

Promoting inclusion

Local parent support groups - A guide for children's centres

Introduction

This guide has been written for staff based at children's centres who are interested in working with support groups for parents of disabled children or considering setting up a group.

It aims to explore why parents find support groups valuable and how children's centres can support existing groups locally. It also highlights some of key things to consider when starting a brand new parent support group in a children's centre setting.

This guide is intended to offer a brief overview of some of the issues. You can find lots more information in our Group Action Pack guides (see below) and can contact us for advice and support.

Our Group Action Pack guides explore a range of issues associated with starting and developing a local parent support group. The guides which might be of particular interest while starting a parents' group at your children's centre, or when supporting an existing parent group, are highlighted with this symbol:



A full list of all the Group Action Pack guides we produce can be found on page 7. The guides can be downloaded free of charge from the Contact a Family website at:

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAP.html> .

Why do parents join support groups?

Parents of disabled children often tell us that the mutual support they receive from other parents is invaluable. A support group provides an opportunity for parents to get together and share their feelings, problems and ideas with others in a similar situation. This lessens parents' feelings of isolation.

Support groups also allow parents the opportunity to pay some attention to their own needs while giving them the satisfaction which comes from helping other parents.

What does a typical parent support group do?

There isn't really such thing as a "typical" parent support group - groups vary greatly in terms of size, activities and scope and no one kind is necessarily better than another. The most important thing is that the group is helpful and supportive to its members.

Although every group is different, parents have a number of experiences in common and most groups provide:

- a regular meeting place for parents of disabled children and their families;
- friendship and opportunities to socialise;
- information and advice;
- emotional and moral support;
- practical help e.g. holiday activities.

What sort of help do parent support groups need?

As every support group varies, so does the amount of assistance they need from external agencies and voluntary organisations. However, most support groups appreciate help with one or more of the following at some stage of their development:

- **Venue**

Finding the right venue for meetings is important. A good venue makes meetings more enjoyable and attracts (and keeps!) group members.

Some groups decide to meet in each other's houses whereas others prefer to meet at an external venue. However, finding an affordable meeting room can be a struggle. Children's centres may be able to help here by offering free meeting space in an accessible, equipped and comfortable environment with on-site childcare facilities.

- **Publicity**

Many groups find that "word of mouth" is a very effective way of publicising themselves but they need the help of professionals working with families to do this.

You can help not only by letting families know about support groups running in the area, but also by sharing this information with the other professionals you work with at the children's centre.

If your children's centre produces a newsletter or bulletin, could you also publicise local groups through this? Similarly, is there a parent noticeboard or information point that groups could advertise their services on?

- **Facilitation**

Although many established groups are parent-led, a new group might ask you to facilitate their first few meetings and act as a source of guidance while the group is getting underway.

The extent of your involvement will depend on whether a group approaches you directly, and sees your role as being time-limited, or whether you have initiated a group that will be permanently based at your children's centre.

The precise role of a professional or paid worker within a group can sometimes be a source of confusion. It is not uncommon for someone to be professionally involved with a parent while offering them support via a group at the same time. It is important to be clear about the part you will play from the outset and agree on boundaries.

- **Speakers**

Many groups enjoy inviting speakers to meetings so that useful information can be passed on to parents, with the opportunity for them to ask questions – speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and educational psychologists are often popular. Your own contacts within the children's centre may mean you can help groups to secure these speakers and build positive relationships.

- **Funding**

All parent support groups need money, even if it is just for the refreshments during meetings. Could any money be put aside in the children's centre budget to give groups some financial assistance? If not, are there ways you could help in kind, like offering free meeting rooms or providing help with photocopying and printing?

How can parent support groups help you?

- Parent groups offer an important additional source of local support to which you can refer the families you work with.
- Your children's centre can gain access to a wide range of parents' views through local support groups. They provide an excellent forum for involving parents in service development and gathering feedback on the service you offer.

Starting a parent support group at your children's centre

You might be approached by a parent who would like to start a parent support group at your children's centre, or you may be considering setting one up yourself. Before you begin, there are some key questions to ask:

- **Is there already a parents' group running in the area?**

Before starting a brand new support group, check whether there are any other parent groups running locally and meeting families' needs.

Contact a Family can let you know whether we are in touch with any groups in your area. Your local child development centre or local carers centre may also be able to let you know about parent support groups meeting locally.

