



Adopt US Kids

Together we hold their future

PARENT GROUP LEADERSHIP CURRICULUM




MODULE 4: FACILITATING GROUP MEETINGS PART 2 – ADVANCED

Total time: 150 minutes, including break

Module agenda

Review and objectives—10 minutes

Managing difficult conversations and challenging personalities—25 minutes

 Activity: Practice handling these challenges—20 minutes

More on handling challenges—20 minutes

Break—10 minutes

 Activity: Icebreakers activity, part 2—15 minutes

Virtual support groups—40 minutes

[Handout 1: “Sample Support Group Ground Rules”](#)

Closing—10 minutes

 Homework!

[Handout 2: “7 Characteristics of Successful Parent Support Group Leaders”](#)

Materials and preparation

NOTE: Familiarize yourself with the entire curriculum, including all handouts and activities, to ensure that you are fully prepared to deliver it.

- Review the activity and prepare any materials needed.
- Prepare the two handouts of this module to distribute to participants.
- Review the homework on page 18 that you will assign to participants at the end of the session.
- Gather needed materials:
 - ✓ Name tents and markers for participants (from the previous sessions)
 - ✓ Flip chart and markers for facilitator
 - ✓ Computer with Module 4 PowerPoint slides loaded and ready to display
 - ✓ Method to display slides, such as projector and screen or large monitor visible to the participants
 - ✓ Fidgets, coloring materials, and snacks (optional)
- Set up the room. We recommend setting up the chairs and tables in a semi-circle or a U so participants can see you, each other, and the presentation. We also recommend having extra chairs and a space that accommodates free movement.

Review and objectives (10 minutes)



Say

We're nearly there! During this session, we're still going to be talking about meeting facilitation, but we're going to dig a little deeper.



Sometimes, a leader's role can get pretty hard. Today, we're going to go over the skills that can help you get through those harder moments (and perhaps even avoid some common pitfalls). We'll also talk about facilitating virtual support groups, which can be quite different than facilitating in-person groups. But first let's do a quick review of the last session.

Ask

Are you feeling ready to handle your first meeting? Does anyone want to share how they will structure their first meeting? Can I clarify anything about the last session? Did anyone have any aha moments?

Do

Provide feedback and encouragement.

Managing difficult conversations and challenging personalities (25 minutes)



Say

As I said, now it's time to get into more difficult issues of group leadership. No one likes dealing with conflict or having conversations that make them uncomfortable. It's natural to want to avoid discomfort, so many of us avoid challenging conversations. But this can spell disaster for your group. If the elephant in the room isn't addressed, group dynamics will suffer and people may be less engaged or stop coming altogether.

Though we're going to talk about both, it's important to note that having difficult conversations is not the same as managing difficult personalities. Support groups are places where people can safely have difficult conversations. Often, the most difficult conversations are also the more necessary ones.

Techniques to facilitate hard conversations

- Ask how members have already tried to navigate through this difficult subject
- Maintain a strong facilitator role
- Remain committed to the group process
- Rely on group agreements and remind members of their importance

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Say

Your group is going to have difficult conversations. Perhaps you'll need to talk about allegations of abuse. Or children acting out sexually. Or a placement that didn't work out. Or the use of physical disciplinary techniques, such as spanking, that do not promote attachment.

Ask

What are some other challenging conversations you can imagine might come up?

Do


Allow the group to make suggestions and write them on the flip chart.

Say

These are definitely discussions that could be emotional or difficult. Your job is to facilitate those conversations effectively, *not* to make those conversations easy. Start off a difficult conversation by asking if the members have already tried to address this topic (either in other groups or on their own) and what was and was not successful. If they are resistant to having difficult conversations because they've had bad experiences in the past, try to help them dive deeper into the potential reasons those past attempts were not as successful. Adoptive, foster, and kinship parents have a lot of combined expertise, use it!

It's also important to maintain a strong facilitator role during difficult conversations. Discussions with disagreements or strong emotions can very easily become unproductive or even hurtful.

Remember, you do not need to have all the answers. You are there to help the group find the answers themselves. Remain committed to the group's process. This is the time to rely heavily on those group agreements you established together and remind members of them as the discussion moves forward. It may even be necessary to add more group agreements just for this one difficult discussion. And don't forget to take breaks if you need to.



Some common challenging personalities

- The side-talker
- The over-talker
- The negative Nelly
- The know-it-all
- The silent one

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Say

There are some common challenging personalities that almost all group leaders see. The first step to dealing with them is to establish clear group norms, as we discussed in the last session. Let's talk about some common challenging characteristics and how to address them.

Ask

Can you think of any strategies you could use as group leader to help you deal with a member who keeps having side conversations?

Do

Reinforce or offer the following:

- Establish a group norm of using a talking stick or other item to indicate who has the floor.
- Some groups have a light-hearted group norm of "one diva, one mic" (meaning only one person talks at a time) that all agree on and know they can cite when needed.
- If you are standing, you could move to where the side conversation is happening and put a gentle hand on the shoulder as a quiet signal. Make sure you know if the person has any triggers related to touch.
- When the side conversations are predictably happening between certain members, try sitting between them in the circle. If it keeps happening, talk to them before the meeting. You could sit across from them and give them an established signal to let them know to stop.
- If the side conversations seem like they may be important, you could say, "I can see that you are both talking about something really important! Why don't you take your conversation out to the hallway because what you're sharing seems really necessary!"

Ask

Great ideas! What about strategies for dealing with someone who is always first to talk and tends to keep talking?

