



# 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 meltdown 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 experiences, and some don't even require getting a babysitter!

## How Parent Groups Work

Parent groups meet regularly to share trials and triumphs and offer one another support. These groups are especially helpful for newer parents to hear from seasoned parents about what to anticipate and 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 specializing in grief therapy or an advocacy group well-versed in guardianship law. These groups aim to connect with other parents who share their experiences and 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 read the same parenting books, such as *Parenting with Love and Logic*, or watch videos on a therapeutic topic, such as play therapy or TBRI® (Trust-Based Relational Intervention). This is an opportunity to practice new parenting approaches or programs collectively, 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 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 adopt any of the other



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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 to take 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.

Various free meeting spaces are available with advance notice, such as library meeting rooms, community centers, and church halls. If the group is small enough, some groups even meet at home.

### **Virtual Parent Groups**

Perhaps you live in a rural area, and no foster, adoptive, or relative caregiver families are nearby. Or maybe finding a sitter to attend an in-person group is too hard. 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. Various simple, user-friendly, and FREE options allow parent groups to meet, sharing audio and video. Register with a platform, schedule a meeting, and share a link. All participants must do is click the link at the designated meeting time. 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 childcare or distance is a barrier to in-person groups. In two-parent homes, one parent may attend for part while the other watches the kids and then switches.

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 also 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. The largest and most popular platform for these groups is Facebook. These social media groups are monitored or facilitated by administrators who grant access to members who have shared experiences. Here, you can post questions, share stories, ask for help, offer encouragement, discover resources, and occasionally vent frustrations. 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 valuable resources. Groups may be comprehensive, such as a "foster parent group," or specific to a subset, such as "transracial adoption." They 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.](#)

## 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, fine-tuning 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, keeping confidentiality at the forefront of the conversation is essential. 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 headphones or earbuds so 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 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 to air grievances. Yes, venting can sometimes feel good, but a group founded on 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 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

## [Family Resources & Support](#)

### From the [Resource Library](#)

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

### Training from [the Champion Classrooms](#)

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

### Additional Resources

- [Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association](#)
- [Wisconsin Foster Family Handbook, Chapter 5](#)
- [Hosting Virtual Support Groups](#)