- **Do parents want a support group?**

This may seem like a strange question but a common misconception is that all parents of disabled children want to join a support group. This is not always the case - groups (of any description) do not appeal to everyone. If you are considering starting a group at your children's centre, is this because you have been alerted to a particular need or because you are assuming this is what the parents want? Have you asked the parents who use the centre whether this a form of support they would like?

Rather than offering a full support group straight away (which some parents may find intimidating) you might like to hold a weekly drop-in session specifically for parents of disabled children. Drop-in sessions allow parents to access information and advice in a relaxed way and at a time that suits them. If you offer refreshments and a comfortable seating area at the same time, parents will have the opportunity to sit and chat and you may find that a support group grows naturally out of this.

- **Who will run the group?**

What is your position in the group? Are you planning to be there in a supportive and advisory role or are you going to be the group leader and facilitator? The extent of your involvement will depend on the group members and how confident they feel about running the group. For the first few months, the group may need a lot of guidance and input from you but you might want to consider gradually stepping back and allowing the group to be parent-led over time. Parents usually feel that they have more ownership over the group if it is parent-led and this leads to greater commitment. It also gives parents the opportunity to develop new skills and gain more confidence.

Take a look at:



Starting a local parents' group

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAPStartLocalGroup.pdf>

Professional workers and parent support groups

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAPProfessionalWorkers.pdf>

Making meetings welcoming

For many parents, attending a support group meeting will be the first time they have been in a group situation since leaving school and they may be anxious, especially if they imagine that everybody else already knows each other. Coming to a support group meeting might also be a parent's first step in acknowledging their child's disability or additional needs. Parents can be easily put off so it is important to give a good first impression and show that the group is welcoming and supportive. Some ways to do this include:

- meeting in a room that offers privacy to ensure confidentiality;
- making sure the meeting room is well sign posted;
- ensuring there is plenty of seating and arranging it informally (a circle or horse-shoe shape work best);
- standing at the door and welcoming parents as they arrive;
- offering plenty of refreshments like tea, coffee, water, fruit, cake and biscuits;
- having sticky labels and pens available so parents can have a name badge;
- remembering to tell the group where the toilets, fire exits and smoking areas are;
- allowing plenty of time for everyone to introduce themselves at the start of the meeting;
- asking the group to suggest some groundrules so they feel they can share their experiences in a safe environment - these might include:
 - confidentiality at all times;
 - accepting differences;
 - no pressure to speak;
 - listening respectfully;
 - being able to add new ground rules when the need arises.



Take a look at:

Starting a local parents' group

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAPStartLocalGroup.pdf>

Attracting and keeping members

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAPAttractingMembers.pdf>

Accessibility

Support groups should be as accessible as possible to all parents of disabled children and reflect the diversity of your local community. There are challenges in creating a group environment which is truly inclusive but being aware of the issues involved and being committed to including all parents is an important step.

To overcome some of the barriers parents face and ensure everyone can attend and participate in meetings, you might like to consider the following:

- **Meeting times**

The timing of group meetings should fit in with both school and family life. Meeting during school hours is popular among many parent groups; although it is important not to meet too close to the start or end of the school day otherwise parents may arrive late or have to leave early.

Remember that some working parents will be unable to attend meetings during the day. If your centre opens late, you might like to offer some evening support group meetings.

- **Meeting rooms**

Is your meeting room accessible to people with disabilities? Would it be suitable for parents who have mobility difficulties or are wheelchair users? Do you have access to a loop system for parents who have a hearing impairment?

- **Childcare**

Some groups encourage members to bring their children to meetings and provide toys and activities for them. Others are open to parents only which can be tricky for those who have no access to childcare.

Providing crèche facilities can make a big difference to parents and enable them to attend groups that would be inaccessible otherwise. As children's centres are expected to provide day care, you are in a good position to offer childcare while parent groups meet.

If you are able to provide childcare, make sure you are clear to parents about what you can provide, for example, do you offer an environment where children with disabilities and children who are not disabled play together? Are you able to provide one-to-one care when needed?

It is important to recognise that some parents do not feel confident about leaving their disabled child in the care of others and it can take time to gain their trust. You can increase parents' confidence by giving them the opportunity to meet the staff so they can discuss their child's needs with them one-to-one. Having a couple of 'trial runs' and allowing parents to stay with their children for all, or part, of a session can also help to reduce anxiety.

