Tip Sheet

LEADING ADOPTIVE PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS:
Tips and Guidelines for Adoption Professionals

Leading adoptive parent support groups can be a great way to promote learning, growth, and community.

Support groups are a common way to bring individuals with some affinity together – and adoptive parent support groups can be useful for parents to be with others who may have a better ability to understand the unique dynamics of having a family formed by adoption. Consider whether having a support group leader with lived experience or professional experience is best – or whether having both serve as co-leaders is the best approach.

Planning for Success

Before the first support group meeting, many decisions need to be made. Some initial key considerations include:

- Format of the group (in-person or virtual meetings)

- Location of the group

- Frequency of meetings

- Group size

- Start time and length of meetings

- Type of content (discussion focused, presentation focused, etc.)

- Other offerings during the meeting (e.g., childcare, snacks/meals, etc.)

- Group eligibility (e.g., is this only for adoptive parents – are prospective adoptive parents or others allowed to join? Do you want to separate by type of adoption, or have a group specific to families that adopt a child of another race?)

Some of these decisions will be made based on the purpose of the adoptive parent support group – for example, if the intent is to provide ongoing training, it will likely be less focused on peer discussion and more on educational material. Other decisions may be impacted by budget capacity – for example, snacks/meals and childcare will have associated costs. Additional decisions may be made by the larger group and could change over the course of the group; for example, if the group begins meeting once a month and later decides to meet every two weeks.

Communication and Setting Expectations

Once the contours of the adoption support group are established, it will be time to craft a strategy for dissemination/outreach to potential group participants. When reaching out to prospective participants, it can be helpful to provide information that explains the purpose of the support group, the eligibility of potential members, and logistical information (e.g., date, time, location); it can also be a way to share other pertinent information that may impact a potential participants' decision-making.

Utilizing multiple forms of outreach may help reach more potential participants; for example, along with sending emails, an organization can also post through social media channels. When possible, having outreach from a professional who is already connected to the prospective

participants can lead toward increased participation. For example, if the outreach comes from a family's caseworker, they may be more open to joining the group. State adoption professionals seeking to recruit participants for a post-adoption support group may benefit from partnering with private agencies that conduct private domestic and intercountry adoption services in their community. Partnering with other agencies will expand the opportunity for a larger network of prospective support group participants.

During Your Meetings

Once the hard work of planning and communicating with potential group members has happened, you'll be ready for the first meeting. As the group leader, seek to show up early and make sure the meeting location can be easily located. If you will be utilizing any audio/visual equipment, such as a video or presentation slides, it is advised to complete sound and visual checks to make sure those components are working as expected.

At the start of your meeting, begin by introducing yourself and remind attendees of the group's purpose. Proceed by letting the group know what to expect during the meeting; this can be as simple as a brief overview of the meeting's agenda. After addressing some of the group's "ground rules," the discussion can begin with a general opening question that serves as an icebreaker to get the group talking and acquainted with one another.

Using External Content

It is not necessary for the group leader to create all the content from scratch. It may be that the group can watch a short video or listen to a podcast and then the group can enter into a discussion about the topic they learned about. Using media like this can create a way to break up a longer discussion. The media content may also be a natural way to raise new topics or issues that have not surfaced from the group.

Tips for Facilitating a Group Conversation

- Pay attention to who has and has not shared. If one person is dominating the conversation, the group leader can interject to help ensure others get a chance to participate.

- Be mindful to begin and end your meetings on time; this can let your participants plan to fit these sessions into their schedules.

- Give an opportunity for new group members to introduce themselves to the larger group, but don't put them on the spot to share deeply personal information right away.

- For the second and all subsequent sessions, you can offer brief reminders of some of the previous topics discussed.

- Remind the group of the "ground rules" (e.g., confidentiality, respect, etc.).

- It is okay if group members have and share differing views or opinions, but the group leader should be prepared to step in if a conversation becomes uncivil. If there are meetings where you expect discussion topics to raise differing opinions, it can be helpful to level-set with participants at the beginning of the meeting and remind group members of their common goals for the discussion.

Resource Spotlight!

The National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) has created many brief training videos on topics relevant to foster and adoptive families. These free online, on-demand videos can be a great way to engage a support group and help focus on a particular topic of interest. There is also a free Guide for Facilitating the Right-Time Trainings **during a support group. The guide provides suggestions on support group structure for each of the Right-Time Trainings including sample group questions and take-home resources.**

Between Meetings

The support group leader does not just work during the support group meetings but also plays critical roles between meetings to help ensure the group's work is successful.

Prepare for future meetings—Developing or identifying content for support group meetings is a crucial aspect of the leaders' role. This includes the specific content that will be focused on at the next meeting, but it also means having an overarching framework for what the group will cover in its entirety. Instead of advanced planning everything in detail, leave room to adjust content based on the needs that arise during meetings.

Send reminders—Sending regular reminders to group members about the timing and location of group meetings – along with any other helpful reminders, such as information about food or childcare availability – can be a useful way to help ensure that group members come prepared and on time for the group's sessions. Even for groups that have been meeting consistently, sending friendly reminders can be a helpful way to encourage attendance and help make managing schedules easier.

Check-in on group members—If there are group members who have been absent without any explanation or group members who have recently shared difficult experiences they are dealing with, checking in on an individual basis with these members outside of the group can be a friendly way to demonstrate concern and support and encourage future group participation.

Check your calendar in advance—Regardless of whether you choose to meet weekly, monthly, bimonthly, or at some other cadence, if your group stays together long enough, you'll eventually run into a scheduling conflict (such as holidays and vacations) that requires you to either cancel or reschedule a meeting time. Forecasting this change in advance can help your participants plan ahead to ensure their calendars are updated accordingly.

Potential Topics for Adoption Support Groups

It may be that the topics your group chooses will come up naturally as the group forms and begins conversations about their experiences. However, some support groups leaders may be more comfortable by identifying topics in advance. Here are just some topics that could be of interest to an adoption support group:

- Separation, grief, and loss for adoptees.

- Birth family relationships.

- Search and reunion.

- Bonding and attachment.

- Incorporating race and culture.

- Trauma-informed parenting.

- Promoting positive mental health and self-esteem.

- Teenage identity formation.

- Unknown family health history and genetic testing.

Ongoing Groups

If you've been hosting an ongoing group for a while the dynamic of the group may change, where the role of leader is less important for facilitating conversation. In these situations,

the group leader should still be mindful to ensure everyone is participating and to raise new topics for the group's consideration and growth. When a group has been established and relationships are forged, the group leader may want to consider limiting new participants. Consider what the impact will be of adding new members to the existing group. If the group has built a strong rapport, adding new members may disrupt an environment where the existing members learn to trust each other to share what may be difficult or vulnerable topics. Additionally, once a group is relatively established, new members may feel like they don't fit in, which might discourage engagement from those families. Getting buy-in from the group before making such determinations can help ensure the group's cohesion and collaboration.

In Conclusion

As the group leader, it can be helpful to remind yourself that every group will have challenges and that it is normal for some meetings to go smoothly and others to feel unsuccessful. The relationships built during a support group are what make these meetings special – by fostering and facilitating a community that values support for one another, the formation of a support group can quickly become an important community for the group members.

To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:
www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library