



Learning Tool 11



Core Principles of Parent Mutual Support Groups

Mutual support groups provide a safe, encouraging environment where parents share their concerns, learn and practice new parenting skills, and connect to each other and to community resources. Mutual support groups help to reduce parental stress and isolation as well as increase parents' self-efficacy and competencies. Groups provide invaluable opportunities for parents to both receive support and give support to other parents who face similar parenting challenges. Further, mutual support groups often offer children's programs to complement and promote children's emotional and social development.



The primary responsibility for the development and well being of children lies within the family, and parenting is demanding and often stressful. These groups offer a meaningful, non-threatening way for parents to gain skills as well as build supportive relationships within the group and the larger community. Effective parent mutual support groups contribute to strengthening protective factors within families and address conditions that place children at risk of abuse and/or neglect.



Mutual support groups help to reduce parental stress and isolation and increase parents' self-efficacy and competencies.

The Eight Principles[©]

Eight principles provide the basis of how effective parent groups operate. Circle of Parents[®], a national network of 29 state and regional organizations of parent support groups, uses the following principles as the basis for positively impacting families and their children.



Trust

Parents who come to support groups count on each other to listen openly, respond honestly, and always act with compassion. Parents know that all information shared in the support group is confidential and never discussed outside the group setting, within the limits of the law. All parents have the option of anonymity in the support group.

Reciprocity

Parents provide non-judgmental support to one another. Parents are the experts about their own families and their own children. Together, parents learn from one another about ways to strengthen their families.

Leadership & Personal Accountability

The support group belongs to the parents who attend. Parents determine the agendas and content of meetings, define their own goals in the group, model healthy interactions, ensure meetings take place consistently, set individual goals, and act on their decisions.

Respect

Parents in support groups can expect to have their feelings heard, one at a time. They can also count on having enough time for everyone to speak, rather than one or two people taking over. Parents, facilitators, and parent leaders honor the cultural traditions, boundaries, and needs of group members.

Parenting in the Present

Support groups focus on what is happening today, rather than spending precious time on things in the past that cannot be changed. (However, at times, people do need to talk about the past, because the past affects what is happening now.)

Shared Leadership

Parents and professionals build successful partnerships. They share responsibility, expertise, and leadership roles.

Responsibility

Members of the group hold each other accountable for the above values, ask for clarification if there is something they do not understand, and reach out if someone else seems to be struggling.

Non-Violence

Participants assist one another in developing positive methods of solving problems and realize that violence at any level is not an acceptable form of dealing with problems and issues.

Applying the Principles

Circle of Parents® is a national organization of programs that offer those in the parenting role the opportunity to reduce isolation and develop and strengthen their parenting skills through the open exchange of ideas, support, information, and resources in weekly meetings. Circle of Parents lives out its mission to prevent child abuse and neglect and support families through the implementation of its core tenets on the group, community, and national levels. The text below describes how a few of the tenets© are demonstrated in support groups and by the Circle of Parents network. You may use these as benchmarks to see how your own organization is faring, or as ideas for possible new directions.

Children are valuable

Each child in every family has unique and special qualities that, if nurtured, will help that child grow to a strong and self-sufficient family and community member. Circle of Parents support groups help parents look at what they can do to build on their own competencies and those of their children. The groups are nurtured by a national network of 29 state and regional organizations that offer similar programs. Every group, where feasible, offers a parallel no-cost children's program.

Children have the right to grow up free from abuse and neglect

By focusing on non-abusive parenting, groups reinforce parents as they share ideas about positive parenting and learn their roles in breaking the cycle of child abuse. The most fundamental belief of parent-led mutual self-help support groups is that neither physical nor emotional violence is an appropriate or productive form of discipline. Some parents face a life-long struggle to change established patterns of abusive behavior for which there may be personal, cultural, and social pressures to maintain. Their support group holds them accountable as they move forward.

Parents who are unable or unwilling to make necessary changes in their parenting to ensure the safety of their children may be given the option of self-reporting or be reported

to the state child abuse registry by their group. The group will continue to support the parent throughout this time.

Children have the right to a nurturing home, family, and community

Nurturing children and keeping children safe are parents’ goals, whether at home or in the larger community. Through weekly group meetings, parents have the opportunity to support one another as they strive to make changes for their families. They are also supported as they learn or refine leadership skills that enable them to take active roles in their neighborhoods and communities so that they may be agents of change for other children and families.

Parents and families have the right to non-judgmental support

On a group level, Circle of Parents members help each other embrace this as a fundamental principle guiding their meetings. In the larger world, parent leaders work with partner agencies and communities to encourage these as universally accepted rights. Parent leaders often appear in public as ambassadors for the program and their stories make them eloquent spokespeople as they speak of their experiences.

Strong communities value children and engage families

A wide variety of programs that support families give parents the opportunity to choose the resources that best suit their needs. When the community supports families, they are better able to contribute to making it a safe and healthy place for raising children. Many communities bring in the mutual support model as an adjunct to other services because it is low-cost and effective.

Communities have the right to parent support groups that are culturally responsive

Because Circle of Parents support groups are parent-owned and parent-led, they can be tailored to the specific needs of the families they serve. Honoring the cultures of families maintains a safe, supportive environment where parents feel welcome. Groups have the capacity to reach populations that might not otherwise feel comfortable mingling with the broader community, for example, families of those in the military, parents with disabilities, and parents whose language is other than English. Circle of Parents addresses cultural diversity in its program materials and provides some resources in languages other than English.

More information about effective parent mutual support groups can be found at:

www.circleofparents.org
www.parentsanonymous.org

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