

Attracting and keeping members



Going for growth

Most local parents' support groups worry at some stage about not having enough members. Common concerns are:

- the group is new and it is difficult to find people to join
- it started off well but now numbers have dropped
- people come once or twice but don't come back
- there are several long-standing members but it seems impossible to attract new parents
- there are lots of members but hardly anyone comes to the meetings or offers to help

Whatever the stage or size of your group there are some common steps you can take to tackle problems of low or inactive membership. There is usually more than one cause and so it is best to consider the various angles, such as:

- Is the group actually needed?
- If it is needed, how do you ensure people know about it?
- Having got new people along, how do you tempt them to come back?
- Having got them back, how do you look after them so that they stay with the group?

contact a family

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Is our group needed?

Do we still want this group?

This may seem an odd question, particularly if your group is very well-established and everyone expects it to be there when needed. Long-standing members may value the friendship and help they have gained through the group and feel guilty at the prospect of not making it available to new parents.

However, parents groups do come and go: children grow up; members move on to other things or feel they no longer need the group.

Sometimes an established parents' group closes because its members lose interest and later a group of new parents decide to fill the gap. This is natural and very positive.

So, if your group has been around for a long time and is struggling with low numbers, get the active members together and discuss whether you wish the group to continue. It would also be helpful to acknowledge how much effort members can continue to offer to the group.

How well is the group functioning?

Assuming that you wish to continue, it may be helpful for the active members to look at the group's overall functioning. For example, are you still carrying out your original aims and objectives or have these changed? Contact a Family has produced a quiz to help groups evaluate their progress; you can find this at the back of this guide.

What do other members think?

It would also be a good idea to write to all your members asking for their views on the value of the group. Their answers will be useful in thinking through how much work you need to put into recruiting new members. You could use the sample questionnaire that follows.

Sample questionnaire

Questionnaire to members of the XXX Parents' Support Group

The XXX Parents' Support Group is planning future activities and, to help us, we are asking members for your views on the group as it is now. Please spare a few moments to fill in this questionnaire as it will be important for our future.

Please tick anything you would like to see retained; a double tick if it is especially important to you!

1. Which of our aims do you value?

Supporting each other	<input type="checkbox"/>	Providing information	<input type="checkbox"/>
Raising awareness of children's needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	Campaigning for better services	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any others			

2. Which activities do you enjoy?

Evening meetings with a speaker	<input type="checkbox"/>	Coffee mornings	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family outings	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children's parties	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any others you would like to add			

3. Are you able to help the group with any of the following?

Booking the room	<input type="checkbox"/>	Organising tea and coffee	<input type="checkbox"/>
Booking speakers	<input type="checkbox"/>	Typing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Photocopying	<input type="checkbox"/>	Putting up posters	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helping write leaflets/posters	<input type="checkbox"/>	Looking after the money	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helping organise events	<input type="checkbox"/>	Taking notes at the meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transport for people without cars	<input type="checkbox"/>	Accompanying a new member to early meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>

Any other ways

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please return to _____ by _____

Publicising the group

When you first start a local group, you put a great deal of thought into publicity and attracting members. However, it is all too easy to stop advertising the group once members become involved in its activities. You may then just rely on a poster in the Child Development Centre (CDC) or depend on a friendly social worker to pass on details of the group to new parents. If neither of these is producing new members, you may have reached the point where you need a concerted publicity drive. This could be a concentrated one-off exercise involving everyone, or a regular event, for example every year.

Using the networks

Professional workers are an important resource; using their networks will help you to publicise the group to your target audience. Choose some key professionals and invite them to attend the group. Send a letter of introduction and some leaflets to the rest asking them to let parents know about the group.

Using the local media

Local newspapers and radio are always on the lookout for local stories and are usually keen to support good causes. You may like to find out which reporters have an interest in health, social services or consumer issues and build up a relationship between them and your parents' group. Let them know about events that are coming up and invite them along.

For more information about publicity and the media see the Contact a Family Groups Action Pack guides *Publicity for your group*, *Writing a news release* and *Speaking to the media*.

Welcoming new members

Once you have succeeded in tempting people to their first meeting, how does your group welcome them? It will be helpful for your members to draw on their own experiences of being put at their ease (or not!) when thinking about how to welcome new people to the group.

Being the newcomer

As well as the difficulties of being a 'stranger', it is likely that many new parents coming to your group will be experiencing some or all of the following:

- low confidence
- a feeling that their knowledge of their child is not valued
- anxiety about their child
- a need for support and information
- hopes that the group can help, but
- anxiety about walking into a room of strangers, and
- feeling excluded because group members all know each other and seem competent, confident, informed and impressive

In addition, parents may have practical problems about attending a meeting, such as lack of transport, babysitting problems or exhaustion.

For all these reasons, a newcomer may be anxious or reluctant to join in. Yet all your group members felt the same at first. If other parents are to share the benefits that you've gained from the group, it is important that you make a warm and friendly first impression on a newcomer, and acknowledge the step they have taken in coming along.

