

FOSTER / ADOPTIVE PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS



STARTING A SUPPORT GROUP



SHOULD YOU START A GROUP?

Before starting a support group for foster and adoptive families, first determine if there are existing support groups in your community for foster, kinship or adoptive parents. Consider joining with an existing group or identify any gaps in the current groups and determine if a new group could fill that need. Perhaps there is a group for adoptive families, but not for foster or kinship families. Perhaps there is a day-time group that works for stay-at-home parents, but there is a need for an evening or weekend group.



GROUP TYPE

In addition to the standard, in-person support group, consider non-traditional types of groups, such as video conferencing groups or online groups. A closed Facebook group is an inexpensive way to facilitate an online group. Depending on the size, Google Hangouts is an inexpensive way to host a video group.

What is the need this group will meet? Who might attend?

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FREQUENCY

Typically, groups meet once or twice monthly. Meeting more often may be challenging for leaders. Meeting less often makes it difficult to build relationships. Some groups host one meeting and one family activity each month.



LOCATION

When selecting a location consider accessibility. If it is a two-story building does it have an elevator? Is there ample parking? Is it centrally located? Is it semi-private? Cost is also a factor to consider. Finding a free location is always best. Most churches will allow their building to be used at no cost for something like this, provided it doesn't interfere with their other meetings or activities. But if you have concerns that the community might think your group is just for one particular church and not open to everyone, you might want to find a more neutral location such as a library, room at a school or college, or coffee shop with a private meeting room.

How many will be attending?

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How often will the group meet?

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What are some possible locations?

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What are next steps in securing location?

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REFRESHMENTS

Depending on the time of your meeting, snacks and drinks are nice. To keep your costs down you could invite group members to bring snacks to share. Another alternative is to invite local restaurants or churches to provide snacks or a meal for one of the groups. If you meet monthly you only need to find 12 donors each year.



CHILD CARE

Because this is a group for parents (foster or adoptive) someone will need to watch the kids. You can ask people to arrange for their own child care, but it may decrease attendance. If you meet at a church or library, where there is a separate space for the kids, you can seek volunteers to help watch the children. It is important to have at least one volunteer who is knowledgeable about special needs of children who have experienced trauma and may have special needs or disabilities. You might need to pay to get someone who is qualified. You can either ask all the parents to share the cost or find a donor. You will likely need more than one person to supervise the kids, but if you have one adult who is well prepared to care for kids with special needs, you can supplement that with high school or college students or other adults who are willing to volunteer. Be sure and ask about child care worker requirements for the church or location you are considering. Many require workers, even volunteers to have a background check. This is highly recommended for the protection of children and adults. When possible, select care givers who are trauma informed.

Some groups use their church's regularly scheduled children's programs in lieu of childcare. For instance, the group meets during Awana on Wednesday night, or during a church service when multiple service times are offered.



PROMOTION

Since your target audience is limited to foster or adoptive parents, promoting it shouldn't be too difficult or expensive.

- **Social Media:** You could create a Facebook page or Instagram account (the two platforms most used by young moms) for the group, but you will likely have access to more people by posting on other existing accounts, such as your local Department of Human Services, County, City, churches, or groups specifically for foster or adoptive families. For a small fee you can pay to 'boost' the posts that announce your meeting.
- **Newsletters:** Foster and adoptive families are usually already associated with the foster care or adoption agency that licensed them, and these organizations typically send out monthly or quarterly newsletters. Simply ask to have a notice posted in their newsletters about your group.
- **Community Announcements:** Most newspapers, TV and radio stations set aside time/space to announce community events at no cost. They will usually require the information to be submitted several weeks or even a month in advance, so keep that in mind as you plan each meeting.
- **Churches:** If you are already working with local churches to recruit and support foster or adoptive families, they may be willing to promote your support group through their normal channels of announcements (newsletters, bulletins, video announcements, social media platforms)



COSTS

Determine costs associated with the group. Consider which items could be donated, such as meeting space or refreshments, and then look for sponsors. You can also consider charging a small fee to participants, especially if you are paying for childcare workers. Keep good financial records. If you must purchase items, be sure to save receipts and track expenses with your other financial records. Be sure to send thank you letters and tax receipts (as appropriate) to sponsors or donors.

SAMPLE BUDGET

Facility
Refreshments
Promotion
Materials
Speakers
Child Care
Other
TOTAL:



TRAINING HOURS

Many counties and agencies will count support group attendance as training recertification hours. This is especially true if training is provided during the meeting. An attendance check-in sheet, calendar of topics and training certificates may be needed to facilitate this for families. Check with applicable counties and agencies for requirements.

