

STARTING AND NURTURING



ADOPTIVE PARENT GROUPS

a guide for leaders



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Starting and Nurturing Adoptive Parent Groups
A GUIDE FOR LEADERS

NORTH AMERICAN COUNCIL ON ADOPTABLE CHILDREN

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ABOUT NACAC

The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting adoptive parents, promoting adoption awareness, informing adoption professionals, and helping children find permanent, loving families. Serving parents and professionals throughout the U.S. and Canada, NACAC publishes materials, conducts training, advocates for system change, and provides support related to:

- adoption support and preservation
- parent group development
- adoption subsidies
- adoptive and foster parent recruitment
- transracial/transcultural parenting
- child welfare system reform
- kinship care
- concurrent planning

NACAC also holds the most comprehensive adoption conference in North America. In Minnesota, NACAC recruits foster and adoptive parents and provides peer support to adoptive families.

For more information, please contact us at www.nacac.org, info@nacac.org, or 651.644.3036.



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INTRODUCTION

Starting and Nurturing Adoptive Parent Groups: A Guide for Leaders was written for you—adoptive, foster, and kinship parents who want to start a parent group. Your desire to lead is an important step for you and one that will positively affect the quality of life for families in your community and maybe even change the systems that determine child welfare policy. It takes courage to be a leader, and you should be proud of your willingness to help other parents and children.

As you think about starting a parent group, remember that you don't have to do it alone. Gather good people around you to help you take the first step. You can begin slowly or develop quickly, and however you and your group grow and change, you will make a difference in the life of a child, a family, a community, or even a country.

Although this guide starts leaders at the very beginning of the group development process, it is designed to help leaders and parent groups at all stages of development. New leaders can work sequentially, going chapter by chapter as they progress from organizing their group to creating a mission and plan, to sponsoring their first event. Experienced leaders may use the materials by selecting single chapters, segments of chapters, or specific samples that address their current needs. A group that has supported the needs of the community for years may want to focus on chapter 6 to help them become a nonprofit organization. Other groups that are expanding their direct services to families may be most interested in exploring chapter 7 on financial planning and fundraising. A group experiencing membership burnout may feel they have lost the

passion behind their mission and can find suggestions for how to rejuvenate their group in chapter 8. Wherever your group may be, this guide is meant to be one source that can help you and your group do what you want to do.

However you decide to use this guide, feel free to share the information generously with others, and make handouts available to anyone who needs them. Be creative and adapt any of the exercises and tools provided to fit your group's style and culture. Take your time processing the information and if any part becomes overwhelming, return to it later when the timing is right or when you can apply the material to your group.

NACAC has nurtured and supported the efforts of more than 1,000 parent groups across North America since 1974. Over the years, parent groups have supported individual families and children, provided post-adoption services, and recruited prospective foster and adoptive families. Many groups have become agents of change—identifying policies and practices that will help foster children and adoptive families and working to make those policies and practices a reality. As a parent group leader, you are a part of a formidable network of parents who are dedicated to improving the lives of foster children, children who have been adopted, and their families.

As you and your group develop, remember to return to this guide from time to time, seek out other resources, stay connected with your community and other leaders, and contact NACAC if you have questions or need help. Most importantly, don't ever lose sight of the collective power that parent leaders have.

chapter ★ *one*

BECOMING A LEADER

Adoptive, foster, and kinship parents have established and organized parent groups for years. Many motivated parents have started a group with a clear and focused mission in mind. Others simply wanted to help parents connect. Whatever level you may be at, you should think of yourself as a leader.

RECOGNIZING YOUR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

Have you ever:

- organized a birthday party for your child?
- participated in a political campaign by collecting signatures, registering voters, or distributing campaign literature?
- organized a bake sale, rummage sale, special event, or fundraiser for your place of worship, social club, book club, block club, or another organization?
- chaired a committee or held an office in high school, college, or in an organization?
- served as the captain of a team sport?
- organized a neighborhood carpool?

If you can answer “yes” to any of these questions, or have taken on similar activities, you possess leadership skills. You don’t have to be the president of a company, own your own business, or be a well-known spokesperson for an organization. All you need is the ability to envision a desirable future and get people to support that vision. As a parent, you do this every day with your children. Whether or not you have realized it before, you are a leader. The exercise on the next page will help you identify your leadership qualities and those that you think are necessary for a parent group leader to have.

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

A strong group needs good leadership to accomplish its goals. Strong leaders should have the best interests of the group in mind as they help guide the direction and carry out the mission of the group. Many of the most effective leaders are the ones who can listen to advice and input from others.

The following eight characteristics are often found in effective leaders. Think of leaders you admire and consider whether they are confident, assertive, hospitable, receptive, goal oriented, flexible, enthusiastic, or humorous. It is rare to possess all of these characteristics and certainly not necessary or required of you as a leader. Rather than possess each one of these qualities, a leader:

- appreciates and values the characteristics
- knows when and how to use them
- draws these qualities out in others

Think about the strengths you have now, the ones you want to develop, and the characteristics others might have that could complement your leadership style. Many parent group leaders share the leadership responsibilities and take advantage of the combined qualities of their team of leaders.

CONFIDENT

If you don’t already have it, one quality that is important to develop is confidence. Pure and simple, you must believe in yourself. There will be times when you will feel scared while facing difficulties, but it will be important for you to project confidence to others. In other words, act as if you feel confident until it becomes a quality you carry

EXERCISE: IDENTIFYING YOUR STRENGTHS AS A LEADER

This exercise will help you identify the skills and characteristics that make you a leader. Take a minute to make a list of your strengths—including both personality traits and abilities that will help you as a leader.

Are you:

- honest?
- organized?
- friendly?
- inspiring?
- funny?

Are you good at:

- focusing on the big picture?
- identifying strengths in others?
- communicating with diverse audiences?
- convincing others of your vision?
- supporting others through difficult times?

Then, make a second list of the skills and qualities you think a good parent group leader should possess. Compare your lists with the leadership characteristics we've identified throughout this chapter and the abilities in the box on page 7. Use our suggestions to expand both of your lists.

Next, compare the two lists you have made. Obviously you have many strengths that will make you a successful parent group leader. Are there some items in the second list that you don't have or would like to work on? Highlight any of the items in the second list that you want to develop in yourself.

These lists will help you realize the strengths you can rely on as you lead others, and identify the areas you need to work on to become the type of leader you aspire to be. If you highlighted any of the skills or characteristics in the second list, concentrate on developing them. For example, if you need to enhance your ability to focus on the future, think about and write down where you see yourself in the future: in three months, six months, one year, and three years. Then list one or two steps you can realistically take to reach those goals. Be creative and come back to this list periodically to check your progress.

with you and can draw from even when tasks are challenging. Throughout your years as a leader, you will face multiple challenges, and come up against roadblocks and obstacles. People will make demands on your time and on your patience. Because parent

group leaders often deal with difficult issues, accomplishing goals won't always be easy. Confidence will be one key to your ability to overcome these obstacles.

Part of gaining confidence is your own willingness to take risks and actively pursue projects and activities that feature your strengths, and then to let yourself expand to try new things. As you and your group experience successes, your confidence will grow and give you the courage to take on even greater challenges.

ASSERTIVE

Assertiveness goes hand in hand with confidence. People who are assertive exude confidence and are forthright. They stand up for their rights and beliefs as well as the rights and beliefs of others. Assertive people state what they need from others and respectfully listen when others express their needs. Assertive people take the time to understand themselves, are clear about what their expectations and needs are, and directly express those feelings and desires to others around them.

For many people, assertiveness is a tough thing to master.

People who are aggressive rather than assertive are too forceful or pushy. They often

annoy others because of their tendency to push their agenda and because of their inability to listen to others. On the other end of the spectrum, passive people often have trouble expressing themselves or taking action. Passive leaders either can't get any-

thing done because they won't speak up or are easily manipulated because they defer to everyone.

Assertive leaders:

- are clear about their position on an issue
- seek more information if something seems undefined, unfocused, or confusing
- express their viewpoint
- hear and process the viewpoints of others
- discuss differences with an open mind
- factor in differing view points when making a decision

Look for a book or take a course on assertiveness if this is a skill you need to strengthen. As a leader, you will need to assert yourself, your position, and your cause often.

HOSPITABLE

It is important for you to be hospitable so you can welcome and attract new members to your group as well as keep them coming. Hospitality is exhibited to others in what you do, what you say, and even how you set up your meeting environment. It is important to be warm, congenial, and friendly; to smile, shake hands, and make direct eye contact. Think about your meeting as if you are welcoming guests into your home—Will members feel comfortable? Are there refreshments? Will group members sit on equal ground? Will they be able to see each other? Is there time set aside for introductions? Is the meeting room accessible to people with disabilities? Is there a place and staffing for child care? Think about meetings you have attended: What made a particular meeting enjoyable or what made another one uncomfortable? Providing hospitality doesn't just happen. It takes planning and a conscious effort to provide a welcoming environment.

RECEPTIVE

An effective leader is receptive to other group members. Most people expect a leader to lead, but leading doesn't mean dominating. Groups—especially adults—are usually much more effective when all members are valued as intelligent contributors and

welcomed to share their knowledge and experience. If members believe that you are only willing to push your own agenda, they will lose interest, feel discounted, and maybe even drop out. It is good to know you have a lot to share with the group, but if you are not receptive to the gifts of other group members, your leadership will feel like a dictatorship to them.

The following are ways to show that you are a receptive leader:

- let others voice their opinions before you voice yours
- brainstorm ideas with the entire group
- set group goals (not your goals)
- allow the talents and gifts of others to be revealed
- publicly acknowledge those gifts and value them
- encourage group members to use their talents by serving as officers or taking a leadership role on a group project or subcommittee

Receptive leaders are comfortable with their strengths and abilities but know they are not the only one who can teach the group; they also listen and learn from others.

GOAL ORIENTED

It is helpful for a group leader to be focused, particularly when the group is planning how to achieve its goals. One way to hold your focus as a leader is to prioritize. The group may have many worthy goals, but only a few of them will be attainable within the first year. Choose two or three, or if the goal is a big one, choose only one. Then think of how you might break the goal(s) down into smaller, more manageable steps.