Do

Reinforce or offer the following:

- When someone is talking a lot they may need to be heard and validated. Try pulling the member aside before or after the group and asking if they need some one-on-one time.
- Sometimes people need to remind themselves that they've been talking a lot and they should wait before they speak again. Give them some ideas about how they can self-monitor. Or establish a quiet signal with them in advance if they find it challenging to self-monitor.

- Consider a norm such as “three then me,” where each person lets three other people talk before they talk again.
- Another option is to have a norm of “landing the plane,” where you use a flat hand motion, starting high and angling down gradually across your body, to let the speaker know they should get to the point.

Say

Although the support group is a safe place to bring concerns, constant negativity can derail your group. There is no surer way to sabotage a support group than to allow it to become stuck in negativity. People come to support groups looking for hope, strategies, and solutions. You’ll have to work hard to ensure that the group doesn’t get or stay negative.

Ask

Do you have ideas of how to deal with a group member whose comments are consistently negative?

Do

Reinforce or offer the following:

- Reframe negativity by asking for solutions and encourage members to do the same.
- Have a private conversation with the negative person, reminding them of the group goals of hope, strategies, and solutions, and ask for their help.
- Set a positive tone at the beginning of each meeting by establishing a norm of having everyone share a positive parenting experience or asking everyone to name something good that happened this week.
- If the negativity is deep but based on a specific situation, you may suggest that the issue may be too complex for the group to handle and suggest another form of support, such as counseling.

Say

This doesn’t mean that people can’t express their disappointments and challenges. It just means you may need to be careful so that one person doesn’t bring everyone else down.

If you have tried these ideas and the issues remain, it may be necessary to ask this person to find an outlet other than your support group. Remember, the group’s continued existence depends on satisfaction of the members! If the group’s tone is reliably negative, people will not come. It may feel harsh to ask someone to leave the group, but it’s better to preserve the group for the other members.

Say

Your group is a place for everyone to share and learn from one another, but sometimes one member has the answer for every topic or situation that's raised. Many times, their input is quite good, but it may also be that others feel intimidated about sharing their ideas, resulting in an unbalanced group dynamic. For shared learning to happen, there must be opportunities for multiple voices to be heard.

Ask

Any ideas for managing a know-it-all?

Do

Reinforce or offer the following for the know-it-all:

- Try following this person's contributions by asking, "Does anyone have another idea or strategy to share?"
- Use the "three then me" rule that we just talked about.
- Regularly remind the entire group that you are committed to having many ideas for any challenge because there are no solutions that work for everyone.
- If the behavior is frequent, have a private talk. Thank them for all they bring to the group and acknowledge their expertise. Ask for their help in making room for others to come up with ideas.

Ask

All of these challenging personalities that we've talked about are folks who tend to talk too much or at the wrong times. Do you think we, as leaders, should be worried about folks who don't talk very much? If so, what should we do?

Do

Reinforce or offer the following for silent members:

- Check in with them now and then to give them opportunities to speak without forcing the issue.
- Have a private talk to ask if they are comfortable with being called on as a way to invite their input.
- Don't worry too much. Once you have made the effort to welcome and include your quiet member, know that if they keep coming, you can be sure that they are getting what they need!



Activity: Practice handling these challenges (20 minutes)



Say

It's relatively easy to talk about how to handle these situations, but it can be hard in real life. So let's practice.

Do

Do a role play where a training attendee acts as the leader and you act as one of these difficult personality styles. Have the leader practice some of the ideas discussed. To have less pressure on one person, tell them that during the role play, they can press pause, and ask other training attendees for help.

Do at least two scenarios with a different personality type, trading off which training attendee is acting as the group leader.

Ask (after the activity)

- For those who acted as the leaders, was that easier or harder than you expected? What was easier and what was harder? Would you do anything differently next time?
- For those who observed, what did you think the most effective strategies were?

More on handling challenges (20 minutes)

When managing difficult situations, remember:

- Support groups are not meant to be therapy
- Prioritize the needs of the group

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Say

Sometimes a person's situation or actions can threaten to hijack the group. This may not be the individual's fault, but you have to respond for the health and longevity of the group.

When a group member is really struggling, we need to support them, but we should not cross the line into therapy. A support group is not the place to address someone's mental and emotional health challenges. If this is happening, you need to have a private talk with the person.

Try to remember to put the needs of the group over any individual. Asking a member to leave can be incredibly difficult, but it's necessary if that person's actions threaten the group's sustainability. The loss of one member is a big loss, but not as big as the collapse of the entire group.

If removal may be necessary:

- Talk with the person outside of the group
- Outline the problem and offer some solutions
- Let them offer their own solutions
- Reiterate the ground rules and group norms
- Suggest that outside professional help may be in order, if that seems to be the case
- Check in after they've left

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Say

When removal is or may be needed, first talk with that person outside the group setting to discuss what the issue is and offer some solutions to the problem. When talking, stick to the group agreements whenever possible, and show the person how they may not be following the norms they agreed to. Remind them about the group's purpose and that sometimes people will need professional help outside the group.

If that doesn't help, you may need to ask them to leave at least for a while. This can be a very difficult decision to make. Here are some suggestions for making it less so:

- Assess the situation. Have you tried to redirect the person or offer ideas for them to access more formal supports or interventions? Have your suggestions fallen flat?
- Has accommodation for one person turned into a routine, taking over the group dynamic and diminishing others' satisfaction?
- Remember that your group members are looking to you to lead. Trust your instincts and read how the group responds when this difficult person is in attendance.
- Seek the advice of other experienced group leaders who can support you in decision-making and taking action.

