shared about the struggle she was having getting her son to obey. Rather than provide the answers myself (which I didn't have much of anyway), I turned to the group and said, "What suggestions do you have for this problem?" It immediately elicited comments from several members who had been quiet.
3. **Summarize or Paraphrase.** After a speaker or member concludes his or her comments, you might want to ask the group to share what they heard or what was significant to them. In a similar fashion, you might want to summarize by saying something like, "I heard Clara say…." Then ask, "Clara, is that correct?" To get others involved, follow that with a general question to everyone, "What did you hear Clara say?"
4. **Use Smaller Groups.** Many people who are reluctant to talk in front of a group are more than willing to talk face-to-face with one or two other people. At times, as the facilitator, you may ask the larger group to divide into groups of twos or threes to discuss a topic more fully. Afterwards, the smaller groups can report what they discussed with the larger group.
5. **Pull Ideas Together.** As facilitator, you should be looking for patterns and connections in the conversations of group members. Sometimes when I'm facilitating, even if I'm not the primary speaker, I take notes of what the speaker or group members are saying on a flip chart. After some time, I draw the group's attention to the flip chart and ask them to look for patterns, to help me group the comments together in ways that make sense. This exercise helps everyone think about the topic in context and often produces new insights.

Summary

Group facilitation is both an art and a skill. To be a good facilitator you need to learn and practice the skills mentioned in this chapter. In the meantime, don't be too hard on yourself. Remember, a great guitarist starts with simple chords and gets better with practice. At each meeting do the best you can with what you know. Then after the meeting, evaluate yourself. Use the worksheet at the end of this chapter as your guide.

Good facilitation takes practice, so don't get discouraged if things falter during a meeting. Keep rehearsing your options. You can do it.

Evaluate Your Facilitation

What did I do correctly?

_____

_____

When did my intervention reroute the discussion in more positive ways or engage more people in the conversation?

_____

_____

Where did things begin to go wrong?

_____

_____

At that point what was I feeling?

_____

_____

What are some different ways I could have handled it?

_____

_____

Where did I intervene when I should have remained silent?

_____

_____

At what points should I have intervened sooner?

_____

_____

What type of intervention did I use, and why did I believe that was appropriate at the time?

_____

_____

What can I do between now and the next group meeting to prepare myself better?

_____

_____

What to Talk About at Your Peer Support Group Meetings

New peer support groups often wonder about the content of group meetings. What should we talk about? What will best meet the needs of our family members? Where do we go to get speakers? Should we have a speaker every time?

More established groups have experimented with a great many different topics and formats, and they were quick to tell me in my interviews that some of the topics worked well and some didn't. Often, it is a matter of trial and error to find what fits your group the best.

When topics don't go over well it's usually because of two oversights on the part of organizers. First, the topic is not of interest to meeting attendees. Second, the leader or speaker is unprepared.

The Importance of Family Voice

Too often organizers or facilitators come up with a list of topics they think the group will like but fail to check them out with group members. These organizers may think they are saving time or acting in the best interest of others. Instead, they are wasting the group members' time and robbing them of the opportunity to have input. Families feel less valued when you take over and plan for them. They need to be involved and have input in what kinds of topics they want to discuss at each meeting.

Some groups have an annual or semi-annual "satisfaction survey." At this meeting the facilitator leads the group to talk about what's working and what's not working in the group, what changes would be beneficial, and what kinds of topics the participants want to discuss in future meetings. These "information gathering" meetings can be some of the most energizing events you have all year. You might want to use the sample "brainstorming" session at the end of this chapter as a starting point to develop your own "satisfaction survey" session.

I once facilitated one of these "planning" sessions for a group in my city. As a group, they came up with several topic ideas they

wanted to discuss in future meetings. I never would have thought of many they listed. Here's their list:

- Differentiating self from children
- Losing children to DHS
- Dealing with guilt
- Worrying about our children's future and what life is going to like for them when they reach adulthood
- Grieving our losses
- Sibling issues such as how our children perceive we treat their brothers and sisters
- Dealing with our own depression
- Learning to say "no" to our children
- Information on various mental illnesses
- Dealing with diagnoses and doctors
- Maintaining hope
- Individualized Education Program (IEP) rights

In one session, we came up with a year's worth of topics. The group may not choose to discuss all these ideas over the coming months, but they have a great list from which to choose. More importantly, it was a list of topics in which they were interested. Take the time to ask your families for ideas. Hear their voice and concerns.

