A Guide for Parent Support Groups

“I love my group... I know they care about what I am dealing with and I really care about them too.” - Parent Support Group member

South Dakota Parent Connection has developed this guide is to assist parents and professionals in developing, structuring, and promoting a parent support group.

**Introduction:** Parents organize and join support groups for a variety of reasons. South Dakota Parent Connection encourages families to find what works for them in their particular situation. Parents may be seeking to:

- deal with a new diagnosis or family crisis
- educate themselves and support others
- learn better parenting skills
- become an effective advocate
- develop and build social connections
- gain time for themselves, or
- all of the above

The benefits for parents who participate in a support group may include:

- Getting the encouragement and comfort they need to help their child and family
- Gaining a stronger sense of community
- Planning for improved school outcomes
- Planning for improved life outcomes for their child and family
- Working on policy and systems change
- Identifying best practices for their school and community

Typically support and education are the main objectives for forming parent support groups. Support groups may be formed around one particular disorder like ADHD or more generalized topics such as learning differences. Some groups develop a list of objectives for their group. Some sample objectives include:

- Learn about characteristics of people with the identified disability/difficulty/disorder
- Share information that will help members of the group
- Identify programs, strategies, and opportunities for people with the disability/difficulty/disorder
- Identify relevant books and professional organizations as resources about the disability/difficulty/disorder.

**Structure/Organization of the group:**

1. Form a leadership/steering committee – this may be one or two persons in the beginning and can expand as the group grows
2. The leadership/steering committee may establish ground rules for the group, especially about confidentiality and courtesy during group discussions.

3. The leadership/steering committee may want to propose a formal structure to the group, i.e., elected leaders, guidelines, and processes for group direction.

4. The leadership/steering committee may establish and maintain partnerships with others (school administration, community organizations, universities, and specialists).

5. The steering committee may plan the programs for the year.

6. Meeting frequency is typically once a month.

7. Asking a professional or community organization to sponsor or partner with the group can be beneficial in pooling resources, sharing space, consulting, and sharing contacts.

**Membership:** May include:

1. Experienced parents of children with a specific difficulty
2. Parents of children who are newly diagnosed
3. Parents with questions
4. Professionals who support children with difficulties

In the beginning, membership is often a few parents, unless there is a burning issue which impacts a number of children and families, i.e., proposed change in the delivery of services to children. When organized around a burning issue the group may stay together to change that policy or resolve the issue and then disband. Or the group may find common areas to continue their time together. Membership is often very fluid depending on the needs of the family in relation to the objectives of the group.

**Content of the sessions:**

1. May alternate between parent support and parent education, or include both support and education during each meeting.

2. A speaker/discussion format with a guest speaker and time for parents to ask questions, discuss issues, and share strategies is often most effective.

3. Video/webinar presentations.

4. Sharing of community resources.

5. Providing feedback to one another regarding strategies learned at an earlier session.

6. Keeping a list of resources and adding to it regularly can be very valuable for members.

The more actively parents are engaged in applying what they learn, the more they will learn and grow; some groups practice strategies with each other, try them at home, and report their effectiveness or adaptations that work for them.

**Evaluate and gather information:** Evaluation can be completed at the close of each meeting or once or twice per year depending on the wishes of the group. Members can evaluate by completing written evaluations anonymously or by discussing with the group. Some sample questions to use include:

- The day/time/place of the meetings works/doesn’t work
- What were 1 or 2 *ideas or techniques* presented that seemed particularly helpful to you and your family?
- What *subjects or issues* were not covered that you would like to discuss?
• What other suggestions or comments might help us to improve our program?

**Marketing:** Notice of meetings can be accomplished through:

1. Email list/twitter accounts
2. School calendars or other school or parent/grandparent organizations
3. Parent organization websites, publications
4. Daily and weekly newspapers
5. Radio and TV (include public access channels)
6. Posted on bulletin boards in public buildings

**Remember:** There may be families in your community who are not fluent in English. Some families may lack the ordinary means of support simply due to a language barrier and cultural differences and may not be comfortable in an English-speaking group. In this case, remember the following:

• A one-to-one friendship can be very helpful, in terms of emotional support and information gathering especially if there is not a formal group of parents in your community
• They may be interested in forming a parallel group facilitated in their native language
• It may be beneficial for all involved to arrange occasionally for translators and/or translated written material such as presentations, meeting notes, and agendas. That way both groups can share ideas and concerns, let each other know the issues being discussed in each group, or attend when special speakers are invited to either group’s meeting. Remember: Presenting a united voice regarding decisions made in your community can benefit all children!