Having checked to confirm that removal is necessary, here are some tips for making it go as well as it can:

- Do not hesitate. Once you know removal is necessary, do it quickly and clearly. Be firm in what you say, without being mean. "We have not been able to meet your needs, and I have to be accountable to the whole group."
- Choose a meeting time and place outside of the regular meeting.
- If you feel it will be helpful, bring a trusted group member for support.
- Discuss the issue directly, offering both suggestions for other support and a sincere wish for the person to find help.
- Talk with your group after the removal, without going into detail but making it clear that the group comes first.

After the person leaves, you may want to check in after a period of about three to six months to see how they are and offer an invitation to rejoin. Many leaders have found that the time away from the group is helpful and members have rejoined once they've dealt with other external challenges.

Break (10 minutes)



Icebreakers activity, part 2 (15 minutes)

Icebreakers work in established groups, too!

- Move forward when you're stuck
- Create an opportunity for new ideas and growth
- Manage conflict
- Help with decision-making
- Deepen connections



Say

I bet after all that talk about challenges, you could use a change of pace. I know I could.

We talked a lot in the last session about the importance of introductions and icebreakers for new groups. Though we tend to think of icebreakers as being for people who don't know each other, they are also really helpful for established groups. Icebreakers can help groups move on from challenging circumstances and get unstuck. They can help you manage conflicts and navigate changes or challenges in group dynamics. Through some icebreaker activities, you will offer attendees a chance to guide decision-making around the group's priorities, focus, and future agendas. And they can help members forge deeper connections with each other.

And as we're doing right now, they can be a good way to clear the air after a harder conversation.

Today we'll practice an icebreaker that works best for groups who have some established sense of community. This activity is included in the handout from Module 3: "Icebreakers for Groups."

Do

Tell participants to get in small groups (two or three people) and have each person share a childhood experience that had a positive or negative impact on them. They should talk about how that experience affected them and if it affects their parenting. Be careful to ask people not to go too dark or they may trigger others.

Allow several minutes for the group to discuss in small groups. Then, come back together as the larger group.

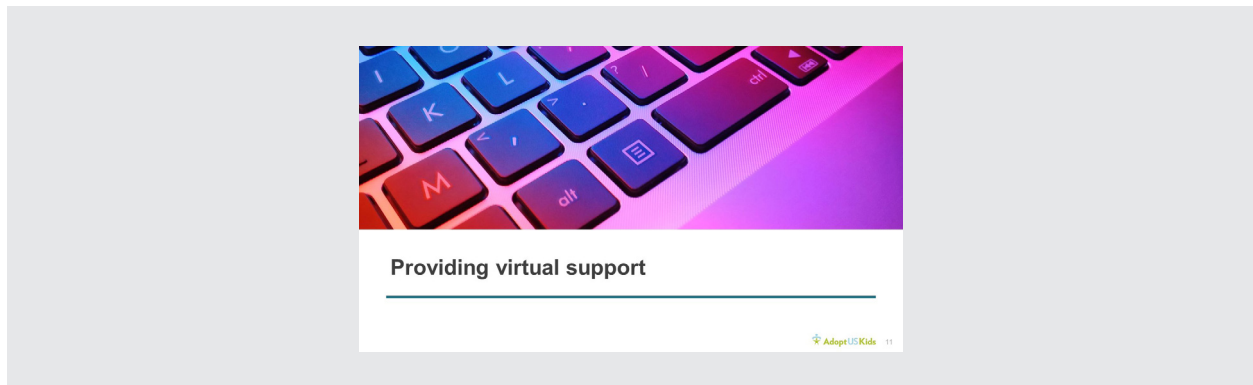
Ask

How did it feel to be sharing these experiences? Compare this experience to the Parent Bingo icebreaker from last session. Why would this icebreaker be for more established groups?

Do

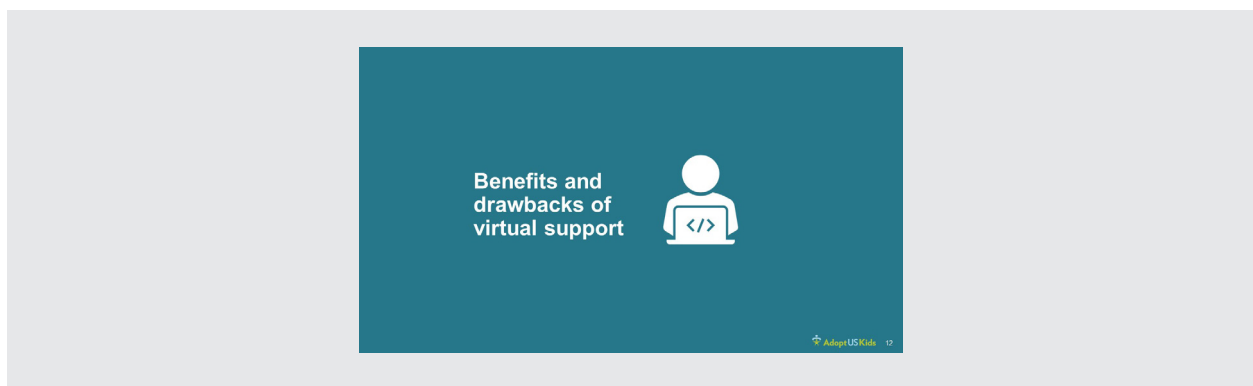
Be sure to include during the discussion that the icebreaker that they just practiced requires a higher level of comfort and trust between the participants, which is why this activity is better for more established groups. It's important for a facilitator to think about the dynamics of the group to consider what type of icebreaker activities are appropriate.