A good leader also needs to be able to look ahead and plan for where the group will be in 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months and what it will take to get there. Thinking of those three time increments can help you to plan for what is realistic to accomplish.

FLEXIBLE

Flexibility is not just a good skill; it is a survival tool. Many things can happen in a group that will be out of your control. The more you are able to see new possibilities, and develop another plan of action when roadblocks present themselves, the more successful and effective you will be as a leader. If you try to control everything, you will likely drive people away and frustrate yourself. It is impossible to control everything, and rigidity can lead to missed opportunities. When you are flexible, you are open to the potential of viewing or doing something in more than one way. When a project comes to a standstill, for example, remaining flexible allows you to consider a new plan of action. A leader who is flexible is better able to listen to input from other group members and incorporate their best ideas into a solid strategy.

ENTHUSIASTIC

When you are enthusiastic about what you are doing, your energy and excitement will spread to others and engage them to join you. If a leader is enthused about the group, new people will want to join and share their energy and talents. When talents flourish and the enthusiasm grows beyond the group, members from the community may take notice and even help the group attain its goals.

HUMOROUS

Last but not least, it is fun to be around a parent leader who enjoys humor and laughter. Like your role as a parent, your job as a leader can be rewarding but also stressful. Leaders who know how to laugh at themselves and at situations can reduce their stress and the stress of others. Research shows that laughter may reduce your physical pain and improve your emotional well-being. Laughter can help you live through any unpleasant situation. It can even promote clear thinking when ideas seem blocked. Learn to find humor in the ups and downs of leadership.

While being a parent is a stressful job, most parents have funny stories to tell about their parenting expe-

riences. Finding humor in everyday living brings people together. Some of the stories we tell weren't so funny when they happened, but with perspective we can see the humorous side to them, and sometimes what we learned can help others.

As a group leader, encouraging laughter can help you:

- keep your cool in stressful situations
- reduce tension
- avert explosive situations when communicating with those who oppose you
- grab and keep your audience's attention
- communicate an unpopular message in a manner that deflects antagonism
- give you ammunition that can disarm the most powerful opponent
- find common ground with others in order to bring about a win-win agreement

Watch for situations where humor is not appropriate. For example, if a parent relays personal information needing serious attention from the group, follow the parent's lead. Let him choose if humor is appropriate for a situation. Don't decide for someone else whether a situation is funny.

In general, be open to laughter. The people around you will appreciate your spirit and will enjoy their work more. If you can infuse humor into the group, you will attract and maintain members, be more effective in your work, and have fun while you're at it.

NETWORKING AND FINDING A MENTOR

As you take steps toward leadership, remember that you don't have to do this alone. Contact other parent groups in your area to see what they are doing well. Think about why certain groups are successful. Learn from those around you to develop new ideas of your own. Discuss your desire to start a new parent group with the other group leaders and members and ask for their support.

A good first step in becoming a leader is to find a mentor. When you identify someone who you

think would be a good match, ask if he or she is willing to be your mentor. Ideally, you will find a person who has had experience leading a parent group or another kind of support group. Your mentor can guide and advise you as your leadership skills grow and mature. If you can't find a mentor from an established parent group, maybe there is a community leader—a volunteer coordinator, parent/teacher organization president, or religious leader—who has the qualities and skills you want to develop within yourself. Ask someone you respect if he or she would be willing to give you advice, answer questions, and provide moral support as you begin your parent group. Choose a person who seems to best fit your personality and understands your goals. Remember to make use of your mentor, especially when your confidence seems to fade or problems arise.

Remember that you have talents to offer too. A measure of a successful mentoring relationship is that the two of you build on each other's strengths. Many mentors have said that what makes a mentorship rewarding for them is how much they learn from the person they advise.

If there isn't the right mentor in your community, it is possible to find a parent group leader from almost anywhere in North America using the Internet. The use of e-mail has made it much easier for group leaders to communicate even across great distances.

SHARING LEADERSHIP

Even if you are a confident leader and feel ready to start a parent group, it is a good idea to gather others around you to share the leadership responsibilities. Leading a group is a time- and energy-consuming undertaking and one way to ensure that you sustain your enthusiasm, drive, and commitment is to find others to help you. Calling together a leadership circle—others who share your vision and want to help you lead—not only divides responsibilities but can be fun.



A GOOD LEADER:

- focuses on mission
- delegates tasks
- displays self-confidence
- provides guidance
- serves as a resource to members
- protects the best interests of the group (rather than personal agendas)
- concentrates on the needs of the group
- supports others
- makes action plans
- prioritizes work
- evaluates the group's work
- focuses on the future
- accepts responsibility for successes *and* failures
- shares success with others
- demonstrates good time management
- listens to suggestions and constructive criticism
- knows when to say "no"



FINDING OTHER LEADERS

Most groups form because the members have something in common. For example, parents who have adopted older children from the foster care system will most likely benefit from being in a group with others who are living through similar experiences. Those who have adopted internationally may want to be with other families whose children are making adjustments to family life versus orphanage life, as well as a new culture and language. Older kinship parents might want practical tips from contemporaries for how to pace themselves as they parent the second time around.

Think of people you know who have adopted, or are foster or kinship care providers. Maybe there are people who attended training sessions at the same time you did who would like to be a member of your leadership circle and help get the group started. Tell local public and private agencies that you are looking for interested people to help lead your group.

If you don't know any potential foster, kinship, or adoptive parent leaders in your area, you can post signs in local clinics, churches, and grocery stores to try to find potential members of your leadership circle. You can also advertise in newspapers or on the Internet. If you live in a rural location and know there are no other adoptive, foster, or kinship families in your immediate area, you will have to make a broader publicity effort to find leaders who can commit to traveling to a central location. Doing all the work alone may seem easier now, but in the long run you will be glad you took the time to find other people to help form the group and develop the plan to get it started.

ORGANIZING THE LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

Selecting a Co-Leader

As a founding member of the group, you may choose to be a primary leader even within a larger leadership circle. On the other hand, you may choose a co-leader who shares your vision and goals. This could be a longtime friend, spouse, or partner, or another parent you have met. Make sure it is someone who shares your enthusiasm, drive, and vision for a parent group.

If you think you have found a co-leader, make sure you clearly discuss your vision for a group with this person. Before taking on leadership together, it is also a good idea to talk about how you will share the role and try to determine whether your leadership styles will complement each other. Maybe you are someone who can see the big picture and is not afraid to set challenging goals. Maybe your partner is more detail-oriented and knows how to achieve outcomes by breaking goals down into smaller steps. Maybe one of you is the more dynamic personality and the other would rather work quietly in the background. No matter what type of style you have, it is a good idea to discuss how you will approach the job of co-leading a group.

Dividing Roles

Your leadership circle will need to identify how it will share responsibilities. Some groups organize their leadership by committee or general task. For example, one leader could chair the membership committee, another the finance committee, another the outreach committee, etc. If your group later decides to become a nonprofit organization (as outlined in chapter 6), you will need to name group officers. In this case you may want to choose a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. Co-leaders may wish to keep their role as equals, but would benefit from having some other positions specified, such as treasurer.

Some groups organize their leadership circle by tasks that need to be done. For example, in the early months of your group, one person could develop strategies for recruiting members, another could scout out and secure a free meeting site, a third person could plan publicity, a fourth person could find volunteers for child care and arrange for food, and two members could plan the first meeting. It is important for the leaders of a group to play to members' strengths and to encourage all members to use their talents to enhance the effectiveness of the group. It makes sense to have your computer whiz design your group's web site, your writer compose your newsletter, and your accountant help with finances.

However the workload is shared—whether it works for your group to hold static positions with office titles, or whether your group wants to allow for more fluidity and let leaders step forward when their talents match a task—dividing the work makes sense in the long run. Whatever way your group decides to organize itself, forming a strong leadership circle is a healthy step in the right direction.

chapter ★ two

PARENT GROUP DEVELOPMENT

As you decide to form a group, it can be helpful to look at different types of parent groups and examine how they function. Adoptive, foster, and kinship parents organize into groups because of a basic shared concern for children and families, but their focus can vary widely.

TYPES OF GROUPS

The following framework describes the primary types of parent groups.

FRUSTRATION VENTING GROUP

Adoptive, foster, and kinship parents know first hand the issues other parents face, the support needed to deal with a large bureaucratic system, and the challenges of parenting a child who has special needs. They also know how hard it can be to try to move forward with a foster placement, adoption, or to get services from their county or agency. Many foster and adoptive parents discover that they share similar concerns and questions about the child welfare system, such as:

- Why does it take so long get a home study?
- Why didn't I receive complete information about my child?
- Why doesn't the agency seem to be sensitive to the needs of families of color?
- Why are relatives overlooked as caregivers for children who need foster and adoptive homes?

Parents who join a frustration venting group are usually discouraged and irritated by the adoption and foster care systems. The size and power of these

systems can be overwhelming, and therefore parents turn to each other to vent their frustrations and to offer each other support. They come together to more effectively achieve their individual objectives. The life span of a frustration venting group tends to be short because parents often leave such a group once their immediate and individual concerns are addressed, such as the finalization of an adoption or an allocation of money for respite care. As a result, turnover in this type of group is high.

MUTUAL SUPPORT GROUP

Mutual support groups typically form after adoptions are finalized or foster children are placed—often when parents of children with similar needs come together to share concerns and provide long-term support to one another. These groups help current or prospective adoptive and foster parents realize that their experiences are not unusual, affirm that they have valuable information to exchange, and share insights about parenting. The main focus of a support group is to encourage members in their day-to-day parenting and to provide a nurturing place for adoptive, foster, and kinship families to come for advice, sharing, and social activities with families like their own.

A support group grows by welcoming new members, but continues in its mission to focus on the social, emotional, and community needs of its membership. Many mutual support groups organize and offer telephone help lines for members to call when they need advice or help with a problem. Some groups have also developed buddy or mentor programs where they match an experienced parent

SERVING THE COMMUNITY AT ANY LEVEL

Many parent groups find that identifying quality adoption-related resources is valuable for their members. This activity can begin as a simple support function and grow into a much broader service to parents and the community:

CREATING A LIST OF RESOURCES

One group found a simple way to help families find local resources on adoption and special needs. Volunteers from the group went to the library and, with help from the local librarians, were able to create a list of all the available books, videos, journals, etc. on their topic. They typed up the list, with titles, authors' names, and brief descriptions of each resource. The list is now available to everyone in the group.