SET GROUND RULES

Set ground rules in advance. Invite participants to create the rules at the initial meeting. Post them on flip chart paper and work through them until everyone has had a chance to add to the list. Confirm that everyone agrees to the rules. This will make it easier to re-direct people during discussion. You only need to point to the agreed upon rules to re-direct the conversation. Save the flip chart to post on the wall each week and briefly review the group ground rules for new participants. Confirm that everyone agrees to the rules before starting the meeting. Some suggested ground rules include:

- Confidentiality: What's said in the group, stays in the group
- Everyone gets a chance to share
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Speak respectfully of everyone involved when sharing.
- Cell phones are silenced and no one reads texts/emails during group.
- No side conversations
- Parking Lot: Post a blank flip chart at the beginning of each meeting and when someone gets off topic, so it can be revisited later that night or at a future group.
- Be respectful. No unsolicited advice. Share personal experiences, but don't be judgmental or critical of others



LEAD WITH CONFIDENCE

All groups need a strong leader, but in the case of a support group that includes parents who are very overwhelmed and desperate for help, it is important to maintain order. The facilitator must stay in control of the meeting and keep it moving along. Be polite but firm. If the meeting is allowed to go off topic or one person is allowed to monopolize most of the discussion, people will stop attending. A few things to keep in mind:

- Redirect conversation that gets off topic. By using a meeting agenda, you can simply point to the agenda and remind the group what the topic is for the night, or that it's not the time to move into that part of the agenda yet. Use the Parking Lot as necessary.
- When one participant monopolizes the conversation, politely but firmly thank them for their comments and point out that we need to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to share.
- Encourage quiet individuals to speak out. Before transitioning to the next question or topic, look around the room and make sure that everyone has had a chance to speak.
- Allow people to pass if they aren't comfortable answering a question. While you do want to make sure quiet people are encouraged to speak, don't make anyone feel they must share.



PROVIDE A RESOURCE LIST

Providing a list of local resources can be very helpful for foster parents, especially kinship families who likely had less time to prepare for this new role. Many communities have a designated 211 Information and Referral Line. In many communities 211 is operated by the local United Way. Providing families with this link is best, as it is more likely to be kept updated. But if you don't have a 211 line or website in your community, you can gather a list of the most requested resources for foster/adoptive families. Checking with your local department of human services or local libraries are good places to start. As you bring in local experts as guest speakers for your group, you can add their resources to your list.



SELECT DISCUSSION TOPICS

When selecting topics for facilitated discussion or for a special guest speaker, always ask group members what they would like to discuss. A simple survey on SurveyMonkey, or a printed survey to hand out at the group, are good ways to get feedback. A few topics to get you started are on the following page.

What topics should we focus on first?

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What resources (books, podcasts, speakers, videos, blogs, etc.) should be used?

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What are the next steps to present these topics?

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DISCUSSION TOPIC IDEAS

- Helping kids identify their feelings, and appropriate ways to express their feelings
- Communicating with biological parents (may be different for kinship families)
- Communicating with the Kids in your Home
- "I" Statements and Solutions Based Communication
- Discipline vs. Punishment: Why Spanking Doesn't Work for Kids Who Have Been Abused and Alternative Behavior Management Techniques
- Trauma Informed Care
- TBRI (Trust Based Relational Intervention)
- Recognizing High Risk Behaviors- Now what?
- Fire setting; Animal Cruelty; Self Harm; Suicidal Ideation; Stealing; Hoarding; Drugs & Alcohol use; Truancy; Destructive behavior; Bullying; Physical aggression
- Finding the underlying source of difficult behavior
- Child Welfare Acronyms
- Helping kids understand their parent's behavior
- Parenting the medically fragile child
- IEPs and other education topics
- Grief and Loss
- Navigating diversity
- Building a sensory library
- Finding and selecting therapists
- Building positive sibling relationships
- Taking time for you
- Finding and utilizing respite care
- Praying God's Word over your children
- Moving from fear to faith
- Using Books to Discuss Difficult Issues with Kids



CREATE SPACE FOR REFLECTIONS

As people arrive give them a large sticky note and ask them to write down something difficult they had to deal with this week, and then post it on the wall or on a flip chart. Make sure they know that the group will discuss this issue, and that they don't have to tell people which issue was theirs. They also don't have to participate if they aren't comfortable doing so. After everyone has had a chance to post an issue, the facilitator reviews them all and looks for those that are similar. One at a time (or one grouping at a time) the facilitator reads them off and asks if others in the room have ever faced this challenge and what they did to overcome it or resolve it.



HELP REDUCE STRESS

Write this question on a white board or flip chart this question, "What would make our life less stressful?" and ask people to respond as they are comfortable. Encourage other group members to share how they have found resources to meet these needs. Spend time sharing resources. Encourage them to refer to 211. If necessary, do some research and bring back information to the next meeting. Some issues you might want to be prepared to address include:

- Respite
- Counseling
- Financial Assistance
- Legal Assistance
- Child care
- Furniture
- Medical care
- Case information



KEEP TRACK

Tracking meeting attendance, topics, etc. can help you watch for trends so you can make adjustments as necessary. It can also provide information you can report to current or potential funders.