Virtual support groups (40 minutes)



Say

Now, we're going to move to a very different facilitation challenge—offering support online. With technology, we have the opportunity to support parents (and for parents to support each other) in new and different ways. Some of us may love getting and offering support virtually, while some may struggle more with it. It's likely you'll have a mix of opinions in your group, too. Even if you don't love virtual groups, be open to it. For some parents, online groups are the only ones they can attend.



Ask

Like anything, virtual support groups have benefits and drawbacks. What do you think are some of the benefits? What about the challenges?

Do

Lead the group through a discussion of the benefits and challenges. Record the answers to both on the flip chart.

Reinforce or offer the following **benefits**:

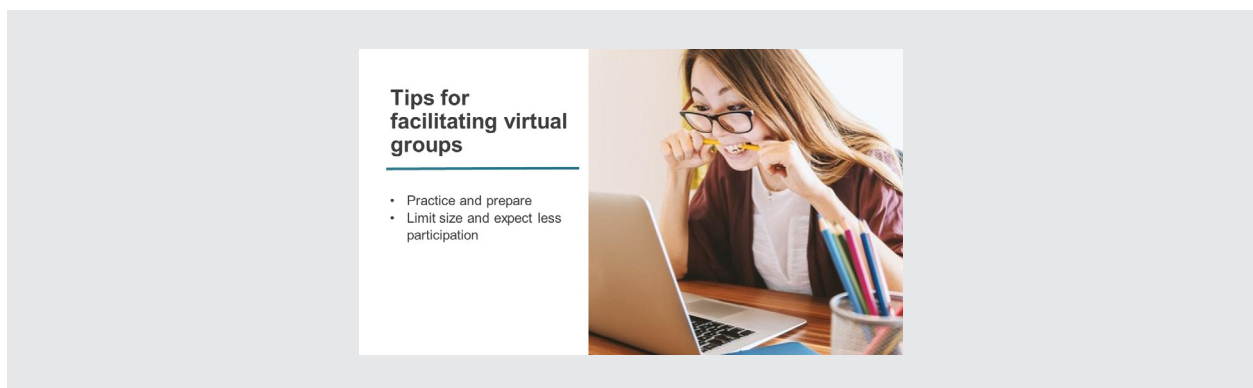
- Accessibility regardless of location
- Maintain connections when you can't be together in person
- No drive time or transportation issues
- No need to think about child care

Reinforce or offer the following **challenges**:

- Loss of the person-to-person connection
- Participants must have internet access or a smartphone
- Can be difficult to attend with kids at home (need for privacy can be challenging)
- Need computer skills that not everyone has
- Harder for the facilitator to read non-verbal cues

Say

Be aware of the trade-offs you're making when you go virtual. None of these challenges are insurmountable, but you need to be mindful of how things get more complicated when you lead virtual groups.

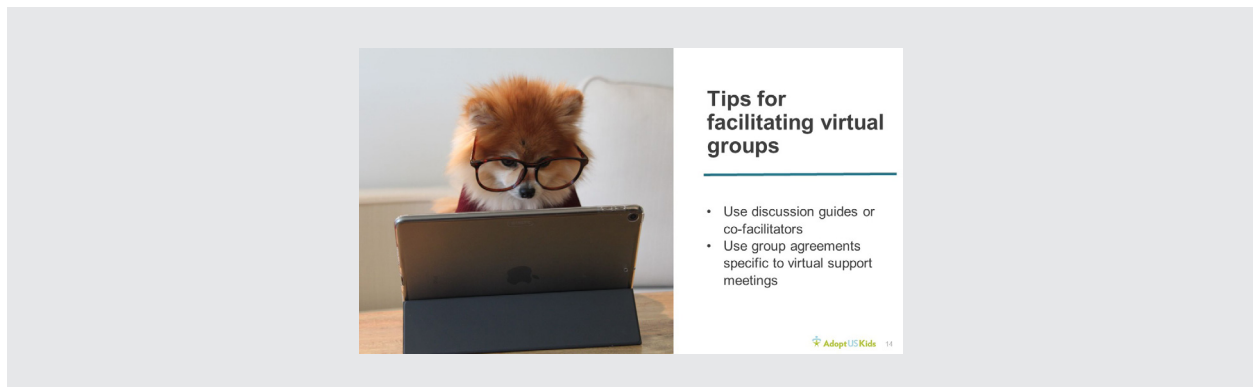


Say

Before your first virtual meeting, try one or two sessions with a co-facilitator or a friend to work out the kinks. Try out your chosen meeting platform on both a computer and smartphone, if possible, so that you'll be familiar with the way it displays in both settings. Expect technical issues and delays.

You may want to prepare a cheat sheet for you and your group members to refer to during the meeting. It will make the prospect of an online meeting less scary for those who are less familiar with technology. You might include things like the link to any downloads they need; instructions for testing their software, logging on, and using the microphone, chat, and webcam; instructions for using a smartphone or call-in option if they don't have a computer; and even some screen shots of the platform itself.

Any online platform takes some getting used to and people may be less comfortable interacting this way in the beginning. Consider limiting the group size to 10 or 15 at first. Even more than in person, too many people in a group setting can make it difficult.



Say

Having a co-leader can be especially helpful if one person is more tech savvy and can handle more technical questions as the group learns the platform. Consider having one person monitor chat questions and the other facilitate the conversation. Some people find that using existing discussion guides can help you facilitate a meaningful conversation and allow you to focus on the new challenges of facilitating a virtual group.

Also, it's likely you'll need some new group agreements just for the virtual setting. What are some questions that might help your group come up with new norms?

