

Somebody to Lean On: Connecting With a Parent Group

A child in your care is having a rough moment. It may be an angry outburst at a family gathering or a melt-down in the grocery store. Suddenly you find yourself with no shortage of "... if that were my child, I'd..." advice from relatives, friends, and even strangers. Never mind that none of them have ever parented a child with a trauma history—or perhaps have never parented at all! If you experience this often enough, it's easy for self-doubt to creep in.

Connecting with other foster, adoptive, or relative caregiver parents can be a tremendous self-care strategy and an opportunity to give and receive encouragement, information, and support. There are more ways than ever to connect with those who have shared experience, and some of them don't even require getting a baby sitter!

How Parent Groups Work

Parent groups meet on a regularly scheduled basis to share trials and triumphs and offer one another support. These groups are an especially helpful way for newer parents to hear from seasoned parents on what to anticipate as well as tips on navigating child welfare systems and procedures. Veteran foster and adoptive parents are always happy to share insights on everything from finding

respite providers to preparing for a permanency plan meeting.

While some parent groups may strictly be "discussion" groups, others opt to bring in "expert" speakers for part of the evening, followed by a group discussion. A featured presenter could be a clinician who specializes in grief therapy or an advocacy group well versed in guardianship law. These groups' goal is not only to connect with other parents with shared experience but leave with some new ideas or resources.

In addition to the blended guest speaker/ discussion group, some groups may meet for training purposes, much like a book club. For example, a group may all read the same parenting books, such as *Parenting with Love and Logic*, or watch a series of videos on a

therapeutic topic such as play therapy or TBRI® (Trust-Based Relational Intervention). This is an opportunity to collectively practice new parenting approaches or programs, then meet regularly to discuss progress and results.

Then there are parent social groups. Some parents find it helpful to talk with others about situations they are coping with or



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working through; others welcome the opportunity to spend a few hours doing anything *but* talking or thinking about parenting.

In-Person Parent Groups

Parent groups can be in-person or virtual. When we think of parent groups, we often think of the good old-fashioned, in-person parent group. They may be exclusively social groups, or they could adopt any of the other activities already mentioned. If their focus is social, they may schedule a regular meet up, such as a monthly bowling night or "parents' night out."

The objective is merely to take some time for self-care and have fun with other parents who understand. Some groups even opt to do activities that involve the kids, such as meeting at a park or skating rink. The kids get playtime while the adults get to chat. The plan is to merely have a good time.



There are various free meeting spaces available with advance notice, such as library meeting rooms, community centers, and church halls. If the group is small enough, some groups even choose to meet in-home.

Virtual Parent Groups

Perhaps you live in a rural area, and there aren't other foster, adoptive, or relative caregiver families near-by. Or maybe it's just too hard to find a sitter to attend an in-person group. More and more people are learning new techniques and skills to stay connected virtually. Virtual parent groups are popping up all over.

Don't let technology intimidate you. If you've never used an online meeting platform like Zoom, now's a great time to try. There are a variety of simple, user-friendly, and FREE options available that allow parent groups to meet sharing audio and video. You simply register with a platform, schedule a meeting time, and share a link. All participants need to do is click on the link at the designated meeting time. All of these virtual meeting platforms have easily accessible tutorials that show you how to use them.

The virtual video gathering is a great option, particularly if child care or distance is a barrier to in-person groups. In two-parent homes, one parent may attend for part while the other parent watches the kids and then switch.

A new trend in online groups is the "after hours" parent group after the kids go to bed. These post-bedtime groups have gained in popularity for a variety of reasons.

Not only do parents have time to participate without distractions, but it allows parents wind-down time to share the day's experiences without the children overhearing. Many groups have made these "adult swim" groups fun by coupling the meetings with snacks and beverages.

Social Media "Closed" Groups

If you're looking for more immediate on-demand connections, you may want to consider joining a "closed" social media group. By far, the largest and most popular platform for these groups is Facebook. These social media groups are monitored or facilitated by administrators who grant

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access to members who have shared experiences. Here you can post questions, share stories, ask for help, offer encouragement, discover resources, and yes, even vent frustrations once in a while. Postings can only be seen by other members and can provide real-time reassurance, laughter, or needed help.