A welcome impression

Before the meeting

- if someone contacts you enquiring about meetings, offer to meet them beforehand or take them along to their first meeting
- consider having a map available to send out to interested families to help them find the venue
- have details about parking, public transport etc available

At the beginning of the meeting

Because some group members may be preoccupied with organising the meeting, it is helpful to designate one or two members who will be available to:

- welcome new parents
- exchange names
- find out what new parents would like from the group
- explain what will go on in the meeting
- introduce new parents to other members

During the meeting

Some ways to create a welcoming atmosphere include:

- arranging the seats in a circle to make it easier to join in
- allowing time for talking and listening to each other
- avoiding jargon or referring to people without explaining who they are
- encouraging comments and suggestions from all
- remembering and using people's names.

After the meeting

- thank new parents for coming
- ask if the meeting was helpful and if the group can help in any other way
- ensure that they have details of the next meeting and of the group contact person
- encourage them to leave their name and contact details for your mailing list
- you may want to follow up with a friendly phone call after the meeting

Keeping members

Which group would join?

Group A

You enter the hall unnoticed and sit on your own. Someone asks your name and you chat awkwardly for a bit about your children. There are a lot of children running around which makes it difficult to hear. Everyone seems to know everyone else. There is no opening to the group and no clue as to what the group's purpose is. Someone starts a discussion about a new specialist who has upset several parents. People are very angry and, as you have suffered at the hands of this doctor, you find the discussion depressing. Eventually parents begin to drift off chatting together. No one says goodbye to you.

Group B

You are met at the door and offered tea and biscuits. A couple of people come up and introduce themselves. They seem friendly and you don't feel awkward. A volunteer takes the children into another room to play and then there is a general group discussion about a new specialist who is upsetting parents by the way he gives diagnoses. You volunteer your experience and feel that everyone listens sympathetically. The members feel that it is important to try to educate this doctor and so everyone discusses a plan for meeting with him. At the end of the session one of the mothers asks where you live and offers you a lift home.

Parents join a local group for a variety of reasons. Underlying these, however, are some basic needs and, if these are met, people are more likely to want to stay in the group. These needs are:

- to share feelings and experiences with others who have been through the same thing and so understand
- to be listened to and feel safe about revealing despair, sadness and anger without being judged
- to relax and have some fun
- to feel useful to the group and involved

These needs can be divided into two categories: relationships in the group; and the work of the group.

Relationships

A friendly, accepting atmosphere is vital to members' well-being. The group needs to be a haven for members, somewhere to escape to from their daily struggles and hassles. This can be best achieved by the following:

- Remaining sensitive to members' emotional needs
 - listening to everyone's point of view
 - allowing time to share feelings
 - supporting members through crises
 - not forming cliques
- Finding ways to relax
 - having interesting speakers
 - going on group outings
 - including families for special events
 - giving yourselves treats

The work of the group

All this requires organising and thought. In the most effective groups, members share responsibility for tasks and making the group attractive to members.

Not every parent will be a consistently active member. Some may be unwilling or unable to play an active role – they may simply lack the time or energy.

However, groups do need a steady flow of members who will share in the workload of the group. Sharing the workload means:

- less work for one or two people
- more ideas
- more skills for the group
- individual skills development and confidence building
- a greater range of activities can be taken on
- commitment
- response to change and growth in the group
- greater democracy
- wider publicity outside the group
- valuing mutual support and individual contributions

Factors that might stop people from joining in are:

- lack of confidence
- lack of experience
- lack of time
- the formality of structures
- domination by one person
- lack of information on how to do the job
- cliques
- class or cultural barriers
- no one ever asks!

The checklist below gives some ways in which people can be encouraged to feel that their contribution counts, however small it may be.

Encouraging people

- Sharing decisions
 - everyone helps decide on the group's activities
 - members are consulted and their views are heard
- Sharing work
 - list tasks and share them out; these could range from putting up some posters or making the coffee to booking the room, arranging speakers, writing the newsletter
 - a large group with a big job could form sub-groups to work together on specific tasks
 - work in pairs; perhaps a new person with a long-standing member
 - even fairly inactive or new members may be willing to deliver some leaflets or put up a poster or make the coffee and tea one night
 - if you have a committee, encourage different people to take on the roles of chair and secretary. Perhaps split the secretary's job into two; one to take minutes and one to respond to letters
 - a time limit on jobs can ensure they are rotated regularly and new people are involved
- Sharing information
 - keep a record of how jobs are done so they can be passed on
 - show new people how to do things as early as possible
 - make use of people's contacts; for example a new member may have a good relationship with a helpful social worker or know a reporter on the local paper
- Sharing skills
 - don't let older members dominate forever
 - fundraise for and offer training if appropriate to your group, for example, listening skills if you specialise in befriending
 - give everyone a chance to contribute any skills they have, such as book-keeping, writing, speaking, design, fundraising
- Sharing practical solutions
 - members may need a lift to the meetings or help with babysitting so that they can attend

Checking on progress

Local groups have lives of their own. Like individuals they progress from infancy through adolescence to maturity; they grow at different rates, and can go backwards as well as forwards.