The Importance of Preparation

I have been to meetings where the speaker didn't show up or the facilitator kept apologizing for not having enough materials for everyone. These meetings always left me with a feeling of "why bother." Family members feel the same way. If group leaders have not put effort into proper preparation for the meeting, then prospective attendees are never going to view these meetings as important or of value for their lives.

One site had a potentially embarrassing situation when a group member invited a local banker to talk to the group. The person doing the enlisting didn't make clear to the banker the nature of the group or the specifics of the topic. He came prepared to talk about investments. Luckily, he had with him some information on budgeting, which was the issue the group really wanted to discuss. He was able to adapt and go in a different direction, but many speakers won't have that versatility.

If group leaders have not put effort into proper preparation for the meeting, then prospective attendees are never going to view these meetings as important or of value for

Here are some key suggestions to make sure you are well prepared for meetings and things like this don't happen to you.

- Prepare a long-term schedule of topics (at least three months in advance) so you are not scrambling around looking for something to talk about just a few weeks before the meeting.
- Decide which meetings need an outside speaker and enlist these individuals several weeks ahead of time.
- Get biographical information on your speaker and make a handout for your group members.

- Give specific information to your speakers about the group, their purpose, and the topic you want them to talk about.
- Call to remind your speaker of the meeting time a few days before the group meeting.
- Make enough handouts related to the topic and have them ready to distribute at the meeting. Family members often like to have something to take home with them.
- Double check that refreshments or food are taken care of.
- Have a calling "committee" phone all group members and prospective members a few days before the meeting to remind them of the time and topic.
- Announce to members present what the topic will be at the next meeting.

All these things take a little bit of effort, but they also make meetings purposeful and eliminate distracting lapses that can discourage attendees.

Despite your best efforts at preparations, things do go wrong occasionally. For example, a speaker may get sick and not be able to come. In that case, you need to have a Plan B. Always have a back up plan and sufficient resources on hand that you can pull out at the last minute. Here are some suggested resources to keep close by at all times.

- Flip chart and markers
- Name tags
- Games
- Discussion Starters
- Pencils and Paper

Beginnings and Kick-offs

At the beginning, new groups rarely have the structure to obtain input from several family members as to topics in which they might have interest. Organizers, which ideally should include

a few potential group members, must do the best they can to find topics that attract family members to the group.

As I mentioned in the chapter on starting a new support group, some organizers choose to begin in a low-key manner with a group of interested family members. These groups want to get organized, develop their mission and ground rules, and develop leadership before reaching out to others. This works for many groups. The progress of these groups tends to be slow and steady.

Other groups, however, want to begin in a bigger fashion by drawing a crowd around a topic of interest. Once a crowd is present, organizers can plant the seed of an ongoing group and encourage attendees to return. These groups begin with a bang, but then attendance tends to taper off leaving a core group to continue. If you choose this route, be prepared for the attrition that will happen and don't get discouraged.

If you start with a well-publicized topic, make it a topic that has widespread appeal in your area and do your best to have well-qualified leaders that will engage attendees and make them want to come back. For example, at one start-up meeting at a Systems of Care site, the project director advertised through flyers, newspaper, and radio spots a meeting to discuss

"Behavioral Crisis Management." They thought this topic would have a large appeal in their area. Organizers invited a state Systems of Care expert to lead the discussions and advertised hot fudge sundaes for the kids.

When a group gathered for this topic, organizers were able to talk to them about their desire to start a group and future topics the group might address.

Topics Galore

I'm about to list several topic ideas different groups have used or thought about using. I do this, however, with great caution. These topics are ideas only. They may or may not fit the needs of your group. The only way you're going to meet the needs of your group is ask them. Do not, I repeat, do not simply choose topic ideas from this list and force it upon your group. Use these ideas to stimulate your group to create their own list of topics. Use these ideas as discussion starters and encourage your group to alter what's here to fit their needs and concerns.

