

Newsletters



Introduction

A newsletter can be a valuable link for parent support groups, particularly those with members around the UK. Even a modest production can act as a means of contact with volunteers, donors and those families who may not wish to participate in other activities of the group. In addition, newsletters provide a useful source of information and news about the group for professional workers, funders and local communities. One good newsletter accompanying a fundraising request may pay dividends.

Setting up

How often?

Before you decide how often to produce a newsletter, consider the information needs of your families and the length of time it will take to produce just one issue. Treat your first issue as a trial: monitor how long it takes you to write and ask for feedback on what your members think of it. It will probably be better to produce a well-balanced, quality newsletter less frequently, rather than a more frequent but less useful publication.

What can you afford?

It is important to have a budget for your newsletter. How much can the Group afford to spend on production and postage? A newsletter can range from an A4 photocopied sheet to a typeset commercially printed version. Both can be equally useful. The content is all important.

If you are going to use commercial printers be aware that prices can vary greatly. Obtain several quotes. Make the companies aware you are a parent support group and a charity and make sure they understand you need a competitive price. Each printer will need to know the size, number of pages, quality of paper, type of cover and quantity of each print run. In addition, if you are going to use artwork, what form will this be in? What will be the approximate number of any photographs/illustrations for each edition?

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Other budget considerations are:

- will the newsletter be free to all members or will you charge?
- will you charge for some members e.g. extended families, professionals and other interested people?
- will you take advertising or charge for inserted sheets?

How many?

In deciding the print run, consider the numbers of existing families, likely new members and interested professionals you wish to reach. Other voluntary organisations may want copies. Newsletters may also be useful publicity material for use in libraries, health centres and other public places.

Who can help?

Consider the resources within the group. Does anyone have access to:

- a computer for word processing
- a computer for desk top publishing
- photocopying or printing facilities
- stationery supplies
- logos, illustrations or graphics (a role here for any artistic group members)

Consider resources outside the group:

- the local C.V.S. (Council for Voluntary Service) and community groups may be producing their own newsletters and be able to advise and/or help
- local charitable groups may help with production costs and facilities
- local companies may be helpful especially if an employee is also one of your group members

Content

The content is more important than the look of the finished article. Write the newsletter so that it reflects the other activities of the group. Make sure that families can identify with the contents. The content should be broad enough to interest the majority of the group. Include chatty personal articles, professional input, news items, feedback from families, research updates, advance notice of play schemes, other events and useful hints for parents.

When you are writing about a complex issue it is important to present a balanced and unbiased view point. This may mean inviting people with different opinions to write short pieces.

Contributions should be encouraged across the group and no one individual should be responsible for writing all of the articles. There will inevitably be views expressed which are personal to the writers. Include a disclaimer phrase in every issue.

You may want to consider using a disclaimer statement similar to that used by Contact a Family in *Share an Idea*:

'The views and suggestions in this newsletter are those of individual contributors and are not necessarily supported by Contact a Family. Contact a Family cannot accept responsibility for any goods or services mentioned in or enclosed with *Share and Idea*.'

Remember the newsletter is one of the best publicity materials your group has. Include contact details for the group and make sure they are clear and easy to find. If someone who has never heard of your group picks up your newsletter, will they be able to tell what the group is all about and will they become more aware of the condition you cover?

Layout and design

The aim should be to produce an attractive and 'reader friendly' publication. Be ready to respond to feedback and review and change the layout of the newsletter in its early days. Use this to work towards a format by which your publication can be easily recognised. An organisation colour, distinctive graphics and your group's logo can help in this respect.

Desk top publishing

A computer with a DTP programme can make this job easier by enabling you to move articles and logos around on the screen. Learning to use the programme may take some time and it is important to remember that the computer is simply a tool – good design is an art.

If you are photocopying the newsletter it is worthwhile buying some special art paper for the final printout from the computer. This will give better definition for copying. If you are using a commercial printing company check with them which format you should use. Additionally it is possible to give the commercial printer a computer disk of any artwork you use. This will produce a higher standard but may be more expensive.

Design tips

1. Don't squeeze too much on a page. Use a clear font and reasonable font size - probably 12 or 14.
 2. *'You can put quotations in italics and shorten the column width to help break up a page of text'*
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3. Or you could put quotations between ruled lines to make them stand out. Have a look at other publications to see how they deal with them.
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4. CAPITALS ARE FINE FOR HEADINGS BUT THEY LOOK UGLY AND CAN BE A STRAIN TO READ IF USED FOR LARGE SECTIONS OF TEXT
 5. For emphasis it is usually better to use **bold text** rather than underlining which can be difficult to read.

6. Justified text is stretched by varying amounts so that the end of each line is at the right hand edge of the column. It can look very neat and prevents the right hand edge of the text from having a ragged look.

However, if your text contains several long words or if the columns are narrow then this can give an undesirable appearance with large gaps appearing between words. It can also be much harder to read.

7. Use photographs, illustrations and text boxes to break up large areas of text. This will make the newsletter more attractive to the eye and people are more likely to read it. Make sure you leave a reasonable space between the text and the lines of the box.

8. If you are photocopying your newsletter be aware that photographs will not come out very well. It may be better to use illustrations and 'clip-art'.
9. If you are using a commercial printer they will be able to "screen" photographs, but this may cost upwards of £10 per picture.
10. Shaded boxes can make even **bold** text difficult to read – use them sparingly.

House style

Decide on a 'house style' to deal with things consistently. This will make your newsletter look more professional and more recognizable as a publication from your organisation.

Things you might want to consider include:

- how you refer to you organisation - 'ANY SYNDROME Support Group' **or** 'Any Syndrome Support Group'
- name of newsletter - 'AS News' **or** 'as news' **or** 'AS News'
- 'Tel. (0123) 456 789' **or** 'Phone 0123 4567989'
- '17 April 2003' **or** 'Thur April 17th 03'
- use just 1 or 2 fonts
- use standard page layouts - full page **or** columns
- use of organisational colour

Production schedules

Do not be too tough on yourself. Compiling the newsletter will take longer than you first imagine. Allow plenty of time to gather in a full range of articles and to check sources. Prioritise the articles – some may be more appropriate for future editions. Make sure that events publicised will not have already taken place before your issue reaches member families.

- discuss with your printer how long they will need to produce the finished copies and try to ensure that all parties stick to the agreed deadlines
- plan volunteer help in advance to assemble and prepare for delivery
- include the deadline date for contributions for the next newsletter in every issue - make it clear which address to send it to

Distribution

Distribution will vary, from volunteers hand delivering local newsletters to a full scale mail-out for national publications. If you are doing it yourselves, then plan volunteer help well in advance to collate and prepare for delivery. For large mail shots, you may want to get an agency to do the work for you. If you are posting copies, make sure that a return address is visible. This will let you know about undelivered newsletters which will save you money for the next issue.

Some members may wish not to receive future editions and you are likely to have new members joining. You will need to be able to produce an up-to-date mailing list for each issue.

Have you got it right?

Your newsletter does not have to be perfect. Parent support groups' newsletters are often informal and chatty, but aim to make it as good as you can within the limits set.

In terms of content, most readers will not be eager to tell you what they really think. Be open to feedback and encourage comments. Most important, don't feel hurt by any adverse opinions.

Perhaps the most relevant judgements on the newsletter are:

- how well informed your supporters are
- how much comment about group activities you receive from outsiders
- whether take-up of services highlighted in your newsletter has increased
- whether it promotes the identity of the group

Many local adult education programmes now include desk top publishing courses. Contact your local council or adult education college for details.

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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