



Setting Up A Support Group

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In this session we will explore why parent support groups are important and how they can help.

By the end of this session you will understand what a support group can be and how it can help, know where you can go for help in setting up a support group and know how to set up a support group

1. Getting started

Before we proceed, it is important to consider what we mean by a support group, why people decide to set up support groups and how to go about setting up a support group.

What is a support group?

Support groups are formed for like-minded people to come together for mutual support.

Support groups can offer emotional

support through talking, listening and offering advice or, provide an activity such as a reading club.

Sharing similar common experiences and interests is at the heart of the support group.

Why set up a support group?

Friends and family do not always understand or know what you are going through when raising a child with a mental health condition.

It is nice to know there are other

parents who understand and know what emotional and practical needs you face.

Support groups can offer a safe and trusting place where everyone feels equal.

How do I set up a support group?

If a support group has been hard to find in your area, you may now be thinking of starting a group.

Speak to other like-minded parents to help you on your way. They may help with ideas and have experience of forming a group. It is helpful to do a bit of research now before you proceed.

The more you share ideas at this stage the more support you will have in running your group.



2. Defining your objectives

Firstly, think about the purpose of your group and what it is you want to achieve. Having structure to your group from the outset will give you a clear direction as to what your group's purpose is.

Key aims

Firstly, why do you want to start a group?
Secondly, what is the group's purpose and what do you want it to achieve?

Thirdly, where and when will your group meet?

Sit down and write a few lines to define this:

- What is my aim?
- Who is my group for and why?
- Is there a particular skill or activity required?
- What do I want to achieve from this?
- Are there other parents or other people with experience who will help me set up my group?

3. Advertising your support group

Once your objectives are clear you can start to think about your first meeting.

It can take time for a group to grow so you must be prepared to advertise your support group.

Finding like-minded people

Consider where you might advertise your group to like-minded people.

Try GP surgeries, local mental health teams, libraries, churches, schools, post offices and other support groups.

Re-visit these methods regularly... if you put a poster up in your library you will need to check that it hasn't been taken down or covered up a few weeks later.

Use your professional contacts

Use your professional contacts (e.g. your child's psychiatrist).

Ask them to promote your group to the parents they support and other professionals they network with.

Ask voluntary, private and public organisations to promote your group for you too.

Mix things up

Use a range of publicity methods... it is better to promote your group in many different ways.

Design some eye-catching posters to let people know about your first meeting.



Don't forget word of mouth and personal invitations... there is nothing better than a recommendation.

Have an online presence

Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are easy to use, free and instant.

Most people are already familiar with using social media and there are many groups with a dedicated page that you can add to.

Contact your local press

Your local newspaper will generally welcome a story about community support and involvement, particularly if they are able to get a photograph too.



4. Your first meeting

It can take time for a group to grow so don't worry if there are only a few of you to start off with.

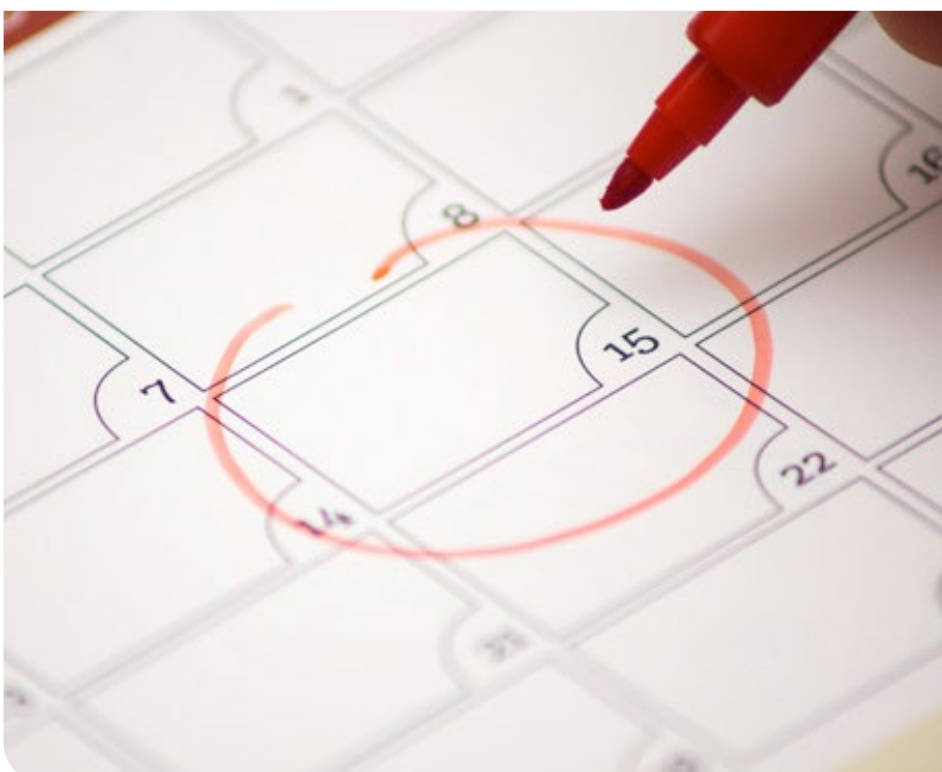
You know what your focus is but it is important to welcome other people's ideas and contributions.

Preparing an agenda

Keep your group's business simple and informal at this very early stage.