Closed social media groups may also include links to relevant information, community events, or other useful resources. Groups may be comprehensive such as "foster parent group" or specific to a subset such as "transracial adoption." Groups may also be specific to geographic regions so that members can provide "in-person" help such as respite care, therapist suggestions, or baby supplies.

Finding a Group

Where exactly do you find one of these parent groups? A great starting place is to check with your agency. Your licensing worker or case manager may know of existing groups and/or others interested in connecting or starting a group. There are also many online resources to identify parent groups in your area (please see <https://wifostercareandadoption.org/resources/family-support-associations/>).

Starting a Group

Can't find a group in your area or one that meets your needs? You might consider starting your own parent group. There are several great resources online to help you get started. These resources include helpful information on start-up basics such as naming your group, how to fine-tune your purpose, where to find participants, expert facilitation tips, and more. (Please see the

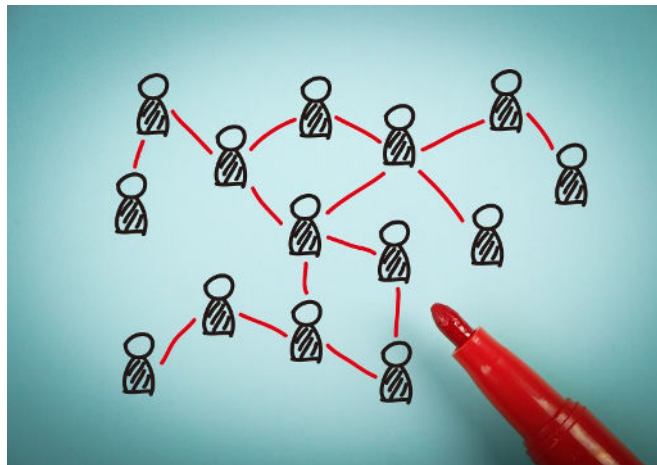
Resource section included with this tip sheet for more on starting a group.)

The following are a few things to think about when starting a new group:

- *What Happens in Group, Stays in Group*
Whether you're most comfortable with in-person meetings or posting and responding on private/closed sites, it's important to keep confidentiality in the forefront of the conversation. Be mindful not to mention names or other personally identifiable information.

If you are participating in a live online group on a platform like Zoom, invest in a set of

headphones or earbuds so that those in your home cannot hear other group participants. If you are discussing a situation of your own, make sure your children are not within earshot. The most innocent of conversations can result in feelings of betrayal or invasion of privacy, and hard-fought trust can



dissolve instantly.

- *How to Keep a Group Active*
One sure way for a group to fizzle out relatively quickly is to use it exclusively as a place to air grievances. Yes, venting can sometimes feel good, but a group founded in frustrations isn't going to last. A skilled facilitator or administrator is essential to keeping things on track. A good parent group should leave you feeling connected, empowered, and energized.

Suggest that the group begin and end on a light or fun note. Encourage sharing tips, tricks, and strategies that will leave

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participants with new approaches to try at home.

Summary

You know that there are aspects of fostering that only foster parents can fully understand. There's nothing that compares with the sharing of ideas, joys, and frustrations with people who "get it."

With all of the options available to us—in person, online, phone—connection groups are more doable than ever.

If you have been thinking about incorporating self-care into your schedule, a foster parent connection group can be one of the easiest and most rewarding of all the self-care activities available to you. It may be just the thing to inspire and sustain you while carrying on the vital work of caring for kids.



Resources

Additional Resources

- [Family Support Associations in Wisconsin](#)
- [Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association](#)
- [Wisconsin Foster Family Handbook, Chapter 5](#)
- [Hosting Virtual Support Groups](#)
- [5 Support Groups for Foster Parents](#)
- [Supports for Foster Families](#)

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *The Adoption Network, Your Guide to Starting a Support System*, by Laura Christianson

Training & Resources From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Starting a Virtual Support Group: The Basics](#)