ESTABLISHING A LENDING LIBRARY

Another group that had a little more time and money developed its own adoption library. Members identified the must-have books, journals, newsletters, etc., and either purchased the items or requested free copies. The group then developed a list of resources by topics, and identified a method through which parents can borrow the materials they need.

DEVELOPING AN ONLINE DIRECTORY

At a higher level, a Pennsylvania parent group developed an extensive resource directory of other supportive services (therapists, agencies, other support groups, camps, and more). Group leaders then created an online directory where parents can click on their county name to see a list of resources sorted by type.

with an inexperienced parent or group families of a similar make-up, such as families who have adopted sibling groups or medically fragile children.

SERVICE GROUP

As parent groups spend more time working with the child welfare system, they can begin to see that the system does not do everything possible to bring waiting children and waiting families together. Also, as parents raise their children, the need for services that address children's special needs becomes clear. Members of service groups are often parents who

want to provide meaningful services to adoptive and foster families. They form service groups to bridge the gap between the needs of adoptive and foster families and the offerings of the existing systems.

As parents themselves, members of service groups are able to identify needs and offer more comprehensive and appropriate services to families. Service groups may recruit foster and adoptive parents; write adoption education curriculum for schools; provide adoption awareness training for the community, school administrators, and teachers; and offer post-adoption training for parents and professionals.

ADVOCACY GROUP

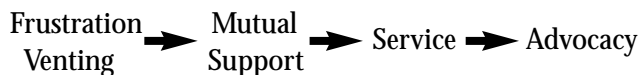
Parent groups that initially form as or evolve into an advocacy group want to change the system to more effectively and respectfully meet the needs of children and families. The focus of an advocacy group is to seek social justice. They challenge the ways in which services are delivered to children and families. Lobbying for new laws, advocating for practice changes, and holding the system accountable for services to children and families are activities typical of advocacy groups. Many advocacy groups lobby for adopted children to receive post-adoption assistance and mental health services. Others seek changes that will find families for children more quickly. These groups focus on the bigger picture and are less involved in meeting their members' individual social and emotional needs.

COMPARING GROUP TYPES

| type of group | reason for existence | purpose | program/services | structure |
|----------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| FRUSTRATION VENTING GROUP | parents have a problem with the child welfare system | enable parents to air problems, share frustrations, meet their short-term needs | discussing what's wrong with the system and how it affects family | informal (no officers, few defined activities, parents often involved for only a short time) |
| MUTUAL SUPPORT GROUP | parents need advice and resources from one another | help families address adoption issues or children's special needs; provide long-term emotional support | social events, brainstorming solutions to challenges, sharing emotional support, validating adoption experience | semi-formal (group may have officers, but not likely to be incorporated and has limited funding) |
| SERVICE GROUP | parents see way to fill gaps in family services | provide helpful support services to families and/or children in the community | offering workshops, printed resources, post-adoption services; recruiting prospective adopters | formal (group has bylaws, nonprofit status, seeks grants or contracts) |
| ADVOCACY GROUP | parents see problems in child welfare system and identify possible solutions | change the child welfare system to better serve children and families in their local region, state/province, or country | working for policy and practice changes at local, provincial/state, or national levels; educating policy-makers and others about family needs | formal (group has nonprofit status, seeks funds, has strategic plan, has broader membership and board representation than adoptive parents) |

EVOLUTION OF GROUPS

Over time, some groups evolve in a linear fashion (as shown below), starting as a frustration venting group and eventually becoming an advocacy group.



Other groups don't move in a linear way. Some groups may remain a mutual support group for their entire existence if that is their members' goal. A group may start out as a frustration venting group, grow and evolve into a mutual support group and

then a service group, lose members, and operate again as a mutual support group. Individual parent groups rarely operate at a single level. In fact, many operate at several levels at the same time. A group may provide a support function for new and prospective adoptive families, while they also advocate for systemic changes.

Every group decides what its purpose is and how it will serve families. As a group leader, your job is to make sure the group decides what its goals are and stays true to meeting those goals or grows—with foresight and planning—into a different type of group.

chapter ★ three

GETTING THE GROUP STARTED

As a group leader, one of your first tasks is to find other group members and organize your first public meeting. Below you will find ideas for recruiting new members and strategies to help you plan your first meeting so that members come back to the group. Early meetings will likely involve getting to know each other and providing informal support, while later meetings may involve deciding on your group's direction and goals.

INVITING NEW MEMBERS

When you begin to plan how you will recruit new members for a first meeting, you should take into consideration location, day and time, and how you will publicize the meeting.

LOCATION

Make sure the location you choose is comfortable and convenient and will encourage participation. Although some groups meet in each other's homes, most groups use a meeting room in a public library, school, place of worship, bank community room, local agency, or park building for little or no cost. Meeting in each other's homes might feel more personal and private, but meeting in the local library might be easier for the members or provide a more equal driving distance for people in outlying areas. Decide what suits your situation, but make sure that the meeting space is centrally located and accessible to as many people as possible.

DAY AND TIME

Holding your meeting during a weekday evening or on the weekend will probably encourage the greatest

attendance since most people usually work during the day or have full schedules during the week. At your first meeting, ask attendees what day and time are best for future meetings.

PUBLICITY

There are several ways to find potentially interested families for your group:

- **Word of mouth**—Generate a list of family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and acquaintances of your leadership circle who are adoptive, foster, or kinship parents. You may surprise yourselves by coming up with a list of 10 to 15 potential members. Many groups have formed just by word of mouth.
- **Contact agencies**—Public and private adoption agencies cannot legally give you the names of adoptive parents and may not want to give out foster parents' names, but they are often willing to post your meeting announcement or include it in a mailing. In fact, some social workers and agencies are willing to help you plan your meetings or provide a space for you to meet.
- **Attend adoption and foster parent orientation meetings or training sessions**—Ask if you can attend an orientation meeting to announce that you are starting a new group, and start developing a list of interested people.
- **Distribute posters and flyers**—You can display flyers in supermarkets, places of worship, fitness centers, doctors' offices, schools, libraries, stores, post offices, and anywhere else you might be able to reach adoptive parents. You can also canvass the neighborhood with flyers. If you use flyers,

TIPS FOR SETTING THE TONE

When you plan for your group you want to set the right tone and create an atmosphere that is inviting. Keep the three Fs in mind: food, family, and fun.

Food—Sharing food eases group tension and adds a dimension of pleasure to the meeting. At first, the leadership circle will probably take turns providing food and beverages for the meetings, but after that you can have each member sign up for a turn.

Family—To attract members, your highest priority is to select a meeting time and space that is convenient for families. Next, think about how your group will accommodate children. They will not only need a space to play but also activities to do while their parents meet. You will also want your meeting content to be relevant to your members and their specific experiences and family issues.

Fun—Fun is first expressed through the attitude of the leadership. As a leader, it is your job to offer activities that are fun and remain open to laughter and joy. Think of the funny stories you have from your own parenting experiences or from your childhood. Sharing one of these stories might be the way to set the tone for the first meeting.

One group worked hard keeping food, family, and fun in mind as they recruited families and planned their meetings. They knew how to:

- make FOOD fun when they asked each family to bring a different ingredient to make tacos—shells, filling, sour cream, salsa—then topped off the meal with make-your-own ice cream sundaes.
- keep FAMILY needs in mind by providing separate activities for children so that the parents can get the support that the group offers. The kids enjoy being with other foster and adopted children, and value time spent with other families that are just like theirs.
- keep the FUN rolling with door prizes for everyone, volleyball for big kids, crafts for little ones, a trip to a farm, and picnics at the lake.

make sure they include all the information a prospective member will need: information about the group, date, time, location (with directions), contact names, and phone numbers. The flyer will probably be the only source of information that prospective members have, so it should be clear and thorough.

- **Use the media**—Consider a more traditional means of publicity, such as advertising in community newspapers. You can write to the editor of the local paper and include a news release, talk to the program directors of your local radio and TV

stations to arrange an interview or ask the directors to make a public service announcement to publicize your group. You can also ask to be listed on the free community calendar that many stations offer.

- **Contact professionals who work with adoptive families**—You may want to contact adoption lawyers, doctors, therapists, and psychologists. Ask them if they will display an announcement in their office or include a flyer in one of their general mailings.

INVITATION LETTER AND QUESTIONNAIRE

Once you have developed a list of prospective members, you will want to send them an introductory letter and new member questionnaire so that you can gather more information about them. A sample letter (page 17) and questionnaire (page 19) are included at the end of this chapter. You can either have people mail the form to you or bring it to the first meeting.

PLANNING THE FIRST MEETING

Arrange the meeting space—Once you have found your location, make sure you have enough comfortable chairs and arrange them in a way that invites participation and helps people to get to know each other. An open circle works well.

Have a sign-in sheet—Prepare a sign-in sheet to collect attendees' names, addresses, children's names and ages, e-mail addresses, and phone numbers to

create a group contact list. This list, once distributed to the group, will help members form relationships and share resources, and provide them with names for child care and respite care trading opportunities. It is probably most efficient to pass the sign-in sheet around at the beginning of the meeting. Make sure you distribute this list to members at the second meeting and keep it updated. Look for the sample sign-in sheet on page 18.

Arrange for child care—Community service clubs such as Girl Scouts, religious youth groups, and school clubs; retired teachers; or members of AARP may be willing to donate their time to provide child care during your meetings.

You can also ask older children to work with an adult to provide child care. Groups on a limited budget sometimes have members trade off as child care providers, which does save money, but excludes a member from the meeting. Members could also agree to each pay a couple of dollars per meeting to hire someone. Plan ahead for children who may have social, emotional, or physical special needs and make sure the child care providers are prepared to properly care for the children.



CHECKLIST FOR THE FIRST MEETING

- Arrange the meeting space
- Have a sign-in sheet
- Arrange for child care
- Develop the meeting content
- Write out an agenda
- Welcome new members



FIRST MEETING TIPS

Smile—People want to join a friendly group. You may be nervous for the first meeting and don't realize you look concerned. Relax, take some deep breaths, and smile.