With that said, here are a few ideas for your group to consider, in no particular order.

- Have someone present on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).
- Have a representative from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) talk about transitions to adulthood.
- Invite a banker to help families manage their limited budgets.
- Invite a Systems of Care staff member to talk about Systems of Care and the importance of family voice.
- Have a Child Welfare worker discuss what happens when a child is removed from the home.
- Invite a Juvenile Bureau representative to talk about what happens when your child is arrested.
- Discuss the laws related to Individual Education Programs (IEP) and the rights of the family members related to those laws.
- Invite graduated wraparound families to talk about the importance of family teams and informal supports.
- Show videos on specific mental disorders like bipolar or Attention Deficit Disorder.
- Show a portion of a movie that deals specifically with pertinent topics like mental health, suicide, drugs, or parenting issues and invite members to discuss what they see in the film and how they relate to it. Be sure to screen the portion of the film you want to show ahead of time.
- Invite a doctor or nurse to talk about medication safety.
- Invite a school counselor to talk about helping your child deal with bullies or how to recognize if your child is a bully.
- Have someone from the Area Prevention Resource Center discuss tobacco or drug-abuse in children and teenagers.

- Have a counselor discuss how to help your children manage their anger.
- Have a counselor discuss how to listen and how to effectively communicate with your child.
- Have a school counselor talk about building self-esteem in your children.
- Have a game night and play noncompetitive games.
- Conduct an "all family" night in which adults and children do something fun together like picnics, bowling, Halloween parties, or Christmas parties.
- Invite a pastor or counselor to talk about healthy grief and how to deal with the losses in your life.
- Use scenarios to talk about conflict in the family and how to use win-win problem solving.
- Use one of the many good books on discipline to discuss how to handle defiant behavior productively.
- Invite someone to talk about the importance of boundaries in your family and how to set them.
- Invite a doctor to talk about how to get needed information out of medical personnel.
- Have a pastor or counselor talk about maintaining hope when things look dark.
- Conduct a group brainstorming session to come up with future topics (see sample brainstorming session at the end of this chapter).

Some of these topics require that you enlist an expert to share information you can't get anywhere else. However, many of the topics can be handled by Systems of Care staff or someone from the host agency. Still other topics would require no more than a facilitator to manage the conversations between group participants.

Variety is important to keep attendees interested. Work at avoiding a rut in which you have an outside speaker every meeting or the same person from the host agency speaking every time. Vary the topics and vary the approaches.

There are times when one topic will carry over into subsequent meetings because of the complexity or interest in the topic. This is fine if the series is not "beaten to death." I wouldn't continue the same topic more than two or three meetings in a row.

Preparing for Topics

Many topics don't require any more preparation than announcing the topic and enlisting a leader. Other topics require more forethought. For example, if your group wants to talk about parenting skills, you will need to do some research ahead of time to discover some of the best resources to share with your group. You might need to find a good video or enlist group members to do some role-playing before the session.

You will also need to do advance preparation when a topic is emotional or potentially volatile. You wouldn't want to invite a Department of Human Services (DHS) worker to a group, for example, where several family members are angry with Child Welfare for taking their children.

One way to handle this type issue is to prepare the group ahead of time. One support group dealing with this issue spent an entire session talking among themselves about what kinds of questions they wanted

to ask Child Welfare workers. The next month they talked about how to maintain respect for the Child Welfare worker. At the third month's meeting, a Child Welfare worker came and answered their well-thought-out respectful questions, and the session was highly successful.

In advance of each group meeting, think through the possible conflicts that may arise and proactively work to minimize those through good planning.

Summary

The topics your group may choose to talk about are unlimited. The most important thing is that you choose topics that the families want to discuss. That means you must get their input. Once those topics are decided, spend some time making sure the presentations are of the highest quality. Plan, do your homework, and take care of details. If you do, month after month, meeting after meeting, your families will learn, grow, and leave with renewed hope.

