

Guidelines for running a Support Group

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Why have a support group?

- To provide parents with a space to talk about their concerns about their highly able child without being judged.
- A chance for parents to share both problems and solutions
- To offer each other psychological support and empowerment in dealing with teachers, schools etc.
- To share strategies for working with teachers and schools
- To share strategies for parenting highly able children.
- A chance to get the children together socially, to make friends and share ideas.

First decide on the focus of your support group. This can be done at your first or second meeting and at intervals throughout the life of your group. You could opt for any of these three options:

- Parent Support Group -- Some parents need a chance to share their frustrations and joys of raising a gifted child, whether those joys and frustrations come from the school or the home environment.
- Advocacy Group -- Some parents want to see changes made in their child's education. Those changes may be in their child's classroom, the entire school or the entire school system.
- A mixture of both

It may be best to begin as a parent support group as that is very often the first need of the parents and then evolve into an advocacy group. If your group has begun to be 'talked out' regarding their highly able children and numbers are dropping it may be time to think about changing the focus to an advocacy one. It could also mean that parents have got what they needed from the group and no longer require it. You will have new members come and old ones leave periodically, this is nothing personal just part of the group process.

How will you structure your group?

Have a structured time where conversation remains in the whole group.

- Start by introductions to any new members
- Ask if anyone has anything they want to talk about in this meeting
- Make sure the quiet people are not overlooked
- Don't force anyone to speak
- Could end the meeting by deciding on date of next meeting or organizing an outing for the children
- Then group can break into smaller groups to chat or can go home

You might also like to have a theme for a night and have someone come prepared to talk about something – don't take this on yourself every week or you will quickly become burnt out.

How often will you meet?

- Meeting too often will discourage people from joining your group.
- Not meeting often enough can cause people to lose interest. In addition, if your group is an advocacy group, meeting too infrequently will not allow you to get much accomplished.
- Every 6 weeks to 2 months is probably about right
- Make sure you decide as a group (as far as possible get decisions to be made by the whole group – avoid being looked to for all the answers as you need support too).

Decide if you will meet over the summer

- People tend to lose interest in school-related issues over the summer months and also have numerous summer activities to keep them busy, so attendance at meetings tends to drop
- On the other hand, some people have more free time during the summer months and so will be more willing to attend meetings.
- Some groups choose family activities, such as an annual picnic, rather than meetings in the summer to keep people from losing interest.

Where will you meet?

- You need a place to meet initially. Groups start out small, so you probably don't need a large room.
- If you don't know the people who will be coming meet in a public place such as the lobby of a hotel or a quiet bar or café. This is for your own safety.
- Once the group is established it may be easier to meet in someone's house.

How do you can people to come?

- Contact the support group co-ordinator at the IAGC (Dorothy Armstrong dorothyarmstrong@eircom.net) and she will liaise with you regarding possible members in your area
- Contact local newspapers and ask them to advertise your group's meetings. Most newspapers have a community news section which lists meetings and community events.
- Create a simple flyer about your group and its purpose (include the meeting time and place). Distribute the flyer in your local library, local grocery stores and any place else you can think of.

- Contact schools and let them know about your group. They may even be willing to distribute your flyer.
- Meet in a public place (not your own home) for groups whose members have been recruited in a non face to face manner.

How many people should be in a group?

- 8 people is the ideal number for a group.
- If your group is larger than 12 it is time to think about forming a new group
- Small groups of 4 or 5 are probable the most likely number for a support group as the population of highly able children is small.
- If your group members no longer need the group and stop coming, don't be discouraged – new members will come along and you will have lots of experience to share with them.

Some general tips

- Don't allow your meetings to turn into complaint sessions. Not only is that unproductive, it is also deadly to the growth of a parent group – the group gets stuck in a negative groove and people become disempowered and angry.
- You could think about having a different topic of discussion for each meeting. People are more likely to be drawn by a specific topic (i.e. communicating with your highly able child)
- Don't feel as though you must be an expert on everything related to highly able children. You can learn along with those who attend your meetings. Prepare for meetings by reading about the topic chosen for that meeting, and if you can, bring copies of one piece to distribute to those who attend. If that's not possible, simply bring a list of suggested articles or books to read, along with where to find them (a Web address, for example).
- Rotate the leadership and the organization of outings for the children.
- Encourage group members to bring along any interesting books they've read or toys/games that they've found useful.

