

Holding an open meeting



Your first open meeting

Local support groups for parents of children with additional needs develop in a variety of ways. Some just grow. They may start off by a couple of parents meeting up who then spread the word informally. Others hear and join in, maybe meeting at someone's home, a community centre, or similar venue. They may choose not to promote the group more widely, but rely on word of mouth to reach new members.

Others decide to launch the group with an open meeting, hoping to reach as many potential members as possible and broaden the range of ideas at an early stage. In some situations, the first public meeting will be arranged by one parent who sees the need for a group and wants to set one up. In others, it is a small core of parents who get together and launch the group, after some groundwork on its aims and objectives.

Holding your first open meeting can be a daunting experience. There are, however, a few tried and tested ways of making meetings more manageable. With good preparation, a clear idea of its purpose and a positive approach on the day, you have a much better chance of holding a successful meeting. Contact a Family development staff will be happy to help at any stage in your planning.

Planning in advance

The aims

The most important aspect of your planning is deciding what you want to achieve in this meeting. For the first occasion, the aims will probably be short and simple, for instance:

- to share your ideas on starting a group and to hear from other parents
- to get names and addresses of those interested in forming a group
- to set the date of a second meeting.

From this you can prepare a simple agenda (see page 7) which can guide you through the meeting.

At a later stage, your agenda may be fuller, taking in elements such as the business of running the group, time for mutual support and sharing, and guest speakers.



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Publicising the meeting

There are a variety of ways of publicising meetings. It is helpful to have more than one person involved at this stage, as this will bring in more ideas about where and how to publicise the event, and more people to spread the word or to distribute posters.

Spreading the word

Word of mouth is a very effective way of attracting other parents. Friends, family and neighbours can all help. If you are clear in your mind about who your group is aiming to reach, it may be clearer who your useful contacts will be. For instance:

- parents whose children are deaf or have impaired hearing: useful contacts - ENT specialist, audiologists, speech therapists, educational support services, peripatetic teacher, National Deaf Children's Society
- parents whose children have a learning disability: useful contacts - child development team, portage worker, community paediatrician, educational psychologist, opportunity playgroup, Mencap and other local charities

Preparing a poster

Posters can reach a wider public than individual contacts. Again, your choice of where to display your poster will partly be shaped by who you want to reach. You can also use more general publicity points, such as libraries, post offices and village halls/community centres.

Checklist for promotional poster

Make sure your poster includes:

- date
- start and finish time
- venue
- who can attend
- what the meeting is about
- accessibility
- other useful information (e.g. crèche)
- contact name and details

If your poster has a friendly tone and is visually attractive, it is likely to produce a better response. There are other suggestions about publicity in the Contact a Family Group Action Pack guides *Starting a local group* and *Publicity for your group*.

Local media

The local press, radio and TV are often interested in publicising parents' support groups. They usually take a 'human interest' angle, which may include focusing on an individual story. This can give you extensive publicity, but be sure that the parents involved are happy to feature in this way as stories can sometimes be slanted. A press release is a

useful way of informing the local media: you can find hints on writing one in the Contact a Family Group Action Pack guide, *Writing a news release*.

The practicalities

Once you have chosen a suitable venue, there are a number of other practical details which can help the meeting run smoothly.

If you are a small group, decide in advance how to share out practical tasks - this can avoid confusion on the day. If you are an individual parent, think about asking a friend or relative to help you with some of the practicalities.

Practical details you may want to consider include:

- seating arrangement: a circle is more friendly than rows of chairs and encourages discussion
- who will put notices on the door to direct people
- who will deal with refreshments
- who will welcome parents as they arrive
- who will chair the meeting
- who will take names and addresses of interested parents
- what notes do you want to take and who will take them

You might also want to suggest a couple of alternative dates and venues for the next meeting to people interested in taking the group forward.

The role of professional workers

If a professional worker has been involved in the planning of your group, you will need to clarify his/her role at this meeting.

If you are aiming for a parent-led group, it is best for parents to take the lead in welcoming people, introducing the meeting and leading the discussion.

If a professional worker is involved, s/he can play an invaluable role in circulating publicity, encouraging parents to attend and helping with practical details on the day such as preparing the room and refreshments.

For more information on this topic, see the Contact a Family Group Action Pack guide, *Professional workers and parents' support groups*.

Managing the meeting

Preparing the venue

Arriving at the venue in advance of participants will allow you time to arrange seating, familiarise yourselves with the layout of the building, put up notices and make sure you each know what you will be doing and where you will sit. Whoever is welcoming people needs to be able to greet late arrivals. The person chairing the meeting can prepare by running through the agenda.

Welcoming people

The chances are that people attending the meeting will be newcomers to you and each other. Some may feel nervous and apprehensive while others may be full of enthusiasm. It is up to you to make everyone feel their attendance is appreciated, and that your group aims to meet their needs. Remembering people's names and introducing them to each other will help them to relax and feel part of the proceedings.

You may choose to offer refreshments and take people's names at this point, or later on.