Sample "Brainstorming" Session

1. Give everyone in attendance a note card. Have them write down a strength their child has on one side of the card and a need their child has on the other side of the card. Next, encourage members to share what they wrote on their card. Allow members to "pass" if they don't want to share. After the sharing, state that in this group session the focus will be on strengths and needs.

2. Have members write down on a large sticky note a strength in their own life that they bring to the group. Point out that this strength may be something they are good at, some resource they have, some personality trait they have, or some skill they have that could benefit the group. Collect these sticky notes and post them on the wall in front of the group. Ask the group to guess which member goes with each strength. Make sure the group understands they each bring much to the group.

3. Next, have participants write down a need or two they have that the group may be able to help them with. This may be a specific topic they want to learn about. It may be a special speaker they want to hear. It might be some problem they would like to discuss with other family members.

4. Break the larger group into small groups of three or four. Ask them to share the needs they wrote down with the others in the group and discuss briefly why these are important. After group members have had an opportunity to share, ask the small groups to come up with three or four more ideas together. Finally, get reports from the groups. List the ideas on a flip chart or newsprint.

5. Ask the group to help you come up with a final list by combining similar topics and eliminating duplications. Give each member five colored sticky dots you can purchase at office supply stores. Ask them to vote for their favorite topics by coming to the list of topics at the front of the room and sticking a dot on their top five choices. This is a fun way for the group to vote.

6. Prioritize the list of topics by the number of votes each received. Next, talk to the group about possible speakers and resources the group could use for the top vote getters. Using personal strengths group members identified earlier, enlist individuals to take responsibility for locating additional resources or making preliminary contacts to potential speakers. Remember, involve group members as much as possible. This is their group.

How to Evaluate Your Peer Support Group

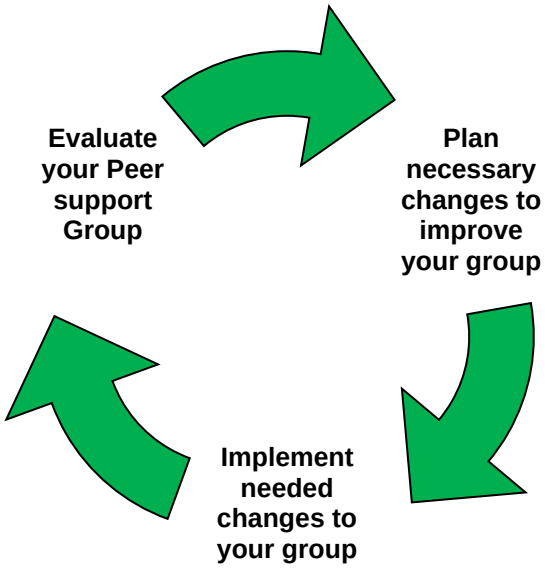
Typically, when I talk to people about evaluation, their eyes roll back into the top of their head or they change the subject as quickly as possible. Evaluation has gotten a bum rap. Most people view it as tedious, boring, and unproductive activity. Okay, I admit, it can be sometimes, but it doesn't have to be.

Many people who dislike evaluation pair it with the negative feedback their boss gave them once (or more than once) which causes an adverse emotional response. For others, evaluation is done so rarely they have difficulty seeing how it relates to ongoing activity.

I want to suggest a different way to look at evaluation. ***Evaluation is an ongoing activity we should do all the time.*** When something we do goes well, we make a mental note to do that again in the future. We have engaged in evaluation. When something doesn't go well and we take a moment to think about what we could have done differently, we have engaged in evaluation.

When we embrace evaluation and make it a part of an ongoing improvement cycle, then we guarantee healthy, growing support groups. If, however, we choose to ignore the evaluative step for our support groups, they will quickly become stagnant and unhealthy.

Notice the chart below. Much of this manual has focused on planning and implementing changes to your group. To complete the cycle, you also need to spend some time regularly evaluating those changes. If something you planned and implemented didn't work, take time to figure out why, change your plans, and implement something different.



I mentioned at the beginning of this manual that no two groups are the same. One size does not fit all. That means it is up to you to figure out what works in your setting, for your families. That means evaluating as you go, making new plans, and trying new things. Keep working the pattern until you find what works best for your situation.

