



Start a Kinship/Foster/Adopt Support Group

SHOULD YOU START A GROUP?

Kinship, foster, and adoptive families need lots of support. A great way to offer this is to provide a space for them to come together, learn from each other, pray together, and simply vent with people who understand their daily struggles. A church is a great place to host a group because buildings often have physical space for children and caregivers to meet separately. A support group can be a beautiful way to show God's love to families in your church and the greater community.

Before starting a support group for kinship, foster, and adoptive families, determine if your community has similar existing support groups. Consider joining an existing group or identifying gaps in the current groups and determining if a new group could fill that need. Perhaps there is a group for adoptive families but not for foster or kinship families. Maybe a daytime group works for stay-at-home parents, but there is a need for an evening or weekend group.

WHAT TYPE OF GROUP?

In addition to the standard in-person support group, consider non-traditional groups, such as video conferencing or online groups. A closed Facebook group is an inexpensive way to facilitate an online group, and Google Hangouts is an affordable way to host a video group, depending on the size.

FREQUENCY

Typically, groups meet once or twice monthly. Meeting more often may be challenging for leaders, and meeting less often makes it difficult to build relationships. Some groups host one meeting and one family activity each month.

LOCATION

When selecting a location, consider accessibility. If it is a two-story building, does it have an elevator? Is there ample parking? Is it centrally located? Is it semi-private? Cost is also a factor to consider. Finding a free location is always best. Most churches will allow their building to be used for something like this at no cost, provided it doesn't interfere with their other meetings or activities. But if you have concerns that the community might think your group is just for one



particular church and not open to everyone, you might want to find a more neutral location such as a library, room at a school or college, or coffee shop with a private meeting room.

REFRESHMENTS

Depending on the time of your meeting, snacks and drinks are nice. To keep your costs down, you could invite group members to bring snacks to share. Another alternative is to invite church volunteers, local restaurants, or churches to provide snacks or a meal for one of the groups. If you meet monthly, you only need to find 12 donors each year.

PROMOTION

Since your target audience is limited to kinship, foster, or adoptive parents, promoting it shouldn't be too difficult or expensive. The best way to invite people is through word of mouth, where parents tell other parents. A personal invitation makes people feel seen and cared for. Here are some different ways to spread the word:

- **Social Media:** You could create a Facebook page or Instagram account (the two platforms most used by young moms) for the group, but you will likely have access to more people by posting on other existing accounts, such as your local Department of Human Services, County, City, churches, or groups specifically for kinship, foster or adoptive families. You can pay a small fee to 'boost' the posts that announce your meeting.
- **Newsletters:** Kinship, foster, and adoptive families are usually already associated with the foster care or adoption agency that licensed them, and these organizations typically send out monthly or quarterly newsletters. Simply ask to have a notice posted in their newsletters about your group.
- **Community Announcements:** Most newspapers, TV and radio stations set aside time/space to announce community events at no cost. They will usually require the information to be submitted several weeks or even a month in advance, so keep that in mind as you plan each meeting.
- **Churches:** If you are already working with local churches to recruit and support kinship, foster, or adoptive families, they may be willing to promote your support group through their normal announcement channels (newsletters, bulletins, video announcements, social media platforms).



COSTS

Determine the group's costs. Consider which items could be donated, such as meeting space or refreshments, and then look for sponsors to cover the remaining expenses. You can also consider charging participants a small fee, especially if you are paying for childcare workers. Keep good financial records. If you must purchase items, save receipts and track expenses. Be sure to send thank you letters and tax receipts (as appropriate) to sponsors or donors.

CONSIDER CHILDCARE

Because this is a group for parents (kinship, foster, or adoptive), someone must watch the kids. You can ask people to arrange their childcare, but it may decrease attendance. If you meet at a church or library with a separate space for the kids, you can seek volunteers to help watch the children. It is essential to have at least one volunteer who is knowledgeable about the special needs of children who have experienced trauma and may have special needs or disabilities. You might need to pay to get someone who is qualified. You can ask parents to share the cost or find a donor. Be sure to ask about childcare workers' requirements for the church or location you are considering. Many require workers, including volunteers, to have a background check. This is highly recommended for the protection of children and adults. When possible, select caregivers who are trauma informed.

Some groups use their church's regularly scheduled children's programs in lieu of childcare. For instance, the group meets during Awana on Wednesday nights or during a church service.

TRAINING HOURS

Many counties and agencies will count support group attendance as foster training recertification hours. This is especially true if training is provided during the meeting. This could be a draw for some kinship and foster parents to attend. Not only will they get much-needed support, but they will also fulfill ongoing education requirements. An attendance check-in sheet, calendar of topics and training certificates may be needed to facilitate this for families. Check with applicable counties and agencies for requirements.

GROUND RULES

Set ground rules for the meetings in advance. Invite participants to create the rules at the initial meeting. Confirm that everyone agrees to the rules. This will make it easier to re-direct people



during discussions. You only need to point to the agreed rules to re-direct the conversation. Save the rules to post on the wall each week and briefly review the group ground rules for new participants

Some suggested ground rules include:

- Confidentiality: What's said in the group stays in the group.
- Everyone gets a chance to share.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Speak respectfully to everyone involved when sharing.
- Cell phones are silenced, and no one reads texts/emails during group.
- No side conversations
- Parking Lot: Post a blank flip chart at the beginning of each meeting and when someone gets off topic so it can be revisited later that night or at a future group meeting.
- Be respectful. No unsolicited advice. Share personal experiences, but don't be judgmental or critical of others.