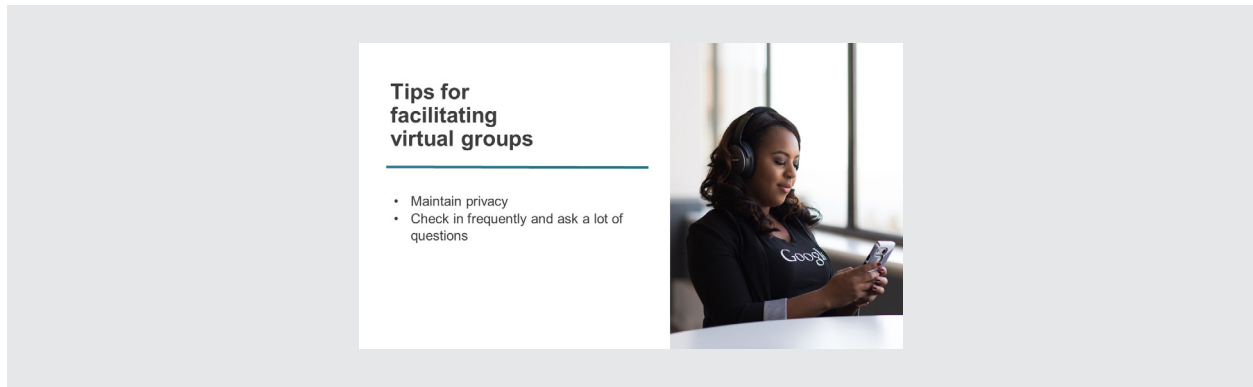
Do

Reinforce or offer the following:

- What do we do if a lot of people are having trouble getting on the platform?
- How do we handle phone calls or other things that take us away from the meeting space?
- How can we be sure this is still a private space?
- Are people required to share their cameras? What if they can't?
- What do we do if children, roommates, or others are around?

Do

Distribute Handout 4, “Sample Support Group Ground Rules,” to give some examples of possible norms to include when groups are held online. Reinforce that groups should come up with group norms together, and this is just a sample of the type of agreements members could come up with.



Say

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality is absolutely essential for all support groups, and it remains true for virtual groups. As we just discussed with group agreements, it can be a lot harder to maintain a private space virtually. It's important that others in the household (especially children) aren't able to hear what the group is discussing. For this reason, a lot of groups require headphones or a room with a closed door as part of their agreements. It's also usually a good idea to choose a platform where the host is able to allow people entry into the meeting space. As much as you want to encourage new potential members to join, avoid putting the meeting link in public spaces.

As we talked about earlier, one of the downsides to virtual groups is that it can be harder to pick up on the non-verbal cues that we rely on to facilitate in-person meetings. It can also be harder for members to bring up pressing concerns virtually. Does silence mean that that person is uncomfortable with the topic, or are they just not used to the platform? Is that person looking down because they're upset, or because they are typing? Because of this issue, be sure to check in with members, both about how they are feeling about the virtual set-up and about the discussion generally.

Ask

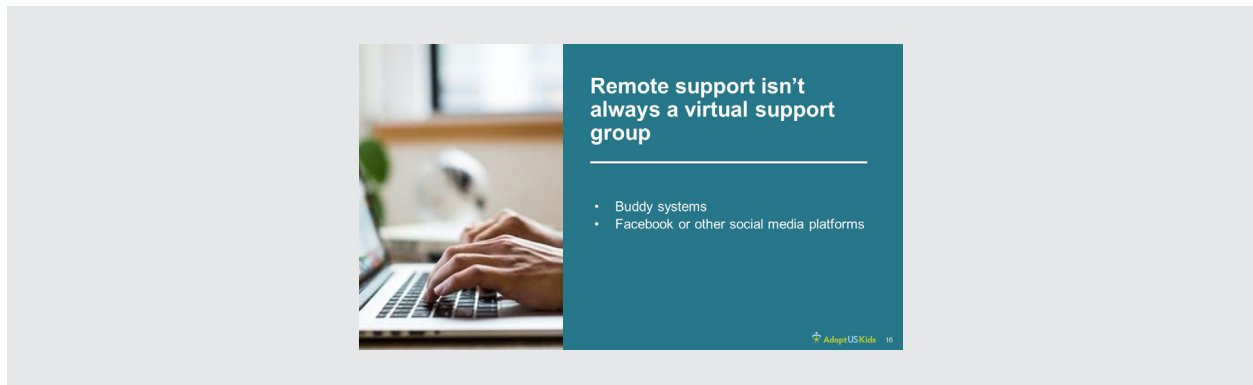
What are some things a facilitator could ask of their members during a virtual meeting to help them engage?

Do

Reinforce or offer the following:

- “I know meeting virtually is harder than in person. Do you feel like you are missing pieces of the conversation?”

- “Are you finding the chat helpful? If you aren’t sure how to unmute yourself, you can participate by chatting.”
- “Is this working for you, or would you like to find another solution?”
- You can also infuse the group with humor by asking silly questions or things to lift spirits and lighten the mood, such as, “Who’s in their pajamas?”



Say

Also, remember that if your members don’t want to do virtual groups, there are other ways to support each other remotely. You could establish a buddy system to encourage members to check on each other. A lot of support groups also have private Facebook groups or other social media platforms as a way to stay connected without doing virtual meetings. Of course, there are benefits and drawbacks to Facebook groups, too! AdoptUSKids has a [recorded webinar](#) on providing support through Facebook groups that may be of use.