Don't move faster than the group—If your agenda is too long, don't try to rush through it; save some things for the next meeting. For example, if you have a large turnout, don't ever cut introductions to give the speaker more time. Especially early on in the group's formation, group members need to get to know each other. If you have a meeting where the group needs more time—to understand content, ask questions, or discuss issues—slow down. Respect the natural pace of the group.

Give new members something to take home—Don't end the meeting without giving the members contact information for the leaders.

Tell people how they will be notified of the next meeting—Remember, you are just getting started and people may need a reminder for the next meeting. If you say you will mail an invitation, you must follow through. E-mailing or calling each attendee is cheaper and the duty can be divided among the leadership circle.

End on a positive note—Plan to share a joke, cartoon, phrase, or saying from one of your children that will make people laugh or smile.

Develop the meeting content—A general rule when you plan a meeting is to vary your activities to allow for both active and passive participation from members. Keep in mind that people learn in different ways—by listening, observing, doing, and interacting with each other.

Sometimes you may want to energize the group by bringing in an outside expert who can show the group something new. Maybe you know an attachment expert who would be willing to speak for free. Whatever you do, avoid the temptation of inviting a well-respected, but boring, speaker and don't let your speaker take all the group's time. If you do have a speaker, assign someone to introduce the person and make sure the introduction and presentation run no longer than 20 minutes.

SAMPLE AGENDA FOR FIRST MEETING

7:30–7:35 pm

Welcome and opening remarks

7:35–7:50 pm

Introductions (*Ask everyone to introduce themselves: name, number of children, and show pictures of their children.*)

7:50–8:10 pm

Introduce leaders (*Have each leader tell why they wanted to start a support group. Ask attendees to think about why they came to the group and what they hope to get out of a group.*)

8:10–8:30 pm

Refreshments (*Break for refreshments and socializing.*)

8:30–9:00 pm

Discussion: Why We're Here (*Allow parents time to share why they came and what they want from a support group.*)

9:00–9:15 pm

Select Meeting Time (*Ask attendees to state preferences for future meeting locations and times. Discuss the best time and place and how to remind people of the next meeting. Hand out questionnaires or collect previously distributed questionnaires.*)

9:15 pm

Adjourn (*Welcome people to stay and visit until 9:30 when you should start cleaning up the room.*)

Next, you may want to introduce your leadership circle and have each leader talk briefly (3 to 5 minutes) about why he wanted to start a group. Then give the group a break for light refreshments. The break gives attendees time to socialize and talk to each other informally about what the leaders shared. It also gives them time to formulate their thoughts and think of questions they might want to ask during the group discussion after the break.

Pull the group back together to discuss why members want to be part of a group. The discussion is important and you want to allow ample time for parents to offer and receive support. (Chapter 4 tells how you can lead your group through a more formal discussion about your purpose at a later time.)

Make sure you leave time for the group to agree upon the date, time, and location for the next meeting as well as future topics. Adjourn the meeting formally and allow members to

socialize for 10 to 15 minutes after the meeting.

Write out an agenda—Clearly identify and spell out the format and goals for the first meeting in a written agenda. Either copy the agenda for each member or post it in the meeting room where everyone can see it. See the sample agenda on the left.

Welcome new members—Appoint someone to greet and welcome people as they arrive and make sure they get name-tags, find the coat rack, and locate the rest rooms. Assign someone to direct the children to their area. A welcome poster and any other information on adoption-related community events make a nice added touch.

At your first meeting, you will probably want to start with some kind of icebreaker—a joke, funny story, or a brief activity to help the group feel comfortable. Then have the attendees introduce themselves by answering a common question or completing a statement, such as:

- How many children do you have and what are their ages?
- Looking back over my week, the bad news is _____, but the good news is _____.

This is a good time to let attendees talk briefly about their children and share pictures.

EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF YOUR FIRST MEETING

Your leadership circle should take time to evaluate the success of your first meeting and use the information to help plan for future meetings. Before the end of the meeting, ask the group:

- “What worked for you?”
- “What could we do better?” Note any themes.

Right after the meeting, take a few minutes to note:

- the number of families who attended
- the comfort level or mood of the group
- the length and depth of the discussion
- the agenda items you were able to accomplish
- what you might include next time or things to improve
- things you hadn’t anticipated and want to address next time

SAMPLE INVITATION LETTER

[date]

Dear *[name of adoptive or prospective adoptive parent]:*

Last month several adoptive parents from your area met to plan how we could help support adoptive families in our community. We are interested in starting an adoptive parent group and would like you to join us. Adoption is a unique experience, and we would like to provide an opportunity for prospective and current adoptive parents to come together, meet each other, discuss common concerns, build a network of support, and have fun.

To help us to plan our group meetings to best meet the needs of prospective and current adoptive families, we have enclosed a questionnaire. We know that you are busy, but ask that you fill it out and return it to us by *[date]*. After we receive your survey, we will send more information to you about our kick-off meeting. If you have additional questions, please contact *[name(s)]* at *[phone number(s) and e-mail address(es)]*.

Thanks. We hope you can join us!

Sincerely,

[leaders’ names]

[address]

PARENT GROUP SIGN-IN SHEET DATE: _____ EVENT: _____

| Parents' Names | Children's Names and Ages | Address | Phone | E-mail |
|----------------|---------------------------|---------|-------|--------|
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NEW MEMBER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Would you like to participate in an adoptive parent group?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe. Please keep me informed of your group's activities.

If no, why?

2. If you would like to attend parent group meetings, but can't right now, please explain why:

3. Are you a(n) *(please mark all that apply)*:

- Adoptive parent
- Foster parent
- Kinship parent
- Prospective adoptive parent
- Other *(please specify)*

4. If applicable, how long have you been an adoptive parent?

5. Mark all that describe your family:

- Single adoptive parent
- Family with multiple adoptions
- Family with biological and adopted children
- Transracial adoptive family
- Gay/lesbian (GLBT) adoptive parent(s)
- Other *(please specify)*:

6. Please tell us if you have adopted *(please mark all that apply)*:

- A sibling group
- An older child/children
- A physically disabled child/children
- An emotionally injured child/children
- An internationally adopted child/children
- An infant/infants
- A relative's or friend's child/children
- A child/children of a different race or ethnicity
- Other *(please specify)*:

7. List the age(s) of your child/children.

8. Place a check mark next to the topics you most would like to discuss with other parents.

- Strengthening parent-child relationships
- Behavior of children
- Adolescent needs and behavior
- Reactions of family and friends about adoption
- Age-appropriate child development
- Addressing child's questions about adoption/birth family
- Sexual acting out
- Anger/destructiveness
- School-related problems
- Making changes in state/provincial adoption laws
- Addressing legal issues related to adoption
- Adoption assistance/adoption subsidies
- Post-adoption services
- Special needs
- Allegations
- Other *(please describe)*:

9. How often would you like to meet? (*Check one.*)

- Once a month
- Every other month
- Once a quarter
- Other (*please specify*):

10. When is the best time for you to meet?

- Daytime hours (*time preferred:* _____)
- Early evenings (5:30-7:30 pm)
- Late evenings (7:30-9:30 pm)
- Saturday mornings
- Saturday afternoons
- Sunday afternoons
- Sunday evenings
- Other (*please specify*):

11. If a parent group were formed, would you be willing to help:

- With refreshments
- Provide transportation for another parent
- Make telephone calls
- Prepare mailings
- Greet newcomers and make them feel welcome
- Prepare the room before or after the meeting
- Plan group meetings/activities
- Find child care
- Other (*please specify*):

12. What special skills do you have to offer a group of this nature? (Are you skilled at word processing, graphic design, accounting, training, writing, fundraising, bargain shopping, etc.?)

Your name(s)

Address

State/Province

Zip/Postal Code

Home Phone

Work Phone

E-mail

I give permission for my/our name(s), address, e-mail address(es), and phone number(s) to be shared with the parent group leaders for the purpose of contacting me about future activities.

Signature

Date

chapter ★ four

DEVELOPING GROUP IDENTITY AND ACTIVITIES

Every group forms its own identity in a different way. Some evolve organically; others take time to decide who they are and carefully plan what they want to do. If the parent group is to be effective, the leaders and members will eventually have to decide together if they want to be a frustration venting group, mutual support group, service group, advocacy group, or some combination. To do this, the group will first need to determine their most important common needs, then choose activities that most effectively address those needs.

After your group has had several meetings, you may find yourselves ready to formalize who you are and what you want to accomplish. This chapter will help you clarify your group's needs and identify activities that will meet those needs. The brainstorming and planning described below should include your leadership team and any members you have recruited. Taking time to plan is valuable—groups that become involved in activities without planning can seem unfocused and unresponsive to the group and risk losing people.

While you are undertaking the planning process, continue to have group meetings that meet your members' immediate need for socializing and support. The planning process can be taken in stages as you and your members are ready. If you need to break the process into stages—take on a stage every three months or so.

The planning process involves four major steps:

- **clarifying identity**—Who are we? What do we care about? What problem do we want to address? What are our needs?

- **building a foundation**—What should we call our group? What is our mission?
- **choosing activities and developing a work plan**—What can we do to address the needs we identified? Who will do what when?
- **tracking progress**—How do we know if we are meeting group needs and making the difference we wanted to make?

Some groups will agree quickly on their needs and activities, but others will require many discussions. Be patient and work through the planning process together. Keep in mind that many groups will need to go through planning again over time—as new members join and needs change. In the future, if the group decides to change (shifting from providing mutual support to offering services, for example), it will have to reassess members' needs and make sure any new activities reflect those needs.

CLARIFYING YOUR IDENTITY

Use the brainstorming exercise on the next page to start your planning process. It will help clarify who you are and why you have come together as a group. During the discussion, you will also identify the underlying needs or problems you want to address.

In many cases, the leader of the discussion will need to help members explore why they want to be in a parent group and keep them from jumping ahead to the activities they want the group to undertake. Many people express their needs in terms of activities or solutions they think will help, rather than getting to the root of the problem. The chart at the bottom of the page demonstrates a parent's possible initial response and the underlying problem that a facilitator might help draw out.

If you identify the underlying issue, you can later identify many solutions that are potentially more effective than what the parent thought she needed. For example, the parent cited in the chart at the right who wants training because she needs ideas or parenting strategies might be equally well served by a fact sheet, book, or resource manual instead of training.

