



Learning Tool 7



Circle of Parents

Parents are attracted to mutual self-help support programs because they want to learn more about parenting, share parenting tips, gain new ideas, and meet other parents, and because they are frustrated with their current methods of parenting. Data from Circle of Parents®, a national network of twenty-nine state and regional organizations offering mutual self-help support programs, reveals that significant changes in critical areas occur for parents who attend self-help support groups over a period of time. Those attending ten or more meetings indicate improvement in self-management (83.3%), parent-child relationship (77.8%), parenting skills (83.3%), and support systems (64.7%).¹

Circle of Parents mutual self-help support groups offer parents several things that enable them to make profound changes in their lives:

Free Support

Circle of Parents mutual self-help support groups provide free meetings for anyone in a parenting role. Led by parents and a trained facilitator, self-help support groups usually meet weekly and are confidential, non-judgmental, and designed to promote positive parenting. Currently, twenty-nine state and regional organizations provide Circle of Parents groups. Parallel children's groups are offered when feasible. Mutual self-help support groups enable parents to understand that other families share their challenges. The groups provide parents with emotional support and build self-esteem, while reassuring parents that they can be successful in dealing the difficulties in their own lives.

Encouragement

Groups encourage and support parents to evaluate their current situations productively. The support groups focus on family and parenting issues and help parents to identify the things that they can realistically accomplish which will lead to positive changes in these areas.

Goal Setting

Groups help parents set realistic and achievable goals for themselves. Members of the groups provide feedback and positive reinforcement to each other. Group members both give and get support. Members offer ideas and strategies and expect parents to be candid about what is holding them back.

Follow-through

Groups help parents follow through on their goals. The support of other members gives parents the courage to keep trying and not give up on making changes to achieve the goals they set for themselves and their families. Support group members believe in members' abilities to address issues and challenges that are keeping them from achieving their goals. They hold each other accountable, and don't let other members give up - even if they may want to.

Mutual self-help support groups can serve a variety of populations, including: teen parents, parents of teens, parents of special needs children, parents who are incarcerated, specific cultural groups, rural populations, and grandparents parenting again. Groups have successfully partnered with Head Start sites, Healthy Families America sites, mental health programs, Cooperative Extensions, schools, faith-based programs, and military and tribal services.

A Parent Reflects

Brian, a single parent of an adopted child with special needs, recalls: "I started coming to the group because I wasn't happy with the way I was parenting. I yelled at my special-needs son all the time, and I was always exhausted. Nothing I tried with my son ever seemed to come out right. I had tried everything, and didn't know what to do. I didn't like my life.

"At first I didn't think I had much in common with the other group members and didn't see much point in coming. But after hearing them talk about their issues and seeing how much everybody cared about each other, I started feeling some hope. These people were talking about real issues, and being honest about how they felt. I began talking a little bit about how things were in my family. No one looked down on me or anyone else, not like my experiences in the past with social workers and psychologists, where I always felt like I was a problem they had to fix.

"After I got into it, I realized that I never had set any goals or done much to correct my parenting problems because they seemed too big and too painful to face alone. The group helped

me realize that my expectations for my son were too high. It dawned on me that I wasn't alone anymore, and I listened to the group when they told me I needed to take better care of myself. They worked with me to set realistic goals. I started to go to bed earlier and to eat more regularly. Things seemed easier to deal with when I wasn't exhausted and irritable.

"I began to learn more about my son's disabilities and normal child development. My son eased up on his resentment when he saw how hard I was trying. But it wasn't all easy. When I didn't stick to the plan, the yelling would return. But my group cared about me and my family and would support me when I slipped and help me get back on the right track. I soon found myself following through on my goal because I didn't want to disappoint my group.

"Now I follow through for myself. The encouragement I got from my group helped me through my struggles with frustration and shame and reminded me that perfection is not the goal."

From Circle of Parents Parent Support Group Handbook (2003) Chicago, Illinois: Circle of Parents.

To learn about resources that are available for families through mutual self-help support groups, or to get more information on the Circle of Parents program, contact the Circle of Parents program in your state or region by visiting www.circleofparents.org.

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¹Circle of Parents Support Group Evaluation Report (2004) The Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida.



FRIENDS, a service of the Children’s Bureau, is the National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) program grants, under a cooperative agreement between Chapel Hill Training Outreach Project, Inc. and the Office

on Child Abuse and Neglect, ACF, HHS. FRIENDS assists and supports the CBCAP state lead agencies by providing training, technical assistance, and information. Contact: Yvette Layden, Office Manager, 800 Eastowne Dr. Suite 105, Chapel Hill, NC 27514, 919/490-5577, ext. 222