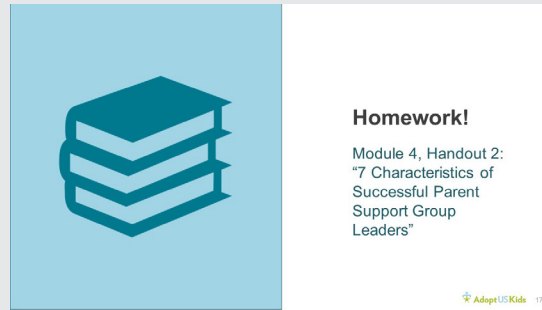
Closing (10 minutes)

Say

As we close, I want to do one last brief activity with you. What characteristics of a leader contribute to a group environment where the group members feel safe, welcomed, and heard?

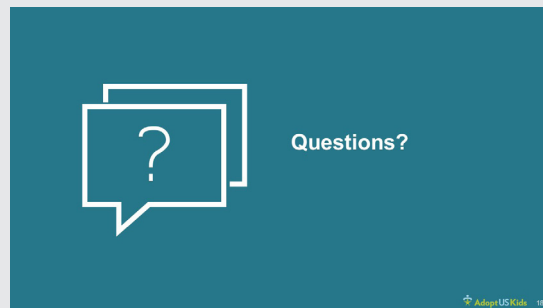
Do

Record the answers on a flip chart. Save the flip chart or take a picture to review at the next session.



Say

Your homework before the last session of this training is to read Handout 2, the AdoptUSKids publication *7 Characteristics of Successful Parent Support Group Leaders*. When we debrief next time, we'll discuss your thoughts on this article. That's all for today. See you next time!



Sample Support Group Ground Rules for In-Person and Virtual Meetings

Please note: It's important for group members to develop ground rules for their group together. It's a first step to ensuring that everyone in the group feels safe to share, respected, and committed to the health and success of the group as a whole. It is critical that each group determines their own set of ground rules or group norms together and with their group's culture in mind. What follows is just a sample to give leaders an idea of what these can look like.

Group ground rules

By signing in to attend the support group today, I agree that I will keep confidential the personal information of other group participants and that I will abide by the ground rules. "Personal information" refers to information that may be used to determine the identity of another group member such as the name of a group member, the name of other family members, contact information, or school and community connections to the family.

I understand that this confidentiality agreement is permanent, regardless of whether I continue to attend the group or the group ends.

Confidentiality may be breached by the group facilitators under the following situations:

- If it is disclosed that a child or vulnerable adult has been or is at risk of being physically, sexually, or emotionally injured by another individual
- If it is disclosed that one of the group members intends to physically, sexually, or emotionally injure another individual
- If it is disclosed that a group member intends to inflict personal injury on themselves

I have read and fully understand the information provided above. I understand that if I breach this agreement, I may be asked to leave the group. By signing in on the attendance sheet, I agree to accept and abide by these ground rules.

Ground rules:

1. Everything said here, stays here. Suggestions, recommendations, or parenting tips can be shared without names.
2. Be respectful and judgment free.
3. Agree to disagree. It's OK to have differing opinions.
4. Avoid interrupting and side conversations.

5. Speak for yourself and give everyone a chance to speak.
6. Share resources and ideas, with an understanding that they might not work for every family.
7. Commit to remaining positive even as members are sharing difficult things.
8. Start and end on time.

Variants for virtual meetings, to include those above:

1. If other people—including your children—are around, use headphones to protect privacy.
2. No screenshots or recordings.
3. Leaders will check in frequently to ensure that members are being heard. When needed, a norm of hand-raising to be recognized may be necessary.

7 Characteristics of Successful Parent Support Group Leaders

An adoptive or foster parent or kinship caregiver is uniquely equipped to lead or co-lead a parent support group because of their life experiences. Yet being in this leadership role requires an entirely different set of skills than those you have been using as a parent or caregiver over the years. You are part of the support group because you recognize the power and value of peer support—you need it yourself. At the same time, you have risen to a leadership role because you have important qualities that allow you to see beyond your own needs to focus on supporting others, while facilitating and coordinating the success of the group as a whole. This is no easy undertaking, and, at times, managing these dual roles—both parent and group leader—can become daunting.

This tip sheet highlights seven essential characteristics of a leader who is able to effectively manage both roles. The successful peer group leader has:

1. An optimistic worldview
2. Open-mindedness
3. Self-awareness and self-reflection
4. Capacity for empathy and emotional regulation
5. The ability to maintain appropriate boundaries
6. Leadership skills
7. A strong support system

1. An optimistic worldview

Life as an adoptive or foster parent or kinship caregiver can be hard. On any given day, a parent may feel worn down, tired, or frustrated. When they feel this way, many parents want support and head to a group meeting. Even the most optimistic individuals may show up at support group feeling pessimistic and defeated.

Group leaders need to be able to recognize and empathize with these feelings—taking note of those whose posture is slumped, affect is flat, or word choices are self-deprecating—without succumbing to these feelings themselves. To create both emotional and physical safety in the meeting space and move the dynamic to a place of healing and resilience, you must begin from a place of genuine optimism and hopefulness.

- **Practice a strengths-based perspective**—Participation in support groups can foster resilience and well-being for caregivers. For this to occur, the leader has to begin with a sincerely held belief in resilience and the power of support to nurture it. As the leader, you must approach each participant and each interaction from a strengths-based perspective. This is not pie-in-the-sky optimism; this is the hard-earned vision of hope that comes from hard work in the context of relationships and community. It takes work to get to know each individual member of your group, as well as how the group as a whole functions as a community. A leader who engages thoughtfully in this work is better equipped to exude a fierce and authentic sense of optimism that draws out the strengths and hopefulness in others.
- **Cultivate optimism and hopefulness in yourself**—While our individual worldview is often an innate part of our personality, it is also possible to be intentional about cultivating an optimistic worldview. Select at least one regular practice—such as reframing negative thoughts or intentionally expressing gratitude daily—that will strengthen your optimism muscles. These practices will assist you in cultivating optimism and resilience among the members of the group.