**Funding for Support Groups:**

1. Partnering with a local organization such as a school or nonprofit to provide resources such as meeting space, presentation equipment, copying and postage/mailing may be the only funding source your group needs.
2. State education foundations, state and local education departments, federal agencies, private foundations, nonprofit organizations, local businesses, and service organizations such as Optimist clubs are all possible avenues for funding.
3. Local organizations provide the best funding opportunities for parent groups, so networking is vital if you are looking for funding to offset costs. Contacts made through the chamber of commerce, civic organizations, volunteer activities, fundraising events for charities or religious institutions, and your children's extracurricular events all offer opportunities for connecting with people in the business community.
4. Check with the local chamber of commerce for a listing of businesses and industries in your region. Corporations commonly provide funding through a local outlet or office, and may give your group a donation of cash, products, or services. In return, you offer the company a sign at your events, a thank-you in your newsletter, and other considerations.
5. Lowe’s Charitable and Educational Foundation is a community program giving away $5 million in grants aimed specifically at parent groups. Grants of up to $5,000 are available. They are awarded to support a wide range of projects, but preference is given to projects that encourage parent involvement and build community spirit. [www.toolboxforeducation.com](http://www.toolboxforeducation.com)
**Online Parent Support Groups:** Online support groups were the #1 ranked source for support groups in 2011. This is mostly because of the flexibility not only in time but also the location and pace that you participate. One of the things that detour parents from online support is they are afraid of receiving misinformation. Ensure that your organization is able provide expert guidance and set up ground rules for the group. 85% of online support groups that do not take charge, fail. Ensure when you post the online group that members know questions/comments are encouraged however; professional advice needs to be left up to the “director/leader” of the group. Also, allowing members to be anonymous has made a huge difference in the success of online support groups. Some people feel as they need support but do not feel comfortable stating who they are. Ways online communities connect can include:

- Mailing lists: Allow a large group of people to send email messages to everyone subscribed on the list
- Message Boards: This has been the most successful online support group
- Online Chats: Some find these difficult because of the fast pace

Successful message boards and forums can be found at: [http://millermom.proboards.com](http://millermom.proboards.com) and [www.bily.org/community](http://www.bily.org/community)

**South Dakota Parent Connection** supports and assists parents across the state by connecting them to information, resources, and training to ensure that the *health, education, and other special needs* of their children are met. All services provided are free to families. South Dakota Parent Connection also offers the SD Navigator Program, a free program that can provide one-on-one assistance in building partnerships between parents and schools. Visit our website for more information. [www.sdparent.org](http://www.sdparent.org). Phone: (toll-free) 1-800-640-4553, 605-361-3171 (Sioux Falls) and 605-348-0305 (Rapid City); e-mail sdpc@sdparent.org

**SAMPLE FORMS**

Sample directory of members completed by each new member with pertinent information form:

**DIRECTORY:**

Parents name: _________________________________________________________
Address: _____________________________________________________________
Telephone: ________________________
Child(ren)'s name: ______________________________
Other children's names: ________________________________________________
Subjects of interest:
  ____ Speech therapy  ____ Hearing problems  ____ Respite care
  ____ Play therapy  ____ Grieving process  ____ Parenting skills
  ____ Vision problems  ____ Eating problems  ____ Orientation & mobility
CALLING ALL PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS AND DEAFBLINDNESS!

A special meeting is being called to organize a Parent Group at Our Town School.

DATE: October 1, 2012  
TIME: 6:00 - 7:30 p.m.  
PLACE: Our Town Public Library Conference Center

ISSUES TO BE DISCUSSED: Educational programs for the a child with visual impairments or deaf-blindness

COME TO THE MEETING AND SHARE YOUR OPINIONS!

For more information call: Joe and Jane Deer at 555-0000 or Sally Smith at 555-1111.

OR

Parents of Children with Learning Differences,

If you would like to know more about the Learning Differences parent support group . . .  
If you would like help organizing a parent group . . .  
If you would like to work with a group for improved access to services for children with learning differences...

The Learning Differences Parent Support Group would like to meet you.

Call: ______ or ________

Email:

Write:

Sources:


National Parent Teacher Association [www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)

Because I Love You [www.bily.org](http://www.bily.org)

US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

Circle of Parents [www.circleofparents.org](http://www.circleofparents.org)

[http://www.tsbvi.edu/seehear/summer97/parent.html](http://www.tsbvi.edu/seehear/summer97/parent.html)
http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/promoting/support_groups_resources.cfm

www.sengifted.org


www.whatworks.uwex.edu

www.pkids.org

www.ptotoday.com