



## How to maintain a support group?

- Encourage members to do mouth-to-mouth publicity. People are much more likely to come to a group if they are personally invited.
- Realize that few parents join shortly after diagnosis; give them time to respond to the initial shock, but try to reach out and help them through this period.
- Some people are worried about the stigma of attending a support group. Always remind group members of their right to anonymity and confidentiality.
- Remember that some parents are afraid that group discussion will increase their anxiety and anger.
- Notify members of meetings by phone, mail or e-mail; develop a mailing and telephone list and keep it updated. But make sure you share this task.
- Announce your meetings in your newsletter (if you have one) make your activities visible with posters and announcements on the hospital ward and the outpatient clinic.
- Develop relationships with area professionals such as doctors, nurses, social workers etc. They are the ones who can make family referrals, promote your group, and serve as guest speakers. Doing this also establishes your group credibility.
- When people miss a meeting, call them and tell them they were missed. Check with new members after two or three times to see how they feel about the group.
- Coordinate transportation, if this is an issue for your group. Most people won't ask for this type of help, so be sure to ask. It might be possible to set up a carpool system.
- Offer child-minder, or organize a special program for the children
- Add a social aspect to the meetings; serve refreshments. Think about having a social activity (e.g. a picnic, a holiday party) once or twice a year. People have the opportunity to develop relationships in a casual atmosphere. They have the freedom to talk about their difficulties or the big sports event that week. It is not always necessary to focus on problems. Sometimes people need a break from the problem that is always so central in their lives.
- Practice accountability. If last month a member expressed a concern and the group discussed some possible solutions, at the next meeting ask if he/she has pursued the options and how it is going. Don't treat each meeting as if nothing happened at the last one. Maybe someone needs to take notes during the meeting.
- Develop meeting goals and guidelines and try to stick to them. These can help members with difficult situations when they arise and can also help in preventing them.
- Have interesting, varied programs, including speakers, if this is what the group wants. Be careful, though. Too many outside speakers can create a superficial group. Speakers may bring big numbers, but you lose intimacy. Balance these programs with sharing.
- A main theme in maintaining a strong group is to have open communication within your group. Involve other group members in the decision-making and problem-solving process.
- Hold other types of events and programs. Not everyone may feel they need help via a support group meeting, but they may be willing to participate in some other activity such as an educational seminar, social event, or fund-raiser. Allow for all talents, expertise and interests to rise.

Remember, support groups can change lives!!

*(Adapted from Helping Hands, the newsletter of the Self-Help Network of Kansas, USA)  
Shelly Ziegler, Laura Lee Liebermann, Marianne Naafs-Wilstra*