2. Open-mindedness

Your personal experience as a parent is a treasure trove of riches to draw upon when leading a parent support group. Every hard-won success you experienced with a child’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP), engaging birth family members during visits, or overcoming challenging behaviors at home offers a solid foundation upon which to anchor the support group. But you need more than that.

- **Know your experience is unique**—It’s important to remember that there are more ways to solve problems and more perspectives to gain from hard times than the ones you’ve tried. What worked well for you may not work for everyone, and events or circumstances that created stumbling blocks for you might be helpful building blocks for someone else. Every child and family is unique. For these reasons, a parent support group leader needs to be able to temper their own experience with an open-minded and flexible approach to the concerns and situations of others. This is characterized by the ability to say, “*I hear you, I’ve been there,*” without quickly adding, “*And here’s what you should do.*” Instead, ask, “*What have you learned?*” or seek input from other group members by asking, “*What experiences do others have with a situation like this?*” before offering your own advice.
- **Never stop learning**—As a leader, you need to be a continual learner. Curiosity and a desire to explore a range of alternatives while journeying with others, even along familiar terrain, will serve you and your group members best.
 - › **Read**—*Keep up with the current knowledge base on issues that are most relevant or frequently discussed in your group.*
 - › **Participate**—*Stay in discussions with other parent group leaders by joining online groups, attending conferences, or signing up for webinars or other training opportunities.*
 - › **Ask**—*Before responding to the concerns of others, take time to ask questions and get the big picture.*

3. Self-awareness and self-reflection

Parent leaders need the capacity to be aware of and reflect upon how their own life experiences not only influenced them in the past but also shaped their current perspectives and attitudes.

- **Reflect before responding**—As you participate in meetings, before responding to or intervening in communications within the group, ask yourself, “*Am I reacting to this situation as a parent or as a leader? How might my response be different if I wasn’t a parent?*” Once you recognize any thoughts, feelings, or biases you have, it is important to acknowledge how they may affect your facilitation style or leadership approach.
- **Acknowledge which hat you’re wearing**—As a support group leader, there may be times when you want to put down the “leader” hat and put on your “parent” hat. When this occurs, it is best to have a co-facilitator you can hand off facilitation tasks to, and to be clear with the group by saying, “*This conversation is hitting close to home. Is it all right if I participate as a parent for the next few moments, while my co-facilitator takes the lead?*” If you don’t have a co-leader, you may still ask for permission to be a parent, rather than the leader, as you seek support or ask questions.
- **Keep developing your self-reflection skills**—A self-aware parent group leader is able to assess and acknowledge their own feelings, strengths, and limitations and understand how those may affect their ability to lead the group. Consider the following before, during, and after group meetings:

BEFORE THE MEETING

- Has anything happened to me recently that may affect my ability to remain engaged, present, calm, and on-task during the meeting today? If so, how can I center myself?
- Are there any loose ends or lingering issues from the last meeting that I am carrying into this meeting? Are these just my own issues or are they topics that need to be discussed with the group?
- Is there any person or topic I expect at this meeting that may push my buttons? If yes, what is my plan to manage this?
- What am I most looking forward to about today’s meeting? How can I bring about these positive moments or outcomes?

DURING THE MEETING

- How am I feeling about this topic or person? Am I:
 - › **Very hot:** *seriously uncomfortable, highly anxious, enraged*
 - › **Warm:** *mildly uncomfortable, anxious, frustrated*
 - › **Just right:** *comfortable, emotionally calm and regulated, curious, engaged*
 - › **Cool:** *Losing focus, distracted, lacking empathy or compassion*
 - › **Very cold:** *checked-out, bored, numb, disengaged, apathetic*

- If I am “very hot” or “very cold,” what can I do to move closer to “just right?” Is there a self-care technique I can use?¹
- Am I allowing my own experiences to support and guide me in this instance, or are my experiences preventing me from leading effectively?

AFTER THE MEETING

- What went well at today’s meeting?
- Where did I struggle and what did I do to cope in that moment?
- What lessons did I learn from the good and challenging moments that I can use to improve future meetings? How will I share these reflections with my co-facilitator?

4. Capacity for empathy and emotional regulation

Demonstrating genuine empathy with members of your group is a critical component of peer leadership. Empathy for others’ challenges and circumstances is part of what makes peer support groups so effective. It can be challenging, though, to demonstrate empathy while also maintaining appropriate emotional regulation that’s needed for effective group management.

- **Make real emotional connections with group members**—Empathy can be defined as the ability to actually feel and share in the feelings of others. It is the ability to feel with—rather than to feel for—others. Empathy can be demonstrated through active listening, making eye contact, and making statements such as, *“I can imagine that must be very difficult right now.”* An empathetic leader is able to hold a safe space within the group for people to express a full range of life experiences and emotions and to articulate their own struggle to make meaning from these experiences, without rushing to judgment or solutions.
- **Maintain composure**—Members of the group may say things or exhibit behaviors which make you sad, angry, or uncomfortable. Topics discussed in a support group setting tend to be sensitive and may trigger strong feelings based on your past experiences. Therefore, your own capacity for in-the-moment emotional regulation is critical to your ability to lead. You need to be attuned to your own responses, to recognize your triggers, to practice impulse control, and to have your own coping strategies ready to employ as needed.