FACILITATE WITH STRENGTH

All groups need a strong leader. In the case of a support group that includes parents who are overwhelmed and desperate for help, it is important to maintain order. The facilitator must control the meeting and keep it moving along. Be polite but firm. If the meeting is allowed to go off-topic or one person is allowed to monopolize most of the discussion, people will stop attending.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when facilitating:

- Redirect conversation that gets off-topic. Using a meeting agenda, you can simply point to it and remind the group what the topic is for the night or that it's not the time to move into that part of the agenda yet. Use the Parking Lot as necessary.
- When one participant monopolizes the conversation, politely but firmly thank them for their comments and point out that we need to ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to share.
- Encourage quiet individuals to speak out. Before transitioning to the next question or topic, look around the room and ensure everyone has had a chance to speak.



- Allow people to pass if they aren't comfortable answering a question. While you want to encourage quiet people to speak, don't make anyone feel they must share.
- If it seems group members simply want time to share, build that into your meeting. It's okay to have a guided topic for part of the time to provide structure and open discussion for part or all of the meeting.

RESOURCE LIST

Providing a list of local resources can be very helpful for foster parents, especially kinship families who likely had less time to prepare for this new role. Many communities have a designated 211 Information and Referral Line. In many communities, 211 is operated by the local United Way. Providing families with this link is best, as it is more likely to be kept updated. However, if you don't have a 211 line or website in your community, you can gather a list of the most requested resources for kinship/foster/adoptive families. Checking with your local Department of Human Services or local libraries is a good place to start. As you bring in local experts as guest speakers for your group, you can add their resources to your list.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

When selecting topics for facilitated discussion or for a special guest speaker, always ask group members what they would like to discuss. A simple survey is a good way to get feedback.

Here are a few topics to get you started:

- Helping kids identify their feelings, and appropriate ways to express those feelings
- Communicating with Biological Parents (may be different for kinship families)
- Communicating with the Kids in your Home
- "I" Statements and Solutions Based Communication
- Discipline vs. Punishment: Why Spanking Doesn't Work for Kids Who Have Been Abused and Alternative Behavior Management Techniques
- Trauma-Informed Care
- TBRI (Trust Based Relational Intervention)
- Recognizing High Risk Behaviors: Fire setting; Animal Cruelty; Self Harm; Suicidal Ideation; Stealing; Hoarding; Drugs & Alcohol use; Truancy; Destructive behavior; Bullying (victim or perp); Physical aggression.
- Finding the Underlying Source of Difficult Behavior



- Child Welfare Acronyms
- Helping Kids Understand Their Parents' Behavior
- Parenting the Medically Fragile Child
- IEPs and other education topics
- Grief and Loss
- Navigating Diversity
- Building a Sensory Library
- Finding and Selecting Therapists
- Building Positive Sibling Relationships
- Taking Time for You
- Finding and Utilizing Respite Care
- Praying God's Word Over Your Children
- Moving From Fear to Faith

USING BOOKS TO DISCUSS DIFFICULT ISSUES WITH KIDS

Invest in several good books and build a lending library for families. You can also read a book together to structure meeting topics.

REFLECTIONS

As caregivers arrive at a meeting, give them a large sticky note and ask them to write down something difficult they had to deal with this week, then post it on the wall or a flip chart. Ensure they know that the group will discuss this issue and that they don't have to tell people which issue was theirs. They also don't have to participate if they aren't comfortable doing so. After everyone has had a chance to post a topic, the facilitator reviews them all and looks for similar ones. One at a time (or one grouping at a time), the facilitator reads them off and asks if others in the room have ever faced this challenge and what they did to overcome it or resolve it.

REDUCING STRESS

Write this question on a whiteboard or flip chart: "What would make our life less stressful?" and ask people to respond as they are comfortable. Encourage other group members to share how



they have found resources to meet these needs. Some issues you might want to be prepared to address include:

- Respite
- Counseling
- Financial Assistance
- Legal Assistance
- Childcare
- Furniture
- Medical care
- Up-to-date information about our case

ICE BREAKERS

Unlike a group at work or church, many of the people in the parent support group won't know each other... at least not initially. So, to help people feel comfortable before sharing personal information and being vulnerable with each other, spend a few minutes doing an icebreaker as an opening to the meeting. Keep the activities light-hearted and fun and don't require people to participate if they don't want to.

SAMPLE AGENDA FOR FIRST MEETING

6:00 p.m. Social time As participants arrive allow time for refreshments and socializing.

6:30 p.m. Welcome & Housekeeping

6:35 p.m. Introduction of Leaders Why they chose to facilitate

6:45 p.m. Introductions of Participants First name Number of children, (foster/bio/adoptive)
How long they've been foster parents Why they joined the group

6:55 p.m. Ice Breaker Activity



7:15 p.m. Facilitated Discussion or Guest Speaker For initial meeting open up discussion as to what people hope to get out of the group, and what specific type of support they need. (understanding the child welfare system, navigating the school system (IEP, 504, etc); behavior management techniques; learn to deal with bio families,

8:00 p.m. Wrap Up Discuss date/time/location of next meeting Adjourn Tracking meeting attendance, topics, etc. This can help you watch for trends so you can make adjustments as necessary. It can also provide information you can report to current or potential funders.