The stages in group development have been described as: forming; storming; norming; performing. You might find this a helpful way of looking at your group.

Forming

At the beginning of a group's life, people can feel anxious or shy or unwilling to commit themselves. It is therefore very important to be friendly and welcoming to everyone; to be supportive and encourage people to contribute at the level that feels right for them.

Storming

As people become more confident they may start to disagree about how the group should be run. This is a sign that people are beginning to care about the group. It is very important to listen to everyone's views and to share decision making as much as possible.

Norming

Members will now begin to trust each other more and to feel a sense of belonging to the group. This is a good time to encourage members to develop new skills and perhaps to try a new venture.

Performing

At this stage everyone feels responsible for the group and members are able to listen to each other, express their opinions freely and share responsibility for the group working well.

This is a good time to evaluate the group's progress and to consider how easy it is for new people to join. Working on membership at this stage may help to refresh the group through bringing in new people.

Where do you think your group is? Use the quiz which follows to help you find out.

The Contact a Family group quiz

It should be completed as a group exercise as this will aid discussion about the group's progress. Your group may like to distribute a copy to each member to complete, but it is best filled in and discussed in one session while ideas are fresh.

Read the three statements in each area and tick the one that you think best matches your group. Then simply add up your scores at the end. You must answer all the questions.

Then see how your answers compare!

Aims and objectives

- A We all agree on our aims
 - B Some of us agree on our aims
 - C We haven't a clue what our aims are
-
- A Our publicity accurately reflects our aims
 - B Our leaflets are a bit out of date
 - C We haven't any publicity material
-
- A We carry out our aims
 - B We sometimes get side-tracked from our aims
 - C We do whatever we feel like at the time

Comfort and convenience

- A The room in which we meet is right for our needs
 - B Some people dislike things about the room
 - C Everyone dislikes the meeting room
-
- A The time of day we meet suits most people
 - B We lose some members because of the time we meet
 - C Hardly anyone can come at the time we have chosen
-
- A We are all pretty happy with the location
 - B Some people are put off by the location
 - C We know the location is not suitable

Views on meetings

- A We all enjoy the meetings and learn something
 - B Some of us do not enjoy some of the meetings
 - C Most of us feeling the meetings are a let down
-
- A We can all grumble or laugh and not feel silly
 - B Some of us feel awkward sharing our real feelings
 - C Everyone feels awkward about sharing their feelings
-
- A We all get on well and listen to each other
 - B Some people are rather annoying
 - C We are not close to each other as a group

Sharing

- A We all decide what to do
 - B Some people decide what to do and tell the rest
 - C One person decides
-
- A We list the jobs and share them out
 - B The same few people do all the work
 - C One person does all the work
-
- A Everyone has a chance to use their skills
 - B A few people use their skills
 - C Hardly anyone uses their skills
-
- A We have a great variety of skills and knowledge in our group
 - B Some of us would like to learn more skills
 - C We badly need help with fundraising, publicity, etc, etc
-
- A We all welcome new members
 - B Some make the effort to welcome new people
 - C No one is responsible for looking after new members
-
- A We all seem to share the leadership around
 - B Leadership is delegated to a few people
 - C We have had the same leader since we started

Membership

- A We have a comfortable flow of new members
 - B We have a trickle of new members
 - C We are desperate for new members
-
- A We are happy that people are hearing about our group
 - B We wish we could get more publicity for our group
 - C No one seems to know that we exist

Relationships with professional workers

- A We run our own group
 - B We have some input from professionals
 - C Our group is run by a professional worker
-
- A We are happy with our relationship with professional workers
 - B We would like more/less contact with professionals
 - C We want to change our relationship with professional workers
-
- A Professionals tell people about our group
 - B Some professional workers sometimes advertise our group
 - C Professionals control the entry of people to our group

Scoring

A = 3, B = 2, C = 1

A score of 55–60: You have a very happy group whose members feel a high level of satisfaction. This is a good time to take on new challenges if members all feel like doing so.

A score of 35–54: Your group is ticking along and satisfying some of its members but most would like it to improve in various areas. Have a look at your B and C answers and see if you can pinpoint any areas where you could focus your efforts as a group.

A score of 26–34: Your members seem to be quite dissatisfied about several aspects of the group. You might find it helpful to identify which areas are causing problems and then talk them through with a Contact a Family development worker or with a worker from a local self-help support team.

A score of 20–25: If you are a very new group everyone may still need time to settle down and decide the group's direction and get to know each other. If you are an older group then such a high level of dissatisfaction calls for a thorough review of your aims and objectives. If you wish, a Contact a Family development worker will be pleased to help you.

NB. If individual members had different answers to some of the questions try to use it an opportunity to open up a discussion about the group and a chance to resolve some differences.

This guide is part of the Contact a Family Group Action Pack. For more information please visit www.cafamily.org.uk or telephone 020 7608 8700.

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