Prepare a simple agenda covering:

- Your aims and your idea so far
- Is there another organisation or charity running a similar group that you could buddy up with for support and advice
- What should the group do and what expertise can its members offer (e.g. treasurer, cake baking, website designer) – ask people to take part in an exercise of their strengths and weaknesses for fun
- Discuss what times and frequency to meet
- Is the group 'open' or 'closed'
- Will you need funds to run the group – if so, what for?
- You may have thought of a group name – choosing a name can be a fun exercise and should reflect its identity. This may be useful to have on the agenda for the next meeting



Inviting a speaker

You may wish to invite a speaker to your very first meeting to talk about something topical and of interest to the parents you wish to support.

Many speakers will offer their time for free (e.g. inviting an organisation to talk about your young person and sleep issues).

A 30-minute meeting after the talk could be held to discuss your new group idea over tea and cake.

Scheduling your meetings

If you can run the meeting once during the day and again in the evening there is the opportunity to involve other people (e.g. those with full-time jobs).

Before each meeting

Agree a set of ground rules with existing group members to avoid clashes and cliques and welcome new members.

Designate an existing member of the group and give him or her responsibility to welcome new members.

During each meeting

Make sure that the ground rules for your group are on display and refer to them.

Acknowledge your new members, thank them for coming and introduce them to the other members of the group.

Allow time to listen to new members and encourage them to voice their opinions.

Remain sensitive to the emotional needs of new members.

After each meeting

Ask if the meeting was helpful and if the group can help in any other way.

Ensure that new members have details of the next meeting and of the group contact person.

Encourage new members to leave their name and contact details for your mailing.

You may follow up with a friendly phone call after the meeting.

5. The finer details

As your group progresses, you may find it necessary to seek help from elsewhere. In addition, take care to avoid the potential pitfalls that may arise.

Help and advice

Local infrastructure organisations such as the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) can provide helpful advice, guidance and resources for new support groups. They will have local knowledge on funding support, networking and membership opportunities.

Parent forums and other support groups can help you in reaching other parents.

Sources of funding

Don't get hung up on fundraising if your group is designed for a coffee and chat.

If your group has running costs then it is often easier to find funds locally.

Potential sources of funding include:

- Your local Council for Voluntary Service
- Local businesses (e.g. supermarkets)



have a corporate social responsibility policy to support community groups

- Your local Rotary Club, Lions or Masons
- Locality budgets from your parish or county council

If necessary, consider asking group members for a regular contribution towards costs (e.g. refreshments).

Potential pitfalls

Check that your venue has public liability insurance.

There are several legal forms to choose from suitable for your group's aims and size. Choosing the right legal structure will have an impact on future development.

6. What can I learn from other people's experiences?

Mary's story

Mary has run a support group for the last 8 years and is giving advice to Jane on setting up a group for the first time.

Can you tell me about your experience of running your group?

I have had 8 years experience of

running a group. I set up a group for the parents of children with mental health issues (my daughter self harms). As a parent, I was feeling isolated and wanted to link up with others who were dealing with the same issues that I was. I produced some flyers and my psychiatrist handed them out to other parents on my behalf; the local paper ran a news story and I simply told everyone I met to spread the word. I didn't really have anywhere to meet at first and approached my local coffee shop who was delighted to support me and even reserved some tables for me for my first meeting. It took a good year before I could say I was running a group with committed members who were happy to help.

What challenges have you faced?

Doing everything on my own for the first few months... be prepared for this. However, if you make all your new members feel valued and ask for advice and suggestions it gives them a sense that the group is 'their group'. Start by asking your members to go on a simple rota of picking up the milk so you build a 'committee' feel. It helps at the beginning to ask if parents are prepared to share any of their expertise or knowledge and have a sheet which can



list anything from cake baking to having a brother for a local councillor (laughs). I feel like I am a counsellor as so much of our lives is emotive so it has helped to belong to a consortium of support groups where we meet every 3 months to share with one another how we are getting on and managing conflict with members is perhaps something I was worried about the most but it hasn't really been an issue so far.

What would be your three top tips for other people?

Tip number one – always remind yourself that Rome wasn't built in a day. Don't expect hundreds of parents to be contacting you. Two is company after all and sometimes just me and one other person getting together was as productive as ten people.

Tip number two – form some ground rules for your group and have them on display. I have put them up on a piece of wallpaper with birds and flowers all over and written down five rules which we all agreed on democratically as a 'team' and they are Listen respectfully; Be positive; Be kind to one another; Don't judge; and Value each other's uniqueness! If ever there is any conflict I can point to the wall (laughs again)

Tip number three – get in speakers to talk about topics of interest and relevance... it's a great way to attract new members. Don't lose sight of them.

What Else?

MindEd for Families

Speaking Up For Your Child
Keeping Ourselves Strong
Parenting The Child With Issues
Finding Helpful Information and Using It Well

Websites

Association of Charitable Foundations: <http://www.acf.org.uk/>

Contact A Family. What outfit do we need? Legal structures for local and national support groups in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales: http://www.cafamily.org.uk/media/831215/2015_-_legal_structures.pdf

GOV.UK. The Charity Commission: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission>

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action. Membership directory: <http://data.navca.org.uk/members/directory>

National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Volunteering: <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-volunteering>

Safe Network: <http://www.safenetwork.org.uk>