By the end of this discussion you will have identified a common purpose, in the form of prioritized needs your group wants to meet, and will be ready to move to on the next stage of the planning process.

EXERCISE: IDENTIFY YOUR PURPOSE

Have everyone in your group answer these questions individually. Allow 5 to 10 minutes.

1. **Who are we? What do we have in common?** *(for example: transracial adoptive parents, kinship care providers, parents raising children with special needs)*
2. **Why are we here in this group? What needs or issues do we want to address?** *(for example: I feel alone, none of my friends understands adoption, I'm having problems with my child's school, my child has been discriminated against, the system isn't working for kids, my child's behavior is out of control)*
3. **What difference do we want to make?** *(for example: we want adoptive families to have other families to rely on, teachers to be aware of children's special needs, the local agency to provide post-adoption services, parents to have effective strategies for managing children's behavior)*

After everyone has had time to formulate opinions, list all ideas and the number of people who gave each response. Discuss the responses, making sure that everyone has an opportunity to participate and prioritize. During your discussion, you will need to narrow your focus by identifying the issues that are most important to the entire group. You will use this final list of needs and issues later when you brainstorm activities for the group. Keep in mind the difference you want to make—your goal is to make a change that solves a problem or meets a need.

| A parent says, "I'm here because I ..." | The underlying issue or problem might be that the parent: |
|---|--|
| want to talk with other parents | feels isolated needs suggestions from other parents feels crazy; needs to normalize adoption experience |
| want training | is looking for resources, ideas, parenting strategies feels isolated needs to talk with other parents who share the same experience |
| am a transracial adoptive parent | wants child to have friends of color wants connections with people from the child's culture of origin needs help dealing with racism |

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

Once you have identified common ground and the issues you have joined together to address, you can begin to formalize your group's identity by choosing a name and writing a mission statement. These steps often begin with group brainstorming sessions and then are continued by a smaller committee who develops recommendations to bring back to the whole group. Whenever possible, try to keep the process fun and engaging for all group members.

CHOOSING YOUR NAME

When you are ready to formally name your group, have members shout out words or phrases that they think capture the essence of the group's identity. Encourage everyone to contribute and gather a large list of possibilities. Think about the image or message you want to project to prospective members and the broader community. Do you want a name like *South Minneapolis Adoptive Parents Association*, describing that you are adoptive parents from a specific geographical location? Or, do you want a name like *Adoptive Parents United* or *Together Forever*? Don't rush your discussion and be creative; you want to find a name that fits your group well.

WRITING YOUR MISSION STATEMENT

A mission statement is a sentence or two that describes who you are and the difference the group wants to make. When you and other group members draft the statement, boldly state what you hope to be rather than simply describ-

ing what you are now. It can be helpful to address the following three questions in the statement:

- **Why are we here?**
- **What do we believe?**
- **What do we do?**

The following two fictional examples demonstrate how a mission statement can answer these questions:

Louisville Family Support Group believes strong families are the foundation of the community and is committed to strengthening families by providing a network of support to transracially adopted children, their siblings, and parents.

- **Why are we here?**—to strengthen transracial families
- **What do we believe?**—families are the foundation of the community
- **What do we do?**—provide a network of support to transracially adopted children, their siblings, and parents

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A MISSION STATEMENT

When the time comes to develop a mission statement, you need a strategy. We recommend a lot of group participation, with one person in charge of shepherding the process. Groups can:

- identify a strong writer with good organizational skills to lead the statement development
- host a brainstorming session with all leaders and members—have participants suggest any words or phrases that reflect the group's possible identity, beliefs, and actions; write every statement down on a flip chart and don't critique anything at this stage
- have participants vote on the ideas that most reflect their needs and goals for the group; rank statements in order of relevance and importance
- ask the writer to take the ideas produced and come back to a future meeting with a well-crafted statement that captures the most important ideas
- allow the group to read the statement and comment as a group—talking over what works and what doesn't; agree on a final draft (if necessary, have the writer come back with another version)
- share the statement with several others outside the group to determine if they understand what the group is about; if many do not, you may want to fine tune your statement to make it say what you want it to say.

Forever Families believes all children deserve a permanent family. We are committed to improving the way the child welfare system serves children and families and will advocate for necessary changes at the local, provincial, and federal level.

- **Why are we here?**—to improve the way the child welfare system serves children and families
- **What do we believe?**—all children deserve a permanent family
- **What do we do?**—advocate for changes in policies and practices at the local, provincial, and federal level

As stated in chapter 2, it is common for groups to change over time, from offering support to offering services, or from offering services to becoming an advocacy group. In the future, if the same need or idea is expressed often and by many group members, then it might be time to revisit the mission statement and make changes to reflect that new direction. Changes happen within groups, but generally a group would not want to significantly

change its mission statement often because that would reflect a lack of direction.

PLANNING GROUP ACTIVITIES

IDENTIFYING PRIMARY ACTIVITIES

Before you begin to plan your groups' primary activities, display your mission statement for everyone to see along with the list of underlying needs or issues identified earlier. At this stage, your group will further narrow its focus by connecting priority needs to possible activities that address each need.

Each idea or potential project your group takes on should be measured against your mission statement. To stay focused as a group, emerging ideas that reflect your mission should be pursued, whereas ideas (even good ones) that don't reflect your mission should be set aside. Most groups have more ideas than they can realistically follow through with, and your mission can help you choose which projects to pursue. The exercise at the left will help you develop a preliminary list of activities and then

determine which activities are the most valuable—but also realistic—for your group. In this way, your group can narrow down its focus to a reasonable number of activities.

Let's walk through the exercise using the Louisville Family Support Group from the previous page. The group's mission statement is:

Louisville Family Support Group believes strong families are the foundation of the community and is committed to strengthening families by providing a network of support to transracially adopted children, their siblings, and parents.

EXERCISE: CHOOSING ACTIVITIES

On the left-hand side of a flip chart, write the final (narrowed down) list of needs or issues your group identified earlier. Ask participants to think about possible activities that the group can undertake to address each need. Allow 5 to 10 minutes. Remind members that one activity might address many needs. (See sample on page 25.)

After people have had time to list their individual ideas, come together as a group and list every suggested activity on the right side of the paper. Draw a line that connects each activity or strategy to the need or issue it will address. This will help you see which activities meet multiple needs.

Next, narrow down the possibilities to what feels right for your group. As a group, analyze which activities meet the most needs and seem realistic right now. Discuss each possibility, answering several questions:

- How important are the needs it is designed to meet?
- How many members will it help?
- How much expertise, money, or time will it take to accomplish?

As before, accept all ideas without criticism and then list and prioritize the activities. Be sure to think about whether each strategy meets the needs you identified earlier.

The chart at the right shows how the group brainstormed sample activities that met their underlying needs.

The chart at the bottom of this page shows how the group might continue the exercise—listing all needs and activities, and then linking each activity to the need it is designed to meet.

Louisville Family Support Group's mission states that they will *provide a network of support to transracially adopted children, their siblings, and parents*. When the group identified their needs and matched them with possible activities, they found the most efficient use of their time and efforts was to:

- provide monthly family meetings
- host an annual multicultural festival

The monthly meetings addressed three needs and was the easiest of the activities to accomplish. Of the

Underlying issues or problems:

Possible activities to address the underlying issue are:

wants child to have friends of color

have monthly children's groups
organize whole family social activities
pair family with similar parents and kids (buddy program)

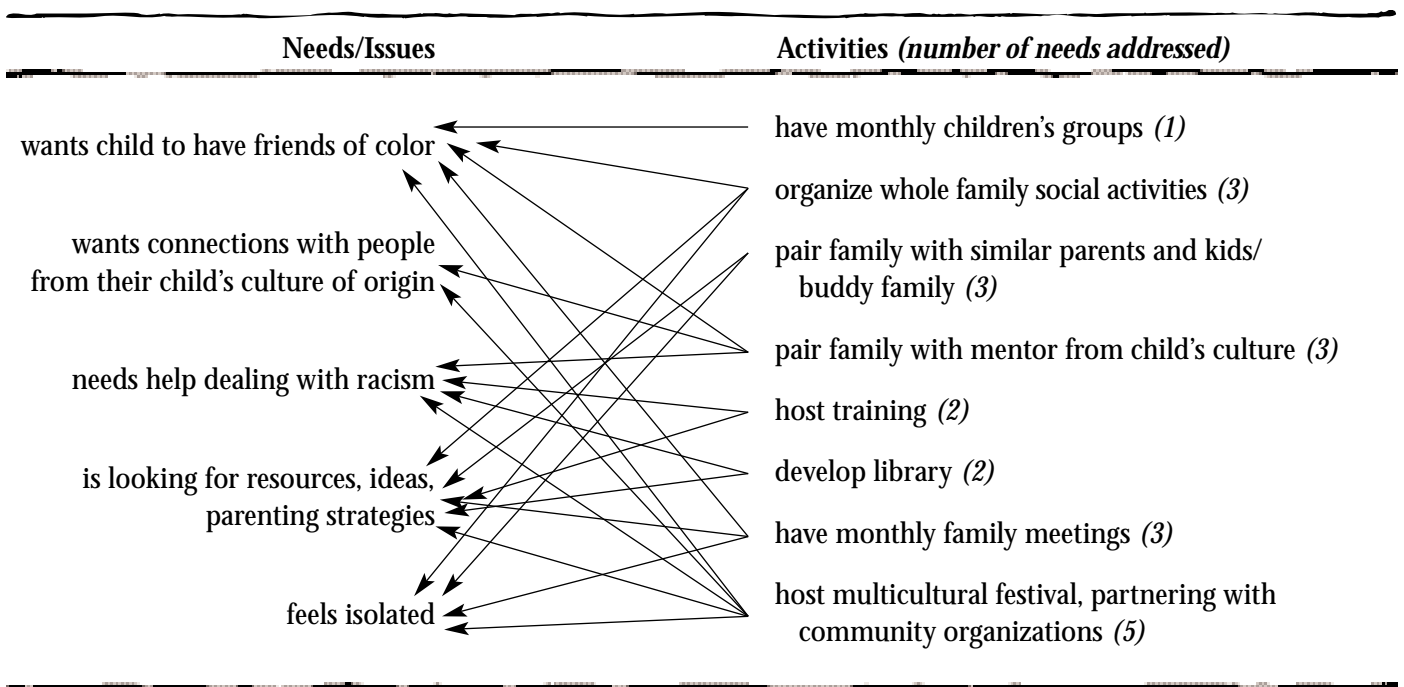
wants connections with people from the child's culture of origin

provide lists of culturally specific community events; organize trips to activities hosted by child's community of origin
host multicultural festival, partnering with community organizations
invite speakers/trainers from various cultures

needs help dealing with racism

pair family with mentor from child's race/culture
host trainings (including one on combating racism)
develop library (that includes materials on race, culture, and racism)
have monthly meetings with other similar families

remaining activities, the multicultural festival addressed every need and was manageable for this small group. The group wanted to pair families with mentors from each child's culture, but realized it needed to build relationships with community groups before it took on this activity.



