

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.

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.

- **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.

Brene 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 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 agreements²**—Use 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.

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.

- **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

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

Find more resources for parent group leaders at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

Tip sheets

- *4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders* (2019)
- *7 Characteristics of Successful Parent-Support Group Leaders* (2019)
- *Self-Care Activities for Your Group* (2019)
- *Symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress* (2019)

Recorded webinars

- *Effective Facilitation of Parent Support Groups* (2018)
- *Engaging Parents and Caregivers in Support Groups* (2018)
- *Peer Support Strategies for Kinship, Foster, and Adoptive Families in Tribal Communities* (2019)
- *Successful Peer Leadership of Parent Support Groups* (2019)

If you want help developing your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families, we can help. Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org.



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