USE ICE BREAKERS

Unlike a group at work or church, most of the people in the foster parent support group won't know each other... at least not initially. So, to help people feel comfortable with each other, prior to sharing personal information and being vulnerable with each other, spending a few minutes doing an ice-breaker is a nice way to open the meeting. Keep them light-hearted and fun and don't require people to participate if they don't want to.

An option for these activities is to pair people up in twos and have them answer the question to each other. Then convene the whole group and ask people to share their partner's answer to the whole group.

- **Name Game**

Ask everyone to think of a word that describes them, that starts with the first letter of their name. For example, Justice Janet, Loving Lance, Beautiful Beau, Always-talking Ashley). Start with the facilitator. The person to the right of the facilitator repeats their name and descriptive word, and then shares their own. The next person repeats both names and shares their own. This repeats until everyone has had a chance, and the facilitator ends by reviewing everyone's names and descriptive words.

This is a good one when most of the people in the group don't know each other yet, such as the initial group meeting.

- **What Veggie are You**

What vegetable (or other food) best describes your personality and why. (Example: Spinach because under heat I can appear soft, but I am really strong like iron).

- **End the Sentence**

Each week write a question on a white board or flip chart at the front of the room, and during the Ice Breaker time ask everyone to answer it. By posting it in advance it will give people who are more reserved time to think about their answers. Suggested questions could include:

- My favorite job was ...
- My first job was...
- My favorite book or movie...
- The last book I read or movie I saw...
- My hobby is...
- My least favorite subject in school was...
- Something few people know about me...

- **Two Truths and a Lie**

Ask everyone to share three things about themselves that people might not know and/or are hard to believe. Two of the things should be the truth and one is a lie. Have the rest of the group try to guess which statement is the lie and why they think so.

This activity can take a while, so it may not best suited for your meetings. It could be a good one for your first support group meeting. Or you could play it each week, with only three or four group members at a time. You could also save it for a time when you group is more of a social gathering instead of a serious group discussion.

- **Bucket List**

Share with the group something you would like to do before you die.

- **New Years Resolution**

Ask people to share with the group something they hope to accomplish this year.

- **What's My Line?**

As everyone to write down a fact about them on a 3 x 5 card and drop it into a hat or bowl. The facilitator reads them off one at a time and everyone tries to guess which fact belongs to whom.

- **Thumb Balls**

Thumb Balls can be purchased through Trainers Warehouse at trainerswarehouse.com. They offer several types of Thumb Balls that have a range of questions printed on them. The facilitator tosses the ball to someone and whatever question their thumb lands on they answer. (If they aren't comfortable answering that question, they can choose another one on the ball, or they can just pass). When they are done they toss the ball to someone else. This continues until everyone has had a turn. Ice Breaker Thumb Ball questions ([Get them here: tinyurl.com/127-ice-breakerball](http://tinyurl.com/127-ice-breakerball)) include things such as Dream Vacation Spot, Favorite Childhood Toy, TV Show You Love or Hate, Favorite Italian Food.

SAMPLE AGENDA FOR FIRST MEETING

- 6:00 p.m. Social time: As participants arrive allow time for refreshments and socializing.
- 6:30 p.m. Welcome & Housekeeping
- 6:35 p.m. Introduction of Leaders
Why they chose to facilitate
- 6:45 p.m. Introductions of Participants
First name,
Number of children, (foster/bio/adoptive)
How long they've been foster parents
Why they joined the group
- 6:55 p.m. Ice Breaker Activity (*see list below)
- 7:15 p.m. Facilitated Discussion or Guest Speaker
For initial meeting open up discussion as to what people hope to get out of the group, and what specific type of support they need. (understanding the child welfare system, navigating the school system (IEP, 504, etc); behavior management techniques; learn to deal with bio families,
- 8:00 p.m. Wrap Up
Discuss date/time/location of next meeting
Adjourn

SUPPORT GROUP EVALUATION

Date: _____ Topic: _____

Special Speaker(s): _____ Facilitator(s): _____

I am (please check all that apply):

____ foster parent ____ potential foster parent ____ kinship parent
____ adoptive parent ____ potential adoptive parent ____ (other) _____

Please rate the training by placing an X in the boxes that most accurately reflect your feelings, and then completing the statements below.

	Poor		Neutral		Excellent
Speakers were well prepared	1	2	3	4	5
Information was understandable	1	2	3	4	5
Room was comfortable	1	2	3	4	5
Information was helpful	1	2	3	4	5
I had opportunity to ask questions	1	2	3	4	5
Everyone had a chance to speak	1	2	3	4	5
Handouts were helpful	1	2	3	4	5

What I learned from this group. _____

What new skills will I try as a result of this group: _____

How this group could have been improved? _____

Topics I would like to cover in the future: _____

Other comments: _____
