

Family support groups provide safe spaces to connect and share information and resources. This fact sheet gives some direction to parents, grandparents or other caregivers who want to keep a support group going.

Starting a support group takes time and effort, yet even with effort, not all groups succeed. If you want to maintain a healthy and effective support group there are some things you need to know.



Tips for Keeping Your Group Healthy

- Have a strong, experienced facilitator, or meeting leader, who can keep the discussion positive and productive.
- Maintain a core group of members who can help start the discussion and keep the group on topic.
- Make sure that every member is asked to contribute to the discussion. This will bring the quiet members out of their shells.
- Decide on roles and responsibilities for members to ensure all the tasks get done. These roles make members feel included and help avoid burnout among the core group. These tasks can be anything that needs to be done for a meeting including promoting the group, securing a meeting place, bringing snacks or collecting names and email addresses.



A Facilitator Keeps Your Group on Track

Support groups can run into any number of problems, but a good facilitator is your group's best defense against them. It may take some effort to find this person in your group so be sure to get feedback from the group's core members on the best person for the job. By choosing a meeting facilitator who can keep the group on topic and include every member in the discussion, your group can avoid problems like these:

- Disruptive group members
- Conversation dominated by complaining or negativity
- Lack of confidentiality
- Group tension or interpersonal conflicts
- Inappropriate or unsound medical advice promoted by members



Finding New Members

Part of sustaining a support group is recruiting new members. Over time your group will naturally change, especially if it provides support for families who have children in a specific age group or families going through a particular experience, like a child with a new diagnosis or a child starting school.

Whatever your group's focus, it's important to find new members who are experiencing similar things. Try some of these ideas to get the word out about your family support group:

- Create a social media account, like Facebook or Twitter, for your group.
- Ask school staff and health care providers to send out periodic emails or post flyers.
- Submit your group meetings to a community calendar or on radio broadcasts.
- Encourage your current members to talk with friends about the value of the group.



Sustaining a Virtual Support Group¹

Some of the barriers to effective, successful support groups are common. These barriers may be intensified if you are hosting a virtual support group. Following are some examples of problems often experienced by virtual groups and ideas for overcoming them:

Group Members are Distracted or Leave Early

- Send activity kits or fidgets to parents before meetings to keep kids occupied.
- Keep virtual meetings short and meet more frequently.
- Make sure the meeting keeps to the agreed-upon starting and ending times.
- Have an agenda for the meeting so attendees have an idea of how long it will take and what topics will be discussed in what order.

Low Attendance at Meetings

- Avoid busy times for your members by sending an online poll to find the best time and day to meet.
- Email members prior to each meeting to let them know what you will be talking about and get people more excited or intrigued about the topic(s). A **same day email reminder** usually helps.
- Be strategic in promoting the group by asking current members to be active in finding new members.

Awkward Groups—No One is Talking

- Have an active facilitator who can help draw out member comments.
- Have prompting questions ready and stick to topics or questions that encourage discussion.
- Take advantage of your technology to create more engaging meetings. Examples include Zoom breakout rooms, whiteboards or Jamboard edu.google.com/products/jamboard/.
- Have “plants” in the meeting who are ready to share their experiences.
- Use show-and-tell or other tools to help members learn about each other.



A Good Idea!

Try attending a virtual support group so you learn what you like and don't like. Go to wisconsinicaregiver.org/virtual-events-for-caregivers#SupportGroups for a list of upcoming sessions.

Maintaining a healthy family support group takes time and continued work. But remember, your group **can make a difference**, so families feel supported, connected and empowered to better care for themselves and their children with disabilities or special health care needs!

¹Rapid response: Virtual Home Visiting, “Parent Groups in a Virtual World” webinar, Aug 2020
parentsasteachers.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_7pBkSh5jQvKdsRzmrA-Xg



Still Have Questions? Need Help Finding Services for Your Child?

- [Regional Centers for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs](https://dhs.wisconsin.gov/cyshcn/index.htm)
dhs.wisconsin.gov/cyshcn/index.htm
- [Well Badger Health Resource Center](https://wellbadger.org) wellbadger.org or call 800.642.7837