Chairing the meeting

The role of the Chair is to lead the meeting towards reaching its agreed aims, with the maximum involvement of the participants.

Checklist for chairing a meeting:

- Introduce the meeting and outline the agenda
- Ensure that points on the agenda are covered
- Encourage discussion
- Make sure that everyone who wants to gets a chance to speak, and that people don't interrupt each other
- Keep discussion to the subject
- Summarise and clarify discussion
- Ensure that decisions are reached and recorded
- Remain impartial
- Conclude the meeting and check that participants know about any follow-up

For more information on running meetings see the Contact a Family Group Action Pack guide, *Effective meetings*.

Introductions

In opening the meeting, you might suggest that everyone introduce themselves briefly. It is worthwhile saying that if anyone prefers not to speak at this stage, this is all right.

You might need to take into account the number of people present. If there is a large number, individual introductions could take a long time: in that case, you could start by keeping your own introduction brief and moving on to someone else who will follow your lead.

Another option with a large group is to split into small groups, ensuring people mix with those they have not met before.

The agenda will indicate what you hope to achieve from this meeting. If you make explicit why the meeting has been called, and what ideas for setting up a group have already been suggested, this will help people to voice their own opinions. You might also like to ask if there is anything else people would like to discuss on this occasion and add it to the agenda.

Encouraging discussion

In some meetings discussion flows easily, and in others it is an uphill slog. Sometimes it depends on personalities and people's confidence in a group setting. It can be difficult to assess whether someone is not speaking because others are more vocal and they are not getting a chance or because they prefer to listen rather than talk.

Ways to encourage participation include:

- making sure that you make eye contact with everyone
- acknowledging people's contributions
- addressing people by name
- referring back to what someone said earlier, such as, "I think you said when you were introducing yourself ..."
- linking different ideas, for instance, "What you were just saying reminded me of what Jill said earlier. Has anyone else found ...?"

It can seem quite a challenge to take note of names and what people are saying if you are feeling self-conscious and under scrutiny. But what most people are expecting of you is that you share your ideas and listen to theirs.

Reaching conclusions

Summarising the discussion, ensuring all the major points have been covered and that everyone has had a chance to contribute, will lead on to making decisions. On this occasion the decisions will involve finding out who is interested in developing a group and where and when you will next meet. If you have designated someone to chair the next meeting, let everyone know so that they are able to put items onto the agenda. It is important, also, that everyone knows who to contact about the group, and how. At this point, the formal part of the meeting can be closed.

Relaxing and chatting with other parents is often the most enjoyable and productive part of the meeting. Group leaders and established members can take this opportunity to circulate and talk to newcomers, taking names of those interested in joining and noting any particular ideas they have or contributions they would like to make.

Troubleshooting

Problems with meetings and how to cope with them

40 people arrive

Assuming that you have anticipated the possibility and the room is large enough for this number, the Chair might introduce the meeting and the key people who organised it. Then split the meeting into groups of five or six people for a set time to discuss their ideas. Ask someone in each group to take notes of the main points. Bring everybody back together and ask for a feedback from each small group - if anyone feels awkward speaking in front of the whole group, they can pass their notes to someone from the planning group. Bring out the main points, especially those which feature most frequently, and move to conclusions.

Only two people turn up

This can be very dispiriting if you have put a lot of effort into setting the meeting up. The two people who have come, however, may form a strong foundation with you, and a group which grows slowly can often last longer than one which starts with a bang. You can be more informal, and talk more about your children and your hopes for the group, while bearing in mind your aims for the meeting.

One person dominates the meeting

You may have to deal with this directly, for instance: by saying “has anyone else got anything to say about this?”; by offering to discuss the person’s concerns individually after the meeting; or by moving the discussion on to a new topic. Alternatively, if you have planned a coffee break, this may give you an opportunity to break the discussion and change the focus of the meeting when you reconvene, to allow others to come in.

No one speaks

Try asking open questions to which people cannot say yes or no, e.g., “what would you like the group to do first?” or “what do you think will be the most important concerns facing our group?” Or you can choose a specific topic and brainstorm on this, e.g., what are good outlets to publicise the group? Or you could put people into pairs to talk together about what they would like to get out of the group.

Reviewing the meeting

While the meeting is still fresh in your minds, it is worth the core group discussing how you felt about it and how far your aims were achieved.

At this early stage, it can be helpful to avoid falling into fixed roles. For instance, some groups make a conscious decision to rotate the Chair, or have a rota for tea making. This allows everyone to try something new and build up their confidence and feeling of ownership of the group.

Recording the content and conclusions of the meeting can be as formal or informal as you wish. It will be useful, however, to keep some written record for future reference.

Sample agenda for an open meeting

Anytown Parents' Support Group

Agenda for meeting on 19.3.2003

- 1 Welcome
- 2 Introductions
- 3 Starting a group
 - your ideas so far
 - are people interested in a group?
 - what would they like the group to do?
- 4 Refreshments
- 5 Next meeting
 - date
 - topic for discussion
- 6 Any other business
- 7 Take names and addresses
- 8 Close meeting

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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