

Support Groups and Playgroups

SUPPORT GROUPS

Running support groups specifically for families formed through permanent or kinship care and adoption provides a valuable and much needed service. It offers families the opportunity to make social connections with others who have similar lived experiences; and offers parents an avenue for receiving understanding and support. Often with common lived experience comes a sense of connectedness and comfortability in sharing personal information.

Things to consider

Having a discussion with your group and thinking through strategies on how to handle some of the potentially sensitive situations can be very worthwhile.

Some situations to get the group thinking:

- Children cannot be expected to understand confidentiality and may innocently repeat information at inopportune times. When discussing sensitive information or emotive topics that involve others, be aware that children may be listening.
- Parenting children can at times be overwhelming, frustrating and even isolating. A support/playgroup can offer empathy and understanding for parents and is often one of the best benefits of attending the group. There may be times when parents require more support or assistance than the group can offer. For these situations, it could be useful to have a list of appropriate professional services with contact details to offer as suggestions.
- In any group situation, it is unavoidable that at times children's behaviour will impact on other children in different ways. Similarly, parents can interpret and respond to these situations in different ways. Your group can develop strategies to minimise misunderstandings and improve communication, such as having clear group guidelines.
- Families have different approaches to disciplining their children and not everyone will agree with other parents' methods. Discussions and sharing around different parenting strategies could be a positive way to support and learn from each other. Consider using the PCA Families Fact Sheet on parenting tips, "Time-in versus Time-out" as a helpful resource. This is available on the PCA Families website.

Remember that the staff at PCA Families are here to support you. We are happy to talk with you about any issues facing your group and offer suggestions or resources that could help.

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Confidentiality

Support groups can provide a safe place for parents to share their concerns, sensitive issues and experiences, so they need to feel that information will be kept confidential. This is particularly pertinent for families negotiating the complexities that often come with family formation through permanent care and adoption. An environment of trust and safety allows group members to share more openly with others, and confidentiality is an essential component.

Confidentiality generally is defined as never discussing, without direct consent, the circumstances of another group member. However, peoples' ideas about what it means to keep confidences can be quite different. It can be helpful and important to talk about confidentiality as a whole group and write up what you have agreed to.

New members also need to be informed about confidentiality, and agree to the statement.

Here are some ideas around confidentiality to consider:

- Each person will have a different view of how public or private their individual family story, and their children's individual stories, should be.
- Confidentiality can be compromised sometimes even without intention. In any small local community, and indeed in the community of permanent care and adoption, it is often very easy to identify individuals even when names are not used.
- All group members' personal information (address, phone number, email) is to be respected and not to be given out to anyone for any reason, without permission from the member concerned.
- A confidentiality statement could greatly assist in dealing with many sensitive issues, and in maintaining a safe and respectful environment in the group.

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PLAYGROUPS

Where to start?

There are a number of things to think about when setting up a group, however the first thing is to connect with at least one or two other parents who are keen to be part of the group, and begin sharing your ideas.

Purpose of your group

It may sound obvious, but clarifying the purpose of your group is a useful starting point. It can be helpful to ensure everyone is on the same page, new members know what to expect, and as a group you know where to focus your limited resources. Think back to your initial motivation for wanting to set up a group specifically for families formed through permanent care and adoption. What needs were you hoping to meet?

Location

Groups in Community Venues: If you are considering a community venue, your local Council can offer suggestions. There may be an existing playgroup venue which already has suitable facilities and equipment. An advantage of hiring Council facilities is that your program will be covered by the public liability insurance policy for the property.

Groups in the Home: A support or play group can also be run from private homes, rotating between members involved. This makes it easy to organise, and remains a private arrangement. However, as a group you may wish to consider can you accommodate an increase in numbers? What would happen if someone was seriously injured in your home or if there was damage to your property? Would it be beneficial to have some general agreement about how to run the group so there is some consistency around house rules; start and finish times; guidelines for children's behaviour; catering, and cleaning up?

Building a Strong Membership

Generally people join groups for two main reasons: because it meets their personal needs (to make friends, to belong, to have fun), and because they support the purpose of the group. So as a way of building stronger commitment consider how you can share the decision-making, encourage a sense of belonging and ownership; maintain a safe and confidential environment; and clearly communicate your purpose.

Costs

Costs can be an inhibiting factor when establishing a new group: costs can be associated with venue hire, replenishing consumables like refreshments or art materials; first aid kit; insurance; purchasing equipment, and administration costs. This is where Permanent Care and Adoptive Families can help. Having access to assistance in the form of promotional flyers or a small amount of funds can make a big difference in helping your group get off the ground, or in strengthening the membership of an existing group.

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MANAGING RISKS AND INSURANCE

Managing Risk

Thinking about insurance and legal matters for your group can seem unnecessary or daunting when all you want is to get together informally with other families and enjoy some activities with your children. However it is still your responsibility as a group to ensure a safe environment during your group sessions and to manage the risks associated with your group's physical environment and activities (to ensure you are taking 'reasonable care').

Some of the ways you can do this include:

- Parents take responsibility for supervising their own children at all times
- During group times, all adults watch out for potential hazards and risks
- Consider establishing a guideline that requires two (or more) adults to supervise groups of children at all times
- Have an emergency plan in place for evacuations or medical emergencies and ensure all adults are aware of it
- Set clear guidelines for the preparation, handling and sharing of food (consider allergies)
- Have safety rules for the children when using play equipment.

Managing Insurance

While it is definitely advisable for your playgroup or support group to have adequate insurance cover, the good news is that it can be a lot simpler to arrange than you think:

- By holding your support or playgroup in a regular venue such as community centre, local government facility, school or Church hall you will be covered under their Public Liability policy. However, this may not cover all your insurance needs, so it is worth investigating thoroughly.

- Playgroup Victoria offers membership packages with insurance cover specially designed to meet all your playgroup's needs. See [here](#).

- For playgroups or support groups run from private homes, a House and Contents Insurance policy which includes public liability may offer cover for negligence.

Financial and in-kind assistance may be available through PCA Families sponsorship which is designed to assist parent or carer-led support groups that are open to families formed through permanent care and adoption.

Regulations

In general playgroups are not required to follow Government regulations which apply to other children's services, and this is primarily because parents or caregivers attend with their children and it is assumed that they will be supervising their children at all times. One example of this is that parents or carers are not required to have Working with Children Checks (WWCC). However, your group may choose to consider applying for WWCC just as an extra safeguard. Similarly, playgroups are exempt from food handling regulations unless a main meal is provided.