

4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders

As a support group leader, you know how important your group is to adoptive, foster and kinship families who participate. Effective leadership and facilitation of support groups is a critical element of the success, vitality, and sustainability of the group. This tip sheet will focus on four keys for successful facilitation of your group meetings: engage, enlist, equip and explore.

1. Engage

People come to support groups for a variety of reasons, but the most significant hunger that a support group can satisfy is the desire for human connection and relationship-building. The group facilitator plays a crucial role in creating those opportunities for connection. The ability to engage and connect with every participant at every meeting is a necessary skill for you as a facilitator. Your role is to create a safe space people will want to come back to. Some tools to enhance engagement include:

- **Welcome**—Arrive ahead of other participants to set up the room and see to logistics, and also to personally greet each participant. Use this opportunity to acknowledge things that may have happened between meetings, such as “How did that IEP meeting at Jared’s school go?” The personal welcome also gives you a chance to gauge moods, learn about critical events in the lives of
- participants, and offer suggestions to assist in making the meeting go better. For example, by offering to spend a few extra minutes at the end of the meeting with a highly frustrated parent, you may be able to head-off their possible derailment of the meeting.
- **Be personal**—Know the names of participants and help them learn each other’s names. The simple sharing of names enhances a sense of connection while also helping participants become and remain present with one another. Use creative name tags (provide craft supplies, stickers, “googly-eyes,” or other tools to decorate name tags). Play icebreaker games focused on building and deepening relationships. A year into the support group, participants may not remember every detail of specific topical content, but they will definitely remember the relationships they developed and this is what will keep them coming back.
- **Create safety**—Begin by developing a set of group agreements or meeting guidelines. Also referred to as ground rules, these guidelines serve multiple purposes. They help maintain a sense of shared responsibility and safety within the group, they support a variety of learning and engagement styles, and they provide a tool to help facilitators prevent or resolve conflicts or challenging dynamics. Once these agreements have been established, reaffirm them at the start of each meeting.

Other strategies for creating safety include being thoughtful and intentional about how the seating is arranged and providing comforting beverages and snacks, fidget toys, coloring materials, tissues, and access to a side room or other space where a person can step out for a moment of quiet reflection if needed during the meeting.

- **Begin well**—Develop a specific ritual or routine for the first 5 to 10 minutes of each meeting. This may include icebreakers and review of group agreements, but can also include such basics as announcements or a quick review of important items from the previous meeting. During these opening minutes the facilitator should make eye contact and personally connect with each person in the room.
- **End well**—Endings are as important as beginnings. Establish in your group agreements if the group prioritizes ending on time and remind participants of this agreement at each meeting. If one or more participants need a little extra time to discuss a personal matter or to decompress from emotional content, you should be available for this, while still winding down and ending the meeting on time for other participants. A simple ending ritual such as going around the room to ask each person to share one word that describes their take-away from the meeting can provide effective closure. Clear boundaries and rituals for starting and ending meetings help participants bring their full selves into the conversation.

Common group agreements

Support groups work better when everyone agrees how to use time and interact with one another. Developing norms collectively promotes group cohesion and provides a useful tool for the facilitator when group dynamics become challenging. Below are some suggested group agreements to get your conversations started.

- *Confidentiality*
- *Be respectful*—How each person defines respect varies culturally. Determine as a group how you want to define respectful behavior.
- *One person speaks at a time*
- *Participate*—Group members take responsibility for their own group involvement. Strategies to achieve balanced participation within the group can include “step up, step back” and a “three-then-me²” guideline.
- *Listen with empathy*—Listen to others without judgment and assume good intentions.
- *Land the plane*—This is a gentle way of asking participants to get to the point of their comment. It helps keep the group on topic during discussion.
- *Everyone’s contributions and experiences are valued*
- *It’s okay to disagree*—Disagree respectfully and remind the group that not every disagreement needs to be voiced.
- *Manage your phone respectfully*—Put phones on vibrate and step out of the circle when taking a call or text.

