A guide for professionals working with local support groups in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do parents join support groups?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forming a new parent support group</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sort of help do parent support groups need?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This guide is for information purposes only and is not intended to be a source of legal advice and must not be relied upon as such. Other organisations are listed for information purposes only and inclusion does not constitute endorsement by Contact a Family.
Introduction

This guide is for professionals who are interested in working with support groups of parents of disabled children. Professionals can play a positive role by helping to build on membership, offering practical support and making resources available. This guide offers suggestions in working with parents and a brief overview of some of the issues parent support groups face.

You can benefit from hearing a wide range of parents’ views through local support groups. You will also be able to involve parents in service development.

Why do parents join support groups?

Parents of disabled children often tell us that the support they receive from other parents is invaluable. A support group provides an opportunity for parents to share their feelings, problems and ideas with others in a similar situation. This lessens parents’ feelings of isolation. Groups vary greatly in terms of size, activities and scope but most groups provide:

- a regular meetings for parents of disabled children and their families
- friendship and opportunities to socialise
- information and advice
- emotional and moral support
- practical help, such as organising holiday activities.

Forming a new parent support group

You might be approached by a parent who would like you to start a parent support group or you may have identified the need to set one up yourself. Before starting a new support group, though, do check whether there are any other parent groups running locally or nationally that are could meet families’ needs. If you are unsure, Contact a Family can let you know whether we are in touch with relevant groups.

“Our parent advisor was fabulous! We were all too weary to get a group going ourselves but she stepped in and got the group up and running for us and then handed us the reins once she had done all the hard work! She was very pro-active in reaching out to other parents”
Networking with other professionals, your local child development centre or charities may also be a good source of information on parent support groups.

What will your position be in the group? Are you going to be the group leader and facilitator? The extent of your involvement will depend on whether you and the parents involved see your role as being time-limited or whether you have started a group that will be facilitated by you. Busy parents may be only too pleased to have a professional do most of the organising!

Although many established groups are parent-led, a new group might ask you to facilitate their first few meetings and give guidance.

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. So, it is important for everyone to be clear about the part you will play from the outset and agree on boundaries.

**What sort of help do parent support groups need?**

As every support group varies, so can the amount of assistance they need or want. However, most support groups appreciate help with one or more of the following at some stage of their development:

- **Reaching Parents:** Parents rely on professionals involved in their lives to tell them what they don’t know. Although, often professionals assume that someone else is providing the information and are very good at giving information from within their own field, but are not always aware of other support and how to access it. Whatever your profession, a system could be implemented whereby all parents are routinely given information about support groups near them by way of good practice. Parent groups offer an important additional source of local support to which you can refer the families you work with.

- **Venue:** Finding the right venue for meetings is important. A good venue makes meetings more enjoyable and attracts (and keeps!) group members. Finding an affordable meeting room can be a struggle. Professionals may be able to help here by offering free meeting space.

- **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. Could you publicise groups through your professional newsletter or e-bulletin?

- **Speakers:** By inviting speakers to meetings to either run a workshop on issues that affect their family life such as challenging behaviour or to talk about a service, for example, speech and language therapy. Your own professional contacts mean you can help groups to secure speakers more easily and build positive relationships.
• Funding: Most parent support groups will seek some form of funding, even if it is just for
refreshments during meetings. Do you have a budget to give groups some financial
assistance? If not, are there ways you could help in kind, like offering free meeting rooms or
helping with photocopying.

• Equality: Support groups should be as accessible as possible to all parents of disabled
children and reflect the diversity of your local community. There may be challenges in
creating a group which is truly inclusive but being aware of the issues involved and being
committed to including all parents is important. 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 ethnic diversity or else some parents may assume the group is not for them.
Similarly, if you are keen that fathers come along, include pictures of dads in flyers. You
can also arrange meetings at times and with activities planned that are more attractive
to fathers. 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.

Support for professionals working in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and
Wales from Contact a Family

Events with Contact a Family
If you are a professional working with parent carers of disabled children in England, Scotland,
Wales or Northern Ireland and would like us to run a workshop or hold a stall at an information
event in your area, please find our contacts in your area to see what we are currently offering.
www.cafamily.org.uk/advice-and-support/in-your-area

Sign up to receive our e-newsletters for free.
If you haven’t done so already, you might also be interested in signing up for our free,
quarterly, professionals e-newsletter. You’ll find new resources and training events for all
professionals working with disabled children and their families in the UK. You can also sign up
for an email alert when our magazine Connected is published and many other resources. We
never share people’s emails with any third party for commercial use.
www.cafamily.org.uk/newsletter-signup
Local Group Network
Our Network is for local support groups to share ideas, top tips and good practice. It is free to join, just visit our website here and fill out the form. If you are running or want to start a group in:

Northern Ireland, email nireland.office@cafamily.org.uk
Scotland, email scotland.office@cafamily.org.uk
Wales/Cymru, email cymru@cafamily.org.uk
England, email adele.meader@cafamily.org.uk

Group Action Pack
for local and national support groups
Whether you’re setting up a local parent support group, developing a national charity or a social enterprise, our guides are packed with advice and tips. Other guides include:

- Effective meetings
- Fundraising
- The role of trustees
- Holding a family day
- Group development and information
- Attracting and keeping members
- Social media
- Newsletters, posters and flyers
- Websites
- Writing a press release and speaking to the media
- ‘What outfit do we need?’: legal structures for support groups
- Public speaking
- A guide for professionals working with parent support groups
- The role of medical advisers in national support groups

Connect with us
www.cafamily.org.uk
www.facebook.com/contactafamily
www.twitter.com/contactafamily
www.youtube.com/cafamily

© Contact a Family, 2015