DEVELOPING A WORK PLAN

After you agree upon your primary activities, you will be able to devise a plan with specific action steps and deadlines. Throughout your group's life, you will want to use this planning process to translate your activities into manageable tasks.

Both the meetings and the festival that the Louisville Family Support Group wants to provide have their own set of tasks, with a mixture of short- and long-range deadlines. Below is a list of duties that will help the group make sure the meetings and the festival happen.

This partial list demonstrates the many responsibilities that go along with helping the group achieve its ultimate mission. Each task listed below includes many steps to ensure success. For example, whoever plans the entertainment for the festival will have to find performers that the group can afford, and find out what kind of staging and set up the performers will need. If it is an outdoor event, the group will need an alternative plan for rain.

Included on page 28 is a sample sheet to show how groups can take an activity that fits their mission and then assign tasks for group members to achieve within an established time frame.

DIVIDING THE WORK

Once your group is invested in its mission and agrees on activities, take time to ask each person to commit to helping the group succeed. Find out the talents of your membership and rely on people accordingly. Ask volunteers to lead or co-lead committees, organize activities, and recruit members to do various tasks. Most importantly, share the duties to keep the work fun and stay energized.

TRACKING YOUR PROGRESS

The final stage of your planning process is deciding how you know if your activities are addressing the needs you identified. Think about questions you can ask your members (or participants) to determine if you are making the difference you wanted to make.

You will want to collect information that:

- describes the benefits or services members receive
- rates the quality of those services
- allows members to offer suggestions for improvement
- opens discussion of new ideas

Your group then needs to tabulate the results and make sense of the collected information. The feedback you receive becomes part of your group's ongoing planning work. If you see low participation, for example, you need to re-check whether individual needs have changed or your activities are not meeting the needs as you expected.

Group Meetings

- recruit transracial adoptive families (ongoing)
- keep an updated membership list with phone and address information (ongoing)
- locate and secure meeting space (2-3 months before)
- find guest speakers (1-3 months before)
- plan activities/materials for meetings (1-2 months before)
- publicize the meetings (1 month before)
- assign someone to facilitate the meeting (1 month before)
- plan for child care and activities (1 month to 1 week before)
- provide snacks (one day before)

Festival

- partner with individuals and organizations representing a variety of racial and cultural communities (1 year before)
 - elect co-chairs (1 year before)
 - solicit donated prizes (throughout the year)
 - plan publicity (6 months before)
 - invite community celebrity guest (3-6 months before)
 - plan entertainment (3-6 months before)
 - plan activities (3 months before)
 - plan food (3 months to the day before)
 - set up booths (the day before)
-

You should collect data in three areas:

1. the number of services you offer and the number of children, parents, or families that use and benefit from your group's services (See sample forms on pages 29, 30, and 31.)
2. the quality of the services your group provides (Did participants like the services? Would they recommend them to others?)
3. the results of your services (Did the services help a family obtain needed resources? Did the services help families avoid disruption?)

Not only do you want to provide services that show high attendance or use, but you want to make sure that families benefited from the services. A group that offers monthly meetings and an annual multicultural festival, for example, could collect data on the number of children and parents who attended each meeting and the annual festival.

In addition, the group could seek information about how the festival or meetings helped enhance children's racial or cultural identity. After the festival, leaders might ask older children to describe any changes in their cultural understanding. Parents might be asked to identify new tools they have to combat discrimination on behalf of their children. As a group, your job is to ask questions that determine if your activities are making the difference you hoped to make.

WAYS TO GATHER INFORMATION FOR GROUP EVALUATION

There are many ways to gather information and evaluate how effective your group is at accomplishing its goals. Below are some of the easiest approaches to incorporate into your plan:

- **Asking the group what they think**—Asking group members at the end of each session if the meeting was useful for them or if they are better able to handle their children's special needs is a simple form of evaluation. Asking if the time of the meeting is convenient or the facilitation was effective also helps evaluate how your group operates.
 - **Surveying participants, particularly after trainings, special events, or guest speakers, about the effectiveness of the event**—Surveys are a simple, quick way to find out if parents are learning what you hoped they would learn from participating in the event. The evaluation form on page 32 will take just a few minutes to complete but will provide data that will help you evaluate the group's process and effectiveness.
 - **Conducting individual interviews with a representative sample of participants**—Through 10- to 15-minute conversations with a few group members once or twice a year, you can learn things you might not hear at a group discussion. By selecting a few participants, you help ensure that what you hear is not simply one person's opinion. During interviews, you can learn about individual results and group process outcomes by asking group members if they have benefited from membership (reduced isolation, increased access to resources, found somewhere to turn in a crisis, etc.) and if they think the group is headed in the right direction.
-

GROUP TASKS (COMPLETED SAMPLE)

Mission: Louisville Family Support Group believes strong families are the foundation of the community and is committed to strengthening families by providing a network of support to transracially adopted children, their siblings, and parents.

Activity: Hold first of the monthly support group meetings (scheduled for November 15)

| Tasks | Person(s) Responsible | Begin Date | End Date | Outcome |
|--|-------------------------------|-------------|---|--|
| 1. Find a location for the group meeting | William Smith | September 1 | October 15 | Find a free, centrally located comfortable meeting space with child care area. |
| 2. Publicize the first meeting | Tanya Chang | October 1 | October 15 | Design, post, and mail flyer with pertinent meeting information throughout adoptive community. |
| 3. Arrange for refreshments | Lana Jackson | September 1 | November 15 | Secure donated refreshments. |
| 4. Arrange for child care for the meeting | Kim Lansing | September 1 | November 10 | Hire or find adult volunteers to provide child care. |
| 5. Plan content and facilitate the first meeting | Carolyn Stevens & Ron Woodrow | September 1 | November 1—planning November 15—facilitating | Plan an icebreaker activity and content for the meeting; decide who will facilitate. |

CONTACT TRACKING FORM

Use this form to track callers to your phone help line or other parents you help outside of group meeting time.

| Date of Contact | Name/Contact Info (address, phone, etc.) | Family Characteristics | Reason for Contact | Action Taken/ Service Provided | Follow Up? |
|--|--|---|---|--|--------------|
| 1st contact? <input type="radio"/> yes <input type="radio"/> no | <input type="radio"/> foster parent <input type="radio"/> adoptive parent <input type="radio"/> prospective adopter <input type="radio"/> kinship care provider <input type="radio"/> other _____ Children (ages, special needs, etc.): _____ | <input type="radio"/> child's behavior <input type="radio"/> wants info on adoption process <input type="radio"/> wants info on special need: <input type="radio"/> needs help with system <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | <input type="radio"/> invited to group <input type="radio"/> referred to services: <input type="radio"/> paired with buddy <input type="radio"/> gave written materials: <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | <input type="radio"/> call back by (date): _____ <input type="radio"/> do research on: _____ <input type="radio"/> add to mailing list <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | notes: _____ |
| 1st contact? <input type="radio"/> yes <input type="radio"/> no | <input type="radio"/> foster parent <input type="radio"/> adoptive parent <input type="radio"/> prospective adopter <input type="radio"/> kinship care provider <input type="radio"/> other _____ Children (ages, special needs, etc.): _____ | <input type="radio"/> child's behavior <input type="radio"/> wants info on adoption process <input type="radio"/> wants info on special need: <input type="radio"/> needs help with system <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | <input type="radio"/> invited to group <input type="radio"/> referred to services: <input type="radio"/> paired with buddy <input type="radio"/> gave written materials: <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | <input type="radio"/> call back by (date): _____ <input type="radio"/> do research on: _____ <input type="radio"/> add to mailing list <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | notes: _____ |
| 1st contact? <input type="radio"/> yes <input type="radio"/> no | <input type="radio"/> foster parent <input type="radio"/> adoptive parent <input type="radio"/> prospective adopter <input type="radio"/> kinship care provider <input type="radio"/> other _____ Children (ages, special needs, etc.): _____ | <input type="radio"/> child's behavior <input type="radio"/> wants info on adoption process <input type="radio"/> wants info on special need: <input type="radio"/> needs help with system <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | <input type="radio"/> invited to group <input type="radio"/> referred to services: <input type="radio"/> paired with buddy <input type="radio"/> gave written materials: <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | <input type="radio"/> call back by (date): _____ <input type="radio"/> do research on: _____ <input type="radio"/> add to mailing list <input type="radio"/> other: _____ | notes: _____ |

MEETINGS AND ACTIVITIES (COMPLETED SAMPLE)

Use this form to track attendees and major happenings at each group meeting or event. The data can help you report to funders, determine future plans, and track your group's participants.

