

The Nuts and Bolts Of Forming a Parent Group

Adapted from the North American Council On Adoptable Children's 1995 Parent Group Manual 1

So you want to form a parent group? Well, you're not alone. There are hundreds of other people out there just like you. You may be feeling a variety of emotions about taking on such a task: excitement, anxiety, empowerment, frustration, etc. Each of these emotions is completely understandable and has been felt by other parents who started similar groups. Organizing a parent group is an important and exciting project that results in direct benefits to the children of your community, as well as the group's members. Although organizing a parent group certainly takes energy and commitment, the process is not difficult and can be very rewarding. This discussion is intended to help you think through the process of forming a parent group, as well as give you some helpful hints on the actual steps you need to take.

Step 1: Defining Your Purpose

Before you recruit your first member or plan your first meeting you need to define the purpose of your group, both in terms of the needs of the children, as well as the needs of the parents. Why do you want to form a parent group? What is your underlying mission? What do you hope to get out of your group? Parents organize groups and come together for a variety of reasons. Some parents need support from other families that have or are currently facing similar problems, ie getting through the system, or handling the emotional roller coaster of adoption and foster care. Some are in search of a social network for themselves or their children and others simply need more information on foster care and/or adoption. In addition, there are those who see problems with the current system and want to make changes; these individuals are interested in the political arena and influencing decision-makers.

It is perfectly normal (and quite common) for parent groups to have dual purposes. In addition, you may find that the purpose of your group changes over time...and that's okay too. Whereas a group may originally form to provide support and information to its members, as the children grow older or other issues develop, the group may evolve or branch off into an advocacy or political organization. The important thing to remember is that having a clearly defined mission for your group increases your chances for success, no matter how you define success.

Step 2: Determining Your Needs

When you begin to seriously think about forming your group, you need to consider how best to meet the needs of the children, the families in the group, and the organization. As the purposes of parent groups differ, so too will the needs. For instance, a parent group that forms for social reasons most likely has completely different needs than a politically oriented group. Overall, groups may need to: 1) determine the types of activities that are of interest to its members; 2) develop a membership calling sheet; 3) decide who will be in charge of organizing certain events (e.g., putting the vice president in charge of organizing children's activities or monitoring proposed legislation in the state); 4) establish a calendar of activities that includes dates, times, and locations; 5) select the formal leadership for the organization; 6) choose a name for the group; 7) incorporate the organization; 8) develop a prioritized plan of action; 9) begin fundraising activities; and 10) select subcommittees.

Determining the needs of your parent group may be as easy as brainstorming with pen and paper in hand while sitting around the kitchen table. Or, it may be as formal as devoting an entire parent group meeting to determine your needs, making certain that someone is taking notes. Do whatever works for your group.



Step 3: Recruiting Potential Members

If you and the other members of your parent group determine that there is a need to involve more people, the next step is recruitment. There are several approaches to finding families interested in participating in a foster parent group in your area. You need to find the right approach for you. Remember, some of the largest groups in the country started with only two or three families.

- Ask people to become members. One of the most basic things to remember when recruiting potential members is that people will not naturally seek out your group. You need to find them. More important, you need to be brave enough to initiate contact. Although these informal conversations may seem simple, you may be surprised to know that some of the most powerful parent groups have started merely by word of mouth, a few individuals told a few more people until they had 10 or 15 active members.
- Send announcements to foster parents. Public and agencies are often willing to assist, especially if you talk with them about the many benefits that will result from a parent group in their area. In fact, social workers in these agencies are often willing to help you plan your meetings, since this makes their jobs easier. A recent communication to NYSCCC reconfirms the Office of Children and Family Services' (OCFS) policy of permitting agencies to share the names and addresses of foster parents with local parent support groups.

Once you have developed an initial list of prospective members, you should start planning for the first meeting. You may want to select a small planning group to address the following issues.

- **Meeting Location.** Make sure that the location is centrally located and accessible to everyone. Possibilities include community centers, religious institutions, schools, community rooms at banks, someone's home, the local agency, a college, or other sites that are appropriate to the community. Think carefully about a setting that will encourage participation from a diverse range of families.
- **Select a Time for Your Meeting.** Holding your meetings during a weekday evening will probably allow the largest attendance since many members are working in the middle of the day. You are wise to ask your members at the orientation meeting what day and time are best for future meetings. Some groups vary meeting times and days from month to month.
- **Arrange for Refreshments.** Rule #1 for planning meetings is to provide treats. Food makes people more comfortable and provides a natural conversation piece for individuals who initially may have little to talk about.
- **Develop an Agenda.** Clearly identify and spell out the format and goal(s) for the first meeting in a written agenda and make it look exciting. Identify how you will meet parents needs. Make a list of announcements and other things that need to be said at the meeting. Be sure to allow ample time for questions, discussion, and formulation of action plans. You will need to determine initial goals and activities for the group. Begin looking at short and long-term goals (e.g., things that will unite the group quickly vs. things that will require planning, organization, and possibly money).
- **Select a Speaker.** Consider an agency representative, your family court judge, or your President to speak at your first meeting. Potential topics may include discussing the purpose of the organization, the needs of parent members, or how a parent group can help children.
- **Evaluate Success.** Members of the planning committee need to discuss how the success of the first meeting is to be evaluated. For example, you could use the following measures to judge the success of your first meeting: 1.) The number



of new people or families that attend, 2.) The number of pre-established goals that are attained, 3.) The length or depth of the discussion; and 4.) The number of positive responses from prospective and current members.