If you are just getting started, most of your time needs to be in the planning and implementation phase. However, don't forget to stop and ask yourself how things are going along the way. Evaluate as you go. If you have an existing group and haven't done serious evaluation in a while, you might want to spend a good deal of time doing that. Then get into a regular routine of including evaluation in everything you do. After each meeting, evaluate.

I prefer regular, ongoing evaluation in which you examine small parts of your group along the way. However, I also understand the need to look at the whole picture occasionally in order to see how everything is fitting together.

On the following pages, you will find an evaluation tool for you to use to get an overall picture of your peer support group's health. The tool's purpose is to point out those things you are doing well in addition to those things that need changing. I suggest you use this tool with your entire support group or with a small planning group made up of support group members. Take an evening and allow everyone the opportunity to give input.

Support Group Evaluation Tool

Answer each of these questions as honestly as possible. Include as many people in the discussion as possible. Refer to the comments in the manual if you are not sure to what the question is referring. Give yourself a score for each question based on the following scale.

3 Absolutely true for our group
2 Somewhat true for our group
1 Not true for our group currently

Question	Score
Do group members understand the clear benefits of a support group?	
Does our group have a well-defined purpose statement?	
Does everyone in our group understand and accept the purpose of the group?	
Does the Systems of Care host agency demonstrate a strong commitment to our support group?	
Does the Systems of Care Community Team demonstrate a strong commitment to our support group?	
Does our support group have sufficient funding?	
Has our group included family members in the planning process?	
Is our group clear about whom our target audience is and what needs we are trying to meet?	
Does our group meet at a convenient time for family members?	
Is the time allotted for our meetings not too long or not too short?	
Does the location of the group meeting meet the needs of our families?	
Is our group adequately meeting family members' childcare needs during group time?	
Do we make adequate food arrangements for our group time together?	
Are we using all available avenues to publicize our group to potential families?	
Do we give personal invitations to potential group members to attend?	
Do we have someone at the meeting location early to greet group members and new attendees?	
Do we follow a clear agenda during every meeting?	
Do each of our group meetings have intentional activities used to involve members in sharing?	
Has our group formalized its rules or guidelines for appropriate group interaction?	
Has our group identified and elected its own leaders?	
Does our group share responsibility for tasks among its members?	
Has our group developed clear statements of philosophy that we review regularly?	
Does our group address problems immediately and proactively?	
Has our group identified potential future leaders?	
Are we taking steps to develop future leaders for our group?	
Are we taking steps to develop current leaders for our group?	
Does our group have an atmosphere of caring and acceptance?	

Is our group providing opportunities for members to get to know each other in unstructured settings?	
Are our group's guidelines posted, and are they enforced in gentle ways?	
Does our group work at developing a positive atmosphere that focuses on strengths rather than negativity?	
Do our group leaders and members practice listening well?	
Does our group facilitator do a good job of keeping the group focused on the designated subject?	
Does our group facilitator effectively handle behavior that hampers the group's effectiveness?	
Does our facilitator understand when to intervene and when to allow the group members to work through issues on their own?	
Does our facilitator intervene in appropriate and sensitive ways?	
Do our group members have major input into the topics to be discussed at meetings?	
Do speakers always come to our meetings prepared?	
Do our leaders always make adequate preparation for meetings?	
Do the leaders of our group take the time to do a quick evaluation after every meeting?	
Does our group set aside regular time for evaluating every aspect of our support group?	

Add up your scores to see how you're doing.

100-120 Your group is doing very well. Celebrate those things you are doing correctly. Then choose a couple of weak areas to work on in the coming months.

70-100 Your group has some very clear strong points. Celebrate those. However, there are several other areas you might want to work on the coming months. Choose a few you know you can do quickly and do them. Then select one or two that may take a while and begin the process of improving in those areas as well.

40-70 Remind your group that needs are currently being met. Otherwise, no one would be coming to the meeting. Pay attention to those areas that are working well for you and celebrate them. Next, prioritize four or five areas you feel you need to work on most urgently, and begin the task. Don't try to do too much at once or you will be overwhelmed. Building a support group is a long-term project.