Groups go through a series of stages – some can be tough so its best to know in advance and understand that this is natural.

Stage 1: Forming

- Dependant on group facilitator's direction
- They feel self-conscious and worry about what other people might think of what they say
- There is a lack of clarity about appropriate behaviour and the nature of leadership
- There will be a low involvement in planning – so you may have to do the donkey work for a while but don't let this become the norm
- Polite conversation – few disagreements

Stage 2: Storming

This is a tough but inevitable stage of any group. Many groups will split at this point if they don't understand that this is normal. It's important to hang on in there, this time passes and remember it's not your fault but actually a sign of a healthy group.

- Conflict – group members may begin to disagree with each other. Don't be intimidated by this – it is far better for them to do this openly than behind each other's backs. Disagreement can be very constructive.
- Sub-groups – Discourage sub-groups talking negatively about other group members. It is natural for sub-groups of friends to form and this is to be encouraged as long as the group can remain open to new members.
- Leadership can be challenged – see this as a positive thing, let other people who are trustworthy take the reins for a while, share leadership as much as possible.
- People's ideas can clash – again that's OK, you don't have to 'fix it'.
- People may become competitive as they try to sort out their role within the group – let people try out different roles e.g. organising an outing for the children, organising date and venue of next meeting etc.

Stage 3: Norming

- Norms emerge within the group – people feel less awkward and more at home being there.
- People feel free to communicate their views and feelings
- Group can make clear plans together and are ready to move into an advocacy mode if they wish to do so.
- There is harmony in the group and it is a safe place to be.
- Leader is less identifiable
- People are more willing to listen to one another.

Stage 4: Performing

- Leadership is flexible and appropriate
- Jobs start getting done
- Group roles become Flexible.
- Groups are constructive
- Disagreement is OK

It can be difficult at times but don't be dismayed it's well worth the effort. It can be helpful to share these group stages with your group as they can be discouraged during the storming phase too. Some times if a lot of new members join you may have to begin these stages again! Sometimes the storming stage only lasts for one meeting. Again if you're needing any help or advice with your group email me.

What is a group facilitator?

A facilitator is a person responsible for structuring groups and group activities in a manner that supports and encourages the participation of all members and allows the group to attain its goals and objectives. The role of the facilitator initially can include:

- Control time limits – when group starts and finishes
- Organize venue, communicate times.
- Organize seating – a circle is best so that everyone can see each other.
- Decide on how the discussion will proceed – remember you manage the structure of the discussion (e.g. begin with discussion of any difficulties group members are having, discuss suggested solutions) NOT content (not what each individual has to contribute).
- Keep the group on task (avoid tangents) and avoid moving away from topics of importance e.g. don't allow some-one to spend the night talking about their holidays, there will be people there who have come for support, it may be hard for them to get to a meeting and they may not come back if they feel it will not address their needs.
- Ensure everyone who wants to speak has time to do so and that no one person monopolizes.

What are the characteristics of an effective leader?

- Creates a positive environment – makes people feel welcome.
- Solicits participation from all members
- Values contributions of each member
- Varies techniques for group decision-making
- Skilled in asking questions
- Good at listening

Questions that encourage people to speak and prevent individuals from talking all the time?

- “Who else has an idea?”
- “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken for awhile.”
- “Can anyone else relate to that?”
- “ You were saying something similar to that earlier on could you add to that”
- “What does everyone else think?”
- “Would you like to speak to this?”
- “What are your ideas?”
- “Did you want to add anything?”
- “You looked like you wanted to say something.” (Only if they actually did look like they wanted to say something – be aware of body language).

A Summary of your Role

- Create Safe, Supportive Environment

How?

- Accept
- Encourage
- Observe
- Listen
- Support

Most of all, know you're doing a really good thing, sometimes it will be wonderful, sometimes very tough but always very needed!!

Contact me for any help, advice or even if you just need a sounding board. I may also be able to help you locate other parents of highly able children in your area.

Have Fun!

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