5. Ability to maintain appropriate boundaries

While empathy and connection are incredibly important, group leaders also need to be able to maintain appropriate boundaries during and outside of meetings. Healthy boundaries help leaders to avoid burnout and allow them to replenish their own stores of energy and hope. Brené Brown says it this way: *“Boundaries are hard when you want to be liked and when you are a pleaser hell-bent on being easy, fun, and flexible.”* But, she goes on to add, *“Compassionate people ask for what they*

¹ You can find more information about self-care strategies in the AdoptUSKids publication, *Secondary Trauma and Self-Care for Support Group Leaders*, available at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They're compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment."

- **Rely on group agreements**²—Using meeting structures and group agreements that have been developed collaboratively can help create and sustain these boundaries.
- **Distinguish between being a leader and being a group member/friend**—Before becoming a group leader, you may have started as a group member. During your time as a group member, you likely made important connections and friendships that you continue to value as a group leader. While your role as a peer is part of what makes you an effective group leader, it's important to be mindful of how your strong connections to other group members may impact your leadership. While your friendships continue outside of the group's interactions, ensure that everyone understands that your role during group functions is to lead and respond to everyone's needs equally. Unequal loyalties—real or perceived—can cause groups to splinter, making them less effective sources of support for every participant.
- **Be yourself**—At the same time, it is important not to be so stuck on boundaries that you distance yourself from your own experiences. Your ability to maintain clear boundaries should enhance, not limit, your ability to use the wisdom and empathy gained from your lived experience for the good of the group.

6. Leadership skills

Experienced parents are often selected for—or volunteer for—leadership roles because their experience has made them credible and trustworthy to the group or the sponsoring organization. But parents also need specific leadership skills to effectively facilitate a group. Being an effective group leader will require combining your personal perspectives with ongoing development of specific group-leadership and management skills that you may not have needed in your previous personal or professional roles.

- **Identify and develop your skills**—A few of the necessary skills for leading a group include:
 - › *Being organized*
 - › *Good time management*
 - › *Effective meeting facilitation*
 - › *An ability to think on one's feet*
 - › *An ability to communicate well with people across diverse backgrounds and cultures*
 - › *Problem-solving*
 - › *Conflict management*

² More information on establishing group agreements can be found in the AdoptUSKids publication, *4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders*, available at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

Consider whether you already have those skills or if you need extra training before you take on your leadership role. Look for webinars and tips sheets on professionals.adoptuskids.org and nacac.org for resources specifically about developing parent group leadership skills. There may also be local leadership training and development opportunities in your community.

- **Provide opportunities for members to solve their own problems**—Perhaps the most important skill for a peer group leader is the capacity to model the difference between giving advice and offering support. As a support group leader, you must help participants develop their own solutions for challenges they face, with the support of the group. This requires leaders to help participants with identifying issues, exploring the deeper meanings or causes (without straying into therapy mode), finding common ground with other participants, and accessing a range of potential courses of action.
- **Own your mistakes**—We all make mistakes. An important leadership skill is the ability to recognize and learn from mistakes and then act upon what has been learned, modeling this for other group members. For example, “I’m sorry I didn’t suggest a break during our last meeting. I realized afterward that a break would have benefitted all of us when the conversation got emotional. Tonight, I ask all of you to help me remember to take our usual break no later than 8 o’clock. Feel free to signal me if I appear to be forgetting. Will that work for all of you?”

7. A strong support system

Being a leader can be lonely. There are days when it feels like your own bucket is being emptied far more quickly than it is being filled. Understanding your own need for a mentor, a friend, and a network of support is critical to your success as a leader as well as to your own mental health and well-being.

- **Develop your support network**—Do you belong to a group of other support group leaders? Do you have trusted friends and advisors you can turn to when you need to check in and be checked on? Do you have a safe space where you can be vulnerable, express anger, gain clarity out of confusion? If your answer to these questions is no, take time to cultivate your own support network. AdoptUSKids and The North American Council on Adoptable Children have resources that are specific to leaders of foster, kin, and adoption support groups. In your own community, you may be able to find—or start—a network of peers who lead other support groups such as groups for parents of children with medical, mental health, or educational needs.
- **Embrace self-care**—Leaders cannot simply teach others about the value of self-care, they need to practice it as well. Prioritize your own self-care and support system so that your bucket will always be full. This allows you to lead from a position of strength that your members will need and respect.

Keep at it!

Successfully managing the dual roles of being both a parent or caregiver and a leader of a support group can be challenging and messy at times, yet also rewarding and meaningful. All of the tips provided here will help as you navigate this rocky path, but there is one other essential ingredient: time. Persevere. Keep at it. Over time, the path will level out, your skills will improve, and handling both roles will become second nature.

Resources

Publications

4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders

<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/4-keys-to-effective-meeting-facilitation-for-support-group-leaders/>

Secondary Trauma and Self-Care for Support Group Leaders

<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/self-care-for-support-group-leaders/>

“Self-Care Activities for Your Group”

https://adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/AUSK/pro-hub/self-care-activities-for-your-group-web508.pdf

“Symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress”

https://adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/AUSK/pro-hub/symptoms-of-secondary-traumatic-stress-web508.pdf

Recorded webinars

Effective Facilitation of Parent Support Groups

<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/effective-facilitation-of-parent-support-groups/>

Engaging Parents and Caregivers in Support Groups

<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/engaging-parents-and-caregivers-in-support-groups/>

Peer Support Strategies for Kinship, Foster, and Adoptive Families in Tribal Communities

<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/peer-support-strategies-for-families-in-tribal-communities/>

Successful Peer Leadership of Parent Support Groups

<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/successful-peer-leadership-of-parent-support-groups/>



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