1 “Step back, step up” encourages those who tend to talk more to occasionally step back to make space for others, while those who are naturally quiet listeners are encouraged to occasionally step forward and offer their insights.

2 A “three-then-me” guideline asks participants that have just spoken to allow three others to speak up before they speak again.

2. Enlist

While facilitators provide invaluable guidance, structure, and leadership for support groups, the experience is best for all when everyone brings their full self to the group. In a TED Talk on meeting facilitation, Jay Vogt suggests that facilitators, “design meetings in a way that will bring out the best in people.” The goal, then, is not merely to engage, but also to enlist participants as co-experts, sharing the leadership and responsibility for the success of the group as a whole. Several facilitation strategies support this key element of enlisting members, including:

- **Choose a facilitation model**—Give careful thought to the model of facilitation that will best serve the goals of your group. Within these models, leaders will need to make decisions about whether facilitator(s) should be drawn from agency professionals or shared by both peers and professionals.
- **Share tasks**—While you as facilitator need to attend to pre-meeting preparation and post-meeting follow-up duties, you can also enlist others in a variety of task-oriented roles before, during, and after meetings. This not only relieves pressure on the facilitator, freeing up your time and attention to manage meeting dynamics and relationship-building, it also is a necessary step in raising up the next cadre of leaders for the group. Tasks can include organizing refreshments, childcare, or transportation; sitting next to newcomers; or leading a portion of the discussion.
- **Attend to group dynamics**—Every person responds differently to being in a group setting. While some participants may inadvertently monopolize a conversation, others may be hesitant

to speak at all. Recognizing the unique dynamics of your group and being proactive in managing this dynamic can help everyone feel supported and included. Participants who are not comfortable sharing verbally may become more engaged when they have a specific task or role, such as time keeper or notetaker. Those who tend to dominate or move discussions off-track are better managed by enlisting them in concrete roles than by silencing, ignoring, or shaming.

Conflict is also a normal, and even healthy, part of group dynamics, especially when a group is considering difficult topics. It may be tempting to try to avoid conflict in your group, but over time your group may lose energy and its effectiveness and value may be lost if the group simply avoids addressing conflicting views or difficult conversations. Rather than avoiding conflict, pay attention to group dynamics to redirect negative energy into positive energy. Reframing questions or comments, staying aware of participants’ body-language and positioning, and encouraging positive, strengths-based group assessment can help the group to move effectively through difficult topics without avoiding conflict.

3. Equip

Every support group will develop its own unique identity and define its own reason for being. At the same time, all groups generally have the same broad goal: to provide a safe and consistent venue that strengthens, supports, educates, and empowers families to successfully parent the children in their home while encouraging their own health and well-being. To accomplish these goals, facilitators need to be intentional about equipping partic-

participants with communication and problem-solving tools to use both during the meeting times and to transfer to other settings at home and in the community.

Plan meeting agendas and activities to cultivate—through modeling, articulating, recognizing, teaching, and nurturing—these important skills:

- **Be a self-aware leader**³—Learn to be self-aware by knowing your own boundaries, limits, strengths, trauma triggers, emotional landmines, and strategies for coping with conflict or stress. Be intentional about using your own emotional regulation, self-care, and coping skills and sharing with the group how these tools help you stay focused and engaged. Learn about, practice, and demonstrate strategic sharing (what to say, when, and how much detail to include) so that you can talk about your own story in ways that contribute to the group in a constructive way.
- **Manage time and take breaks**—In addition to ensuring that meetings start and end on time, build in breaks, snacks, and opportunities for movement. Discussions in support group meetings are often emotionally rich, and can be intense or even triggering for some participants. Providing breaks and alternating between heavier content and lighter activities, such as games, hands-on crafts, or planning for a fundraiser or social event, can support everyone’s well-being and participation.