- **Group publicity**

If you are trying to make a parent support group as inclusive as possible, it is important that this message is conveyed through the group's publicity.

If you use photos on group leaflets or posters, make sure they reflect the diversity of your local area; otherwise parents may assume the group is not for them. Similarly, if you are keen to attract fathers to a group, try to include some pictures of dads.

Depending on the diversity of your local area, you might also want to produce some publicity in community languages, or publicise the group through organisations who support specific communities in your area.



Take a look at:

Reaching out to disabled parents

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAPDisabledParents.pdf>

Reaching out to fathers

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAPFathers.pdf>

Reaching out to black and minority ethnic parents

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAPBME.pdf>

How can Contact a Family help you?

Children's Centre Team

The children's centres team role is to assist centres in providing support to families with disabled children. We would welcome feedback on your experiences of setting up parent groups, including any problems encountered and lessons learnt. We will be providing real life examples of the different ways children's centres have set up and facilitated parent support groups on our website, so that others can learn from their experiences.

For more information, see: <http://www.cafamily.org.uk/childcentres.html> .

Group Action Pack Guides

Our Group Action Pack guides provide further advice about running support groups and these can be downloaded free of charge from the Contact a Family website at:

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAP.html> .

Alternatively, call 020 7608 8700 to order copies.

For Local Groups

- Starting a local parents' group
- Holding an open meeting
- Attracting and keeping members
- Local campaigning
- Professional workers and parents' support groups

For Local and National Groups

- Charity registration
- The role of trustees
- Leaflets
- Publicity
- Speaking to the media
- Writing a news release
- Patrons and celebrity support
- Public speaking for parents
- Effective meetings
- Reaching Out to Disabled Parents
- Reaching Out to Black and Minority Ethnic Parents
- Reaching Out to Fathers
- Data protection
- Websites
- Virtual communities
- Meetings via telephone conference
- Fundraising
- Newsletters
- Employing a paid worker
- Child Protection

One-to-one support for local parent groups

Our Contact a Family offices can give advice and support to local parent groups on a range of issues including starting up, registering as a charity, ongoing development and everything in between.

Nation Offices

Contact a Family Northern Ireland

Telephone: 028 9262 7552

E-mail: nireland.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: 1 Wallace Avenue, Lisburn, BT27 4AA

Contact a Family Scotland

Telephone: 0131 659 2930

E-mail: scotland.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: Craigmillar Social Enterprise and Arts Centre, 11/9 Harewood Road, Edinburgh, EH16 4NT

Contact a Family Cymru/Contact a Family Wales

Telephone: 029 2039 6624

E-mail: wales.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: 33-35 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9HB

Regional Offices

Contact a Family North East Region

Telephone: 0191 213 6300

E-mail: northeast.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: The Dene Centre, Castle Farm Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE3 1PH

Contact a Family North West Region

Telephone: 0161 743 0700

E-mail: northwest.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: 6th Floor, St. James House, Pendleton Way, Salford, M6 5FW

Contact a Family West Midlands Region

Telephone: 0121 415 4624

E-mail: westmids.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: Prospect Hall, 12 College Walk, Selly Oak, Birmingham, B29 6LE

London offices

Contact a Family Ealing

Telephone: 020 8810 8151

E-mail: ealing.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: Room 3, First Floor, St Andrew's Church Centre, Mount Park Road, London, W5 2RS

Contact a Family Lewisham

Telephone: 020 7635 6333

Email: lewisham.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: 1 Forman House, Frensbury Road, London, SE4 2LB

Contact a Family Southall

Telephone: 020 8571 6381

E-mail: southall.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: St. Georges Community Centre, 8-12 Lancaster Road, Southall, UB1 1NW

Contact a Family Southwark

Telephone: 020 7277 4436

E-mail: southwark.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: 54 Camberwell Road, London, SE5 0EN

Contact a Family Sutton and Merton

Telephone: 020 8640 5525

E-mail: suttonmerton.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: Hill House Community Centre, Bishopsford Road, Morden, SM4 6BL

Contact a Family Wandsworth

Telephone: 020 8947 5260

E-mail: wandsworth.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: 1 Siward Road, Wandsworth, London, SW17 0LA

If you are based in an area that does not have a Contact a Family office, please contact:

Jemma Black, Local Groups Officer

Telephone: 020 7608 8755

E-mail: jemma.black@cafamily.org.uk

Address: Contact a Family, 209-211 City Road, London, EC1V 1JN