

Who Should Run a Support Group: Parent-Run vs. Agency-Run Groups

Adoptive parents across the nation are joining together to form parent support groups. One question often posed is: "Should an agency facilitate and run the group or should parents take the lead?" Ordinary people can and do develop parent support groups and serve as an extraordinary resource to others. Parent groups don't need a grant, an agency, or even an office—just a few people who share their common experience and interest.

Thousands of adoptive and foster parents are turning to each other with similar concerns and problems, to attempt to deal with their feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and to find someone who really understands their walk as adoptive or foster parents of children with special needs.

Ed Madara, Director of the America Self-Help Group Clearinghouse recently wrote, "A primary characteristic of parent self-help groups is 'ownership.' The more parents have it, the more they take responsibility, the more they raise their needs and issues, and the more empowering the group is. If they see it as an agency group, they are much more passive."

Parents are parenting for life and most people would agree that parents should feel empowered and have ownership for their job as parents. It only makes sense that they would bring these qualities into a parenting group.

Agencies and parents can have similar as well as differing needs, which can sometimes divide people into two camps: promoting parent-run groups vs. agency-run groups. Instead of choosing between a parent-run or agency-run support group, there might be a better question to ask: Is there a time and place for both groups and also a role for an agency professional to start a parent-run support group as well? "Absolutely!" says Diane Martin-Hushman, Parent Group Coordinator at NACAC. "There is no need to believe this has to be an either/or situation. Visualizing a bridge between parents and professionals, one that invites communication and cooperation, is much more positive than the us and them mentality that unfortunately sometimes exists." Professionals have resources such as curriculum, contacts for guest speakers, and continually updated reading material that could enhance a parent-run group. Parents, on the other hand, are fonts of first-hand information that is not only priceless to other parents, but also an expanded and necessary reality resource for professionals. The future for children is made brighter when professionals and parents come together as equals to share what they know and nurture family growth.

"The increasing rate of change in society requires a different model based on cooperation." from *The Art of Facilitation*

Parents and professionals across the country are taking another look at parent group possibilities and re-thinking the limited nature of parent-run vs. agency-run groups. On the next page is a chart that shows the differences among parent-run, agency-run, and parent-run/agency-supported groups. Columns one and three are adapted from Ed Madara's work, and the middle column reflects Diane Martin-Hushman's model for building a bridge between parents and agencies to form a parent-run/agency-supported group.

Support Group Models

	Parent-Run	Parent-Run/Agency-Supported	Agency-Run
Control	Focus of control is with the members; they are in charge. More empowering to the members.	Agency takes on supportive role, but members control the direction of the group.	Agency is running the group for the members. Agency is in control, less ownership from members. Set curriculum.
Helping	Helping is a reciprocal, two-way process; everyone both gives and receives help at one time or another.	Agency helps with facilitation, maybe provides guest speakers, but parents have private time to share problems.	Staff gives help and facilitates the group, the other members mainly receive help.
Focus	Focus is on the expressed or felt need of the parents.	Focus is on parents' needs. Agency is on hand to bring in experts upon group's request.	Focus is on the professional perception of the needs of the group.
Knowledge Base	Parents' experiences and knowledge are shared with each other based on their similar problems.	Parents' experience and knowledge are valued and shared; guest speakers and resources are available through agency.	Professional knowledge is often based on academic learning and previous experience with clients rather than personal experience.
Availability	Parents form a network for mutual support that surpasses formal group meetings. Parents are available to each other at all times, day and night.	Agency involvement is limited to work hours, but parents are available to each other at all times, day and night.	Professional involvement with the parent is limited to office hours.
Role Models	Experienced parents are positive role models for less experienced parents.	Experienced parents are role models. Outside speakers can bring in expertise.	Professionals are not necessarily a part of the adoption/foster triad.
Advocacy	Parents unite efforts to initiate and engage in genuine advocacy on behalf of children.	Parents lead group's advocacy, and can disassociate from agency if the advocacy issues are in conflict with agency policies.	Professionals are directed by their agency and need to follow the policies and procedures established by the agency.
Relationships	Parents become allies; mutual respect flourishes based on common experiences and solving problems together over time.	Parents become close allies. As group matures, agency staff need to step back and let parents lead.	Professionals cannot and should not be an actual friend.

Parents May Choose Different Groups as Their Needs Change

Over time parents often join more than one group and the dynamics of the group as well as who runs it might change based on what the parent needs. For example, new to adoption, a parent might initially want a more curriculum-based, agency-run group. This parent may want to keep a lower profile and simply absorb as much information as possible. As time passes, this same parent might feel a need to do more talking and initiate the direction of discussions. Forming a parent group with friends, neighbors and maybe even parents met at an agency-run group, now might seem desirable. The realized lifelong commitment to parenting can lead to the logical need for a more ongoing group.

Parent groups can lose energy with a drop in attendance or a loss of focus. In this case, it might be helpful for the group to seek a professional facilitator or agency help to get the group back on track and provide some structure to a portion of the meeting. Likewise, a parent who unsuccessfully attempts to start a parent group might try again with the help of an agency. The publicity and referral support alone and a central location might be all that it takes to get a viable group going.

As parents gain confidence they may want to take the full initiative of running a group. Parents may no longer be comfortable having the group meet at an agency because they want to meet in each other's homes and to speak more freely about problems they experience with the social service system. There are also savvy parents who understand how to facilitate

and maneuver their group to instigate social change. This type of group would definitely want to remain autonomous from any agency to allow them to work with policy makers on a local, state, provincial or national level to enact changes in policy and law that affect the lives of children. There is no right or wrong to the nature of these groups. They all serve a purpose and that is to meet the adoption needs of families.