- **Arrange for Child Care.** Community service clubs such as Girl Scouts, religious youth groups, and school clubs are often willing to donate their time. You can also ask older children to work with an adult to provide child care. You may choose to rotate the child care responsibility among members of your group.
- **Develop a Sign-in Sheet.** Before you can organize anything, you need to know your volunteers.
- **Welcome Guests.** Appoint someone to greet and welcome people as they arrive. This person should make sure participants have a name tag, find the refreshments, coat racks, etc. Assign someone to ensure that the children are directed to their area.
- **Introduce the Speaker.** Have one of your group's leaders introduce the speaker. Be brief so the attention is focused on the speaker. Ensure that the total presentation (introduction and speaker) runs no longer than 20 minutes.
- **Save Time for Discussion.** Potential members may need to ask questions or air their concerns about the group or the issues brought up by the speaker. Be sure to allow 10-15 minutes to questions and answers
- **Don't Move Faster than the Consensus of the Group.** Some people may need time to understand the issues and feel ready to move on.
- **Set the Date of the Next Meeting.** Before the meeting ends be sure to discuss the date, time, and location of the next meeting. Group members should have ownership in their meeting, so allow them to have input in setting these.

Finally, there are a few things you need to do after the orientation meeting. You should remember to send any follow-up materials that you discussed at the initial meeting and send a notice of the next meeting to all interested persons, along with an official membership list. If developments arise between meetings, send written updates to members. People will lose interest and motivation quickly if they do not receive information on the group's activities on a continuous basis. Remember that telephone contact is also very important.

Step 4: Formalizing Your Group Structure

If your group is going to be a permanent, on-going organization, there are several processes that should be undertaken to formalize the structure of your group. These tasks need to be done as expediently as possible, without taking a lot of time away from more important activities. Developing a sound organizational and legal structure is important, but it is possible to get sidetracked into spending too much energy on these processes. Remember to keep your priorities in line.

First, you should select the Officers for your organization. There are a number of ways to assign titles and tasks for group leaders. Depending on the group's size and goals, you may or may not need to be formal about specific job titles. In fact, some groups find that members prefer to volunteer for a specific task rather than take on an on-going job. Typical titles include:

- **President or Chair.** This person is responsible for representing the group at community functions, presiding at meetings, serving as the group's contact person, and generally overseeing the organization.



- **Vice President or Vice Chair.** This person presides in the absence of the President and may be assigned other duties as needed. For instance, in some organizations this person may schedule the speakers for the parent group meetings or plan the children’s activities each month.
- **Secretary.** This person is responsible for taking minutes at the meetings, sending notices of upcoming meetings, and handling necessary correspondence.
- **Treasurer.** This person receives income, disburses checks, handles financial records and files required financial reports.

In addition to these four positions, your group may want to include others depending on your needs. As with the President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer, any additional Officer would become part of your Board of Directors. Some groups have included a Fundraising position (someone who has the ability to access funds from foundations and corporations), a Media position (someone to advertise the group and interact with the media), and a Recruitment position (someone to bring new people into the group by working closely with the local agency to find prospective families). In particular, these three positions add stability to the organization by bringing people and resources in the door.

Second, your group should set up a committee structure. The types of committees your group should establish is determined by the preferences of your members, as well as the purpose, size, and needs of your group. Typical committees could include: Nominations; Membership Bylaws; Public Education; Recruitment of Adoptive/Foster Parents; Advocacy Child-Finding; Programs; Child Care, and more.

Whether or not your group decides to establish a Board of Directors and incorporate your organization, you should still establish a committee structure and select officers. In this way, you can delegate certain jobs to select individuals without feeling the pressure to do everything yourself. When you are able to spread the responsibilities of starting your parent group between a handful of people, you can gain momentum and spark excitement among the founding members, as well as prevent burn out from occurring. Additional information on selecting Officers, a Board of Directors, and establishing a formal committee structure is outlined in “Starting and Nurturing Adoptive Parent Groups, a guide for leaders which is available on the North American Council for Adoptable Children website at www.nacac.org or by writing to 970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106, St. Paul, MN 55114-1149.

Third, you should name your parent group. When the group is ready, select an appropriate name. Since a name gives shape to a group choose one that is all-inclusive. For example, a name such as Council on Adoptable Children (COAC) invites adoptive and foster parents, while the Association of Adoptive Families is more limiting.

Fourth, you should determine your financial needs. Your parent group may need money very early in the organizational stages to cover things like a newsletter, postage, photocopying, telephone calls, etc.

Brainstorming Exercise

As you begin developing your parent group, keep this list of questions in mind. They can help you focus your mission and your efforts. At a parent group meeting, have your member answer these five questions individually. Allow 5-10 minutes.

Bring the group back together and have each member discuss their responses, making sure that everyone has an opportunity to participate. You may find that some people have slightly or very different answers. You will need to resolve these differences before moving forward with your group.



1. Why do you want to be in a group?
2. Who do you think your membership should include? (e.g., only adoptive or prospective adoptive parents; only foster parents; any concerned citizen or organization)
3. What are your strategies to attract new members?
4. How will the community benefit from the formation of your group?
5. How will your group effect change?
6. Who will be most affected by your mission? (e.g., special needs children? infants? international adoptions? etc.)
7. What is the best structure for your group?