- **Use meaningful communication strategies**—Structure your meeting agendas and activities to use tools that equip participants to provide mutual support—activities that generate empathy and reflective listening—such as story circles⁴ or pairs-to-squares⁵ to delve into questions that may be too intense to immediately discuss as a large group. Reframe challenging, shaming, blaming, or offensive statements or questions. A support group in Louisiana coined a communication strategy they call “default to trust and mine for understanding.”
 - *Default to trust*—when someone says something you don’t understand or agree with, or that you find offensive, begin by defaulting to trust. Assume good intent on the part of the other person
 - *Mine for understanding*—rather than responding defensively, ask questions that seek clarification, using phrases such as “help me to understand.”

4. Explore

The fourth key to effective facilitation is the capacity to help participants explore the topics, themes, and issues that are of interest and concern to them. An effective facilitator has to be in tune with the group enough to genuinely understand the participants’ needs and interests as well as to gently lead

³ More information on self-awareness for parent group leaders can be found in the AdoptUSKids publication, *7 Characteristics of Successful Parent-Support Group Leaders*.

⁴ A story circle is a small group of people take turns sharing their experiences with each other to encourage active listening, empathy, and mutual support. For more information about story circles, visit workingnarratives.org/article/story-circles.

⁵ “Pairs-to-squares” is an activity involving participants talking over a question or topic in pairs for a set time, and then each pair joins up with another pair—making a square—to share their reflections as a group of four.

and guide this exploration. One way to do this is to conduct periodic needs assessments. You can use a guided conversation, take-home worksheet, or online survey as a way to gauge current needs, interests, and concerns. In addition, the following strategies support meaningful exploration in the support group context.

- **Vary meeting styles**—Some parents will feel most engaged when there is a specific topic, perhaps with a speaker, and resources or materials for learning. Such topics can range from advocacy skill-building to hair care to attachment and trauma-responsive parenting. Other parents will come looking for an open forum where everyone can share, listen to, learn from, and problem solve one another's stories. An effective facilitator can work to ensure both models are used throughout the course of a year.
- **Provide discussion guides and resources**—When topic-based meetings are planned, use thoughtful discussion guides to structure the conversation. You should also identify quality resources on the topic that you can share with group members. Discussion guides are particularly useful when addressing topics that are value laden, controversial, or where participants have widely differing areas of knowledge or expertise. Discussion guides also allow facilitators to manage a meeting on topics where they are not subject-matter experts. Finally, a good discussion guide can minimize the need to have speakers for every topic by effectively harnessing and using the expertise in the room.
- **Know the resources in the area**—As a facilitator, you may want to attend orientation and informational meetings about various resources in your community so you have accurate, current, and useful information to share with participants. Not every challenge can be solved in the context of a support group meeting, and having knowledge of and access to an array of community resources can really help as you seek to connect group participants to other helpful services.
- **Collaborate on future plans**—A good facilitator is always thinking ahead. What topics, activities, and events will build upon the foundation created? What new goals are waiting around the corner to be addressed? Is our venue, timing of meetings, approach to childcare and refreshments, and use of the agenda still meaningful and conducive to the current strengths and needs of the group? Avoid the temptation to do future planning in isolation or with only a small committee. Engage the full group in a collaborative approach to moving into the future. This will secure increased engagement and enhance the likelihood of sustainability.

Resources

Find more resources for parent group leaders at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

Tip sheets

- *4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders* (2019)
- *7 Characteristics of Successful Parent-Support Group Leaders* (2019)
- *Self-Care Activities for Your Group* (2019)
- *Symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress* (2019)

Recorded webinars

- *Effective Facilitation of Parent Support Groups* (2018)
- *Engaging Parents and Caregivers in Support Groups* (2018)
- *Peer Support Strategies for Kinship, Foster, and Adoptive Families in Tribal Communities* (2019)
- *Successful Peer Leadership of Parent Support Groups* (2019)

If you want help developing your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families, we can help. Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org.



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