MEETING/ACTIVITY

meeting event (check one)

Date: 11/4/2002

Presenter (if any): Dr. Sylvia Manners

Meeting facilitator(s): Jane Green

Brief description (meeting, workshop, special event, topics covered, etc.):

special presentation on attachment disorder

Purpose: help parents who have adopted children with attachment problems

Key points of discussion: techniques for increasing attachment, strategies for handling challenging behavior, print and online resources related to attachment

Decisions made (if any): offer workshop to other adoptive parents on this topic, develop resource library on attachment

PARTICIPANTS

37 total number of participants

6 new members/participants

Indicate the number of each type of attendees/participants (some participants may fit in several categories):

22 adoptive parents

15 foster parents

3 kinship care providers

5 prospective adopters

 prospective foster parents

 adopted children

 adopted teens

 other children/teens

2 adoption/foster care professionals

FOLLOW UP

Describe any follow-up tasks, people responsible, and deadlines:

| Step | Person Responsible | Deadline |
|--|----------------------------|-------------------|
| <u>tabulate evaluation forms</u> | <u>Tyrone</u> | <u>11/12/2002</u> |
| <u>send thank you to Dr. Manners w/ eval results</u> | <u>Tyrone</u> | <u>11/19/2002</u> |
| <u>plan workshop on attachment</u> | <u>Joanne, Paul, Chris</u> | <u>12/20/2003</u> |
| <u>develop resource library on attachment issues</u> | <u>Wendy</u> | <u>3/31/2003</u> |

MEETINGS AND ACTIVITIES

Use this form to track attendees and major happenings at each group meeting or event. The data can help you report to funders, determine future plans, and track your group's participants.

MEETING/ACTIVITY

meeting event (check one)

Date: _____

Presenter (if any):

Meeting facilitator(s):

Brief description (meeting, workshop, special event, topics covered, etc.):

Purpose:

Key points of discussion:

Decisions made (if any):

PARTICIPANTS

_____ total number of participants

_____ new members/participants

Indicate the number of each type of attendees/participants (some participants may fit in several categories):

_____ adoptive parents

_____ foster parents

_____ kinship care providers

_____ prospective adopters

_____ prospective foster parents

_____ adopted children

_____ adopted teens

_____ other children/teens

_____ adoption/foster care professionals

FOLLOW UP

Describe any follow-up tasks, people responsible, and deadlines:

Step

Person Responsible

Deadline

| Step | Person Responsible | Deadline |
|-------|--------------------|----------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |

TRAINING SURVEY

Name of training: _____ Date: _____

Instructions to trainees: We would like to know how you feel about the training. *Your responses are very important to us.* Please rate the training by placing an X in the boxes that most accurately reflect your feelings, and then completing the statements below.

| | Poor | OK | Good | Very Good | Exceptional | No Opinion |
|--|------|----|------|-----------|-------------|------------|
| Presenter(s)' knowledge of topics presented | | | | | | |
| Presenter(s)' ability to communicate in a clear and understandable fashion | | | | | | |
| Presenter(s)' ability to respond to questions | | | | | | |
| Presenter(s)' ability to involve the audience | | | | | | |
| Usefulness of training materials and handouts | | | | | | |
| Comfort of meeting room | | | | | | |
| Selection of topics presented | | | | | | |
| Quality of networking opportunities | | | | | | |

The most useful information presented was _____

As a result of this training, I am better able to _____

What comments or suggestions for improvements do you have about this training? _____

What would you like to see covered at future trainings? _____

Other comments _____

I am (please check all that apply): foster parent adoptive parent prospective adopter
 kinship care provider prospective foster parent adoptee child welfare professional
 other _____

chapter ★ five

MANAGING GROUP MEETINGS

All leaders want to run successful, productive group meetings. Yet there isn't a leader who hasn't wondered: What's wrong with our meetings lately? How can I move the discussion along? How can I help quiet members speak up? How can we get back on track? Successful meetings don't just happen. Meetings that are productive are usually led by someone who has good facilitation skills.

Facilitation is the act of making something easier. In the case of parent group meetings, facilitation is the art of guiding the group's discussions and protecting the structure of the meetings to help the group be as effective, efficient, and productive as possible. Well-facilitated groups usually communicate better, maintain their vital energy, and achieve their goals.

There are three main elements to being a good facilitator:

- understanding group process
- guiding discussion
- structuring the meeting

One or more members of the group may have skills as a facilitator. It is important to use the experience and talent of these members and have them model the facilitation process to others in the group. As members begin to better understand the role of the facilitator, the responsibility can be rotated from one member to another on a regular basis.

UNDERSTANDING GROUP PROCESS

HOW GROUPS MAKE DECISIONS

Many who have studied group decision-making have found that group interaction is not linear. Crowell and Scheidel, prominent scholars in the area of

group decision making, observed that as groups begin to discuss an issue, the discussion usually spirals out and away from the original point, but eventually circles back to a specific comment or anchor point that is related to the original point of discussion. The discussion usually continues to spiral out and circle back. Over time, the discussion reveals more anchor points, the flow of the discussion moves along, and the group makes progress in their collective thinking. In *Small Group Decision Making*, Aubrey Fischer notes that decisions are not just made but rather emerge from interaction among group members. This suggests that the spiraling quality of discussions is important because it allows various key ideas to emerge as the group talks.

The facilitator allows the group's discussion to flow, but then helps keep the discussion focused. An effective facilitator judges when the spiraling is on point and when members need to be reminded of the central topic. Good facilitators limit their talking time and are not dominant speakers. Below are some ways to envision the role of the facilitator.

GROUP MEMBERS' ROLES

Group members take on roles during meetings that can help the group work as collective decision-makers. In *Discussion in Small Groups: A Guide to Effective Practice*, Potter and Anderson state that even in newly formed groups, members either consciously or subconsciously negotiate for some combination of the following roles:

Task-oriented roles help the group complete its tasks:

- goal setter: defines or proposes goals
- information seeker and information giver

- opinion seeker and opinion giver
- elaborator: clarifies ideas
- evaluator: measures group progress against standards
- synthesizer: summarizes, suggests compromises

Group-oriented roles help to build group unity, cohesion, morale, and dedication:

- encourager: praises, builds the status of others
- mediator: harmonizes, focuses attention on issues
- tension reliever: provides humor, clowns, jokes
- follower: serves as audience for others
- group observer: focuses on group process/progress
- cathartic agent: gives expression to group feelings
- reality tester: compares actual results to desired outcomes/goals

Self-oriented roles focus on the individual rather than the group and can be harmful to a group:

- aggressor: builds own and minimizes others' status
- obstructor: blocks progress
- recognition seeker: seeks personal attention
- withdrawer: avoids meaningful participation
- competitor: tries to outdo others
- play person: avoids all serious activity

Identifying these roles, and noticing their presence or absence, can help the facilitator understand why communication is or is not working well. It is also important to value each of the task- and group-oriented roles listed above. A group that functions well will probably have representation from each of the task- and group-oriented lists. At any given time any one of them might be the role that leads the group to a solution. It is the interplay among the roles that is important to the group's ability to function.

HUMAN DYNAMICS

A group takes on the characteristics of its individual members to form its own unique identity. Any time you facilitate a group, you should be aware of the effects of human interaction. People bring their past (good and bad), personality, and style to the group. Outlined below are some human dynamics that can both enhance and inhibit group interaction. This list has been adapted from *The Zen of Groups*, by Hunter, Bailey, and Taylor.



QUICK REMINDERS FOR THE FACILITATOR

- be positive
- set ground rules
- engage everyone in the first 5–10 minutes
- have a beginning, middle, and end to each meeting
- be aware of yourself and others
- know that 10% of our communication is verbal and 90% is nonverbal
- accept that conflict is normal; work through it
- remain committed to the group process



Individual uniqueness—Each member has his or her own view of the world, which is expressed through thoughts, actions, beliefs, and cultural identity. The uniqueness of each individual makes the group rich but also often necessitates a deeper level of discussion to reach decisions.

Baggage—Individuals also bring biases, hopes, fears, and opinions based on their past, and this baggage can cause people to react to other group members. Baggage can also affect a person's ability to be open to others and be willing to see new possibilities.

Power—Always present, power is best when shared. People can possess different kinds of power: *personal*—based on personality or charisma; *assigned*—given by others; *positional*—based on a position of authority; *knowledge*—based on a specific expertise base; and *factional*—rising from a smaller group within a group.

Feelings—Feelings are important; they should be acknowledged. According to Hunter, Bailey, and Taylor, group members “should learn to have feelings, rather than be had by them.”

Trust and identity—Trust and identity are established and developed over time as group members share and work together. Groups that work in healthy ways to deal with feelings, leadership, and power will deepen their trust and develop a strong group identity.

Group purpose—Strong groups that have established some structure and good methods of communication seem better able to stay focused on their goals and maintain a clear purpose. Without a clear purpose, groups tend to fizzle out.

Withholding—If you are in a group meeting and something important comes to your mind, but you don't say it, you are withholding. People usually withhold out of fear, but when they conquer that fear and bring up the unspoken topic, it often deepens the trust in the group.

Conflict—Although conflict is normal, it does need attention and should be resolved. Conflict that is pushed aside and never dealt with will come back to haunt the group.

GUIDING DISCUSSION

As a result of the mixed dynamics, agendas, and interests involved in human interaction, facilitating a discussion requires careful thought about who is speaking how often and what topics the group most needs to address. Two occupations demonstrate the skills and artistry needed for facilitation:

Traffic cop—The facilitator intervenes during discussion by:

- prohibiting conversational traffic jams—too many people speaking at once
- giving the green light for one person to talk and the red light for others to stop and listen
- redirecting conversation when roadblocks appear

Orchestra conductor—Just as a conductor builds on the resources and talents of the individual orchestra members, so does the facilitator by:

- soliciting expertise from individuals (solos) or a cluster of members (trios, quartets)
- asking for more volume from quiet members and less volume from dominant members
- leading the group to seek harmony and stay in tune as they work collectively toward goals
- tracking the group rhythm and intervening to speed things up, slow things down, or change the beat
- stopping and redirecting the group when members are playing their own song



A SUCCESSFUL PARENT GROUP FACILITATOR:

- upholds structure and order at meetings
- honors the group process above his/her own personal needs or agenda
- values the contributions of all members as equal participants
- helps to identify key points of discussion as they emerge
- helps the group work through conflict
- is adaptable
- seeks balance in discussions
- draws out quiet members and manages members who tend to dominate the discussion
- redirects discussions that get off track
- asks the group to reassess its goals when the group is not making progress toward its stated goals
- is self-aware and self-accepting
- sees all interactions as relevant to the group process: what people say, what people do—including body language and side comments—and everything else that happens during the meeting



MONITORING WHO SPEAKS

Facilitators are supposed to encourage the participation of all group members and keep the conversation vital. Sometimes they have to direct not only who talks, but when that person talks. The following suggestions have been adapted from *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, by Kaner, Lind, Toldi, Fisk, and Berger.