Building a Bridge between Parents and Professionals: Guidelines for Professionals Supporting a Parent-Run Group

- First of all, believe in the dynamics and benefits of parent-run support groups, especially for parents with children who have special needs. If you are a professional, ask yourself how forming a parent-run group could enrich your work.
- Learn about and begin to assess parent support group models that already exist. Check out some of the parent groups that are thriving. Don't reinvent the wheel. Check with NACAC and get the *Parent Group Manual* to use as your model for starting the group.
- Identify parents you already know who might be interested in and benefit from participating in an ongoing parent support group. You probably know parents who are at different stages, with different skill levels who could begin to teach each other. It is important to include some veteran parents who can take a leadership role. Use section I of the *Parent Group Manual* to do some brainstorming about

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who might take leadership roles and what those tasks might entail.

- Form a core group after you have identified several possible members. Your role at this point will be to confirm their common interest and emphasize that the success of the group will be mutual involvement. All members should be willing to contribute and share the work of the group.
- Clarify your role as a consultant for the group. You are a resource person, not the leader. Without this distinction, a common pitfall is to slip back into the traditional role as the leader.
- Offer advice on planning, publicizing, copying and distributing notices for the first public group meeting. Promote referrals from contacts with other professionals, associations, and agencies.
- Plan to attend and assist at the first meeting, which is crucial because it sets the tone for the potential group. You are there for moral support, maybe as a speaker, or initially as a co-leader, but your role should be minimal. One model is for you to be present only for a half-hour, then leave to allow parents to bond and take their leadership positions. It will be important for all group members to have time for introductions, to speak freely, and to agree on a site, a common time for future meetings, and future topics.
- Continue to advise the group regarding organizational development whether the parents choose to be formal or informal. Provide ways to structure the group with elected officers and written by-laws or affirm the choice of remaining informal. The group may need assistance in attaining a 501(c)(3) status, putting together a newsletter, finding guest speakers, or becoming involved in community education.
- Be available to address or troubleshoot new problems as they arise. Your expertise could help the group with problems such as what to do when a member dominates, or how to increase membership. Use your skills with a light touch so the parents maintain ownership of the group and remain responsible for what happens there.
- When the group is vital and working well together, it is time to step back and let the members determine their own path. This is a time for everyone to celebrate the group's independence. As you hand over the leadership to the group, let members know they can contact you if they have any future questions or problems.

The Evolution of an Adoptive Parent Group

In early 1992, Raymond Moore, an adoptive parent for 14 years, first learned about an adoptive parent group offered by Montgomery County Children Services in Dayton, Ohio. The county invited adoptive parents in the area and was overwhelmed when more than 50 people responded. Ray became a member of the group, which was facilitated by agency social worker Dale Richardson and included about 25 to 30 participants at each meeting. Unfortunately, after parents realized that the agency did not require them to attend the group, only four members—including Ray—showed up at the next meeting. Although Ray had been successfully raising his oldest son as a single parent, he was interested in what a group had to offer.

After only four months, the agency announced that grant money for the group was running out, but the group could decide to continue on its own. Dale encouraged the group to continue meeting and offered space in the county's boardroom. He also put the group in touch with NACAC, which in turn sent them materials on adoption, how to lead a group, and information on how to become a non-profit organization. The group elected Ray president and began to meet monthly. Then an exciting opportunity came up for Ray. Dale had decided not attend the 1992 NACAC conference in Ottawa, and Ray was sent in his place. "Being surrounded by all those people and participating in the conference just blew me away," said Ray. He felt empowered and was excited to see so many people committed to children and adoption.

Ray came back to Ohio with renewed energy and vision for the group. They decided to choose a name for themselves—Dayton Area Minority Adoptive Parents, Inc. (DAMAP)—which Ray says was designed "to reflect our members and what we were about." As the group evolved over the next five months, members no longer wanted to meet with staff supervision in county facilities. Although they trusted Dale, the group was ready to become more independent, so they began to meet in the local library. The group then completed the steps to become a non-profit organization. Six years later, membership grew to include 14 children in attendance at meetings. "How can I say this?" said Ray, "Our kids are special, and we gave the library the blues! It was time to meet in each other's homes."

For the past four years, DAMAP has met in member homes, with the host family providing dinner. As with all groups there has been membership flux but right now there are 17 active families whose children range in age from 18 months to 29 years. Ray explained, "In the beginning we were all African American parents with African American children, but really we focus on the child. Now we have some white parents who have adopted African American or bi-racial children. We even have one white family who adopted white children but asked to be in our group because we are established and have a good reputation. Over the years DAMAP has earned statewide respect, with good local television coverage. People from the area tend to call us to ask our opinion about issues on adoption and African American children."

Reflecting on the history of the group, Ray commented, "Although our group became independent, we still work closely with Dale and private agencies, and there is a feeling of mutual respect. I think it was important for us become a non-profit organization because it turned us into a more cohesive group, gave us a focus, and made us move out into the community. Every year we try to plan one event that involves the community. In June of 1995 the state asked us to lead a two-day Regional Conference on the African American Family, and the following year we led one on transracial adoption. We have also hosted adoption fairs and other workshops for parents. This year we are planning a workshop on allegations. Some of our members have been affected by this issue and the timing seems right."

Over the past decade, Ray has not only adopted four other children, but has demonstrated his leadership skills as president of DAMAP and is beginning his fourth year as a board member of NACAC. As with all groups, eventually new members need to take on leadership roles. Ray joked, "Some of the new members are so obsessed with being parents, it's hard to get them to commit to becoming a leader." He does, however, have his eye on one family who seems ready and willing to take that next step.