Forming the line-up—At the beginning of the meeting, ask group members who have pressing issues to raise their hands. Assign each person a number, and call on them in order. This does not mean that others cannot speak, but it is a way to make sure the group gives time to those who have something important to discuss with the group. It is also a good way to keep one member from dominating the meeting.

TIPS FOR GROUPS THAT GET STUCK

Groups sometimes get locked or frozen in a topic or issue and seem unable to move through it. Unresolved personality conflicts, issues of control and power, and emotionally charged situations can cause groups to get stuck. Parent groups with members who are experiencing trauma, such as an allegation or a disruption, can sometimes get mired in those situations. It is extremely painful for a family to live through an allegation or a disruption, and sometimes the family's pain engulfs the group for several meetings.

THREE STEPS TOWARD RESOLUTION

- **Vent**—Allow the individual(s) to take time to vent at the first meeting after the initial crisis.
- **Problem solve**—Take time during the second meeting to work through the issues involved. The group can offer solutions to the situation.
- **Seek outside help**—By the third meeting, pull the individuals aside who are unable to move through the crisis and suggest that they find some outside assistance to help them manage the situation.

The group is there to help individuals, but also has a larger purpose and should be allowed to move forward toward its broader goals.

Encouraging—When you are often hearing from the same people, you can ask, “Is there someone else who has something to add?”

Balancing perspective—When you want more than one side of an issue, you can ask the group, “Does anyone have another way of looking at this?”

Making space—Learn how to recognize facial expressions, body language, and other clues to help you know when to help individuals who haven't spoken yet, but look like they have something important to contribute. You can say, “Ron, you look like you have a reaction to that comment. What would you like to say?”

CHOOSING TOPICS

As groups become involved in discussion, the conversation can veer off in many different directions. The facilitator then helps the group see how and when it got off track and asks the group to make a conscious decision regarding which direction it

wishes to pursue. Below are strategies for how to redirect the group.

Sequencing—When the group discusses several issues at the same time, the facilitator identifies the various topics and suggests an order in which to discuss them. For example: “You are talking about planning the cultural fair, selling tickets, and publicity. Let's plan the event first, then discuss publicity. If we have enough time at the end of this meeting, we'll talk about selling tickets.”

Tracking—Sometimes the facilitator needs to identify the different issues being discussed and write them down for the group. Once the group sees what the issues are, members can prioritize them, look for how they might relate to each

other, and either group them together or discuss one issue at a time.

Deliberate refocusing—Sometimes issues are discussed to death and the group needs to move on. A facilitator can say, “We have spent 20 minutes discussing family problems during the holidays. At the beginning of the meeting we set aside time to generate a list of ways the county could offer better post-adoption services. Should we move on to this topic?”

STRUCTURING THE MEETING

In addition to understanding the dynamics of groups and guiding discussion, a facilitator must provide structure to the group's interaction. Every meeting should have a definite beginning, middle, and end. The group decides on the structure for its meetings, and the facilitator upholds that structure. Each meeting should have an agenda to follow. The group needs to decide who sets the agenda. Is it the

president, a facilitator, the leadership circle, or the whole group? If one person is in charge of the agenda, can anyone add to it? What is the process for adding an item to the agenda?

Before the meeting begins, establish how much time individuals might need to discuss pressing issues. Make a list of who wants to talk, for how long, and in what order. Prioritize the time allotted to individuals and topics so that the meetings are productive, serve the members, and end on time.

Identify the facilitator at the beginning of each meeting. Designate a second person as the timekeeper, and a third to take notes during the meeting. The timekeeper monitors time spent discussing topics and works with the facilitator to help stop lengthy discussions and keep to the agenda.

BEGINNING

At the beginning of a meeting, group members experience a phase of social unease and awkwardness called primary tension. Often group members are unsure of how they will be treated by others, and the result is stilted and uncomfortable communication, which can take the form of:

- extreme politeness
- apparent boredom
- sighing and yawning
- soft and tentative speaking
- long pauses

The group will not be able to do its work until it breaks through this phase. Effective ways to break through tension are introductions, icebreaker activities, social time, and food.

Actively engaging all group members in the first 5 to 10 minutes of the meeting is important to breaking primary tension. Icebreakers can be a creative way to make introductions. For example, each member could name a book that describes their week, or tell a funny or touching anecdote about their kids. Many icebreaker ideas are listed in books on facilitation and on the Internet. Try new ideas for doing introductions; the energy of the group is stimulated when you vary the way you begin each meeting.

MIDDLE

The group focuses on business in the middle of the meeting, such as discussing a current family issue or a chosen topic, listening to an outside speaker, planning an event, or completing a project.

As facilitator, you will want to convey the message that the group is a safe place to talk about personal concerns. One way to do this is to establish ground rules for your meetings, such as:

- confidentiality—what is said in the group is not discussed outside the group
- punctuality—group members arrive and leave on time and agendas are followed
- willingness to learn—each member agrees to be coachable and not to stay purposely stuck in a problem
- respect—members will use words and actions that convey mutual respect
- mandatory reporter guidelines—define these guidelines and remind the group that some members may be mandated reporters. Any incident that falls under the requirements for a mandated reporter will need to be reported.

Ground rules allow all members to know what they can expect from the group, which helps to build trust. When the group writes ground rules, they become invested in them. Ground rules should be reviewed and displayed at each meeting, especially when the group has new members.

END

Providing closure for your meetings helps establish boundaries and keep the group's purpose clear. One idea for closing a meeting is to have members take turns selecting a poem to read. You can create a ritual with music, a drum beat, or gong to end the meeting. A closing that includes an evaluation of the group process for that meeting can also be helpful. Whatever you choose be sure to officially end the meeting. Members can still choose to stay after the meeting and talk.

chapter ★ six

BECOMING A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

If your group decides to provide more extensive services to your community, you will most likely need to find more sources of revenue. A group that incorporates and obtains tax-exempt status in the United States—under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code—can apply for grants from foundations and accept tax-deductible donations from individuals and organizations. (See information for how to become a nonprofit organization in Canada on page 45.)

The benefits of incorporating and obtaining federal tax-exempt status are:

- Donors to groups that have 501(c)(3) status can claim tax deductions on their gifts, which encourages them to make those contributions.
- The organization can apply for foundation grants.
- The organization is often taken more seriously by foundations, donors, and others.
- The organization can obtain nonprofit mailing privileges.
- Depending on the state, there may be exemptions from certain state taxes or sales taxes.
- Incorporating decreases the liability of individual members and officers.
- Incorporated groups can purchase insurance for members and officers.

MAKING THE DECISION

There is no right or wrong answer to the question of whether your group should become a nonprofit organization; it depends solely on the group's goals. If your group wishes to keep it simple—remaining a place where members talk out problems and help each other with parenting concerns—you may not need the benefits that nonprofit status offers. On the other hand, if your group is ready and eager to offer classes, set up a web site, publish a newsletter, or host a conference, you will most likely want to secure more revenue. Incorporating and obtaining 501(c)(3) status will open doors for greater funding to accomplish these goals.



ARE YOU READY TO BECOME A NONPROFIT?

- We are ready to offer services that will require initial fundraising.
- We are ready to do fundraising or apply for grants.
- We have enough group structure to identify officers and write bylaws and articles of incorporation.
- We have financial management procedures in place.
- Someone in our group is willing to manage all of the paperwork for the application process.



This chapter is meant to clarify the process for becoming a nonprofit tax-exempt organization. The information included here is by no means intended as legal advice. If you have any questions, contact a legal advisor.

GETTING HELP

Groups should decide whether or not they want to hire a lawyer to complete all the paperwork for incorporation and 501(c)(3) status. Some groups have a lawyer as a member who can help them, and some groups find a lawyer who is willing to do the work pro bono (for free). After looking at their limited budgets, many group leaders decide to prepare the paperwork themselves. It can be done—many leaders have successfully completed the process without assistance from a lawyer.

If you choose not to seek legal help but want more information, the following suggestions should help get you started:

- Go to your local law library (located at the county court house or in a law school) and ask the law librarian to help you find the state statute that governs the incorporation process.
- Call the general information number for your state government to determine which agency handles incorporation. In Minnesota, for example, it is the Secretary of State. Clerks can tell you where to get blank forms and possibly samples of completed documents.
- If you have access to the Internet you can also go to your state department's web site to find information on incorporation and bylaws. You can also get the federal guidelines at www.irs.gov and see examples of finished documents. Similar information is available at www.nonprofitlaw.com and from NACAC.

If you have questions during the process, don't hesitate to ask another group leader who has been through the process or contact NACAC.

GETTING ORGANIZED

To get started, your group will need to gather and create the following information:

- group name
- mission statement
- officers—president, vice president, secretary, treasurer
- board of directors



THREE STEPS TO BECOMING A NONPROFIT

1. Write, then file your group's articles of incorporation to become incorporated in your state. (Incorporating will formalize your group but will not enable it to receive tax-deductible donations. Donations won't be tax-deductible until you obtain 501(c)(3) status.)
2. Write your group's bylaws.
3. Complete and file IRS Form 1023 along with your group's articles of incorporation, bylaws, and the filing fee. This step should be completed within 15 months of becoming incorporated in your state.



- group goals: a plan of the activities or programs your group wants to do and a written narrative describing that plan
- financial information from the current year and the three preceding years; if the group has only been in existence for the past year—the current year plus projected finances for the next two years

Taking time to clarify who you are as a group, what your goals are, and how you want to accomplish those goals will help prepare your group for the paperwork required by your state and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). When your group completes the six points listed above, you will have brought together the information you need for the articles of incorporation and bylaws, as well as information you will later use to file for 501(c)(3) status.

NAME AND MISSION STATEMENT

You will need to name your group and create a mission statement if you haven't done so already. If you already have a name and mission statement, this is a good time to revisit both to make sure they reflect who you are and what you want to become.

Make sure your name reflects your mission—If you chose a name like *Park Avenue Parent Group* in the past, and now your group wants to serve the area beyond Park Avenue, you need to think of a name that has a broader scope and is not restricted

geographically. Maybe a name like *Midwest Adoptive Parent Association* is better suited to your group. If you started out as an adoption group and call yourself *Adoptive Families United*, but now include foster parents as members, you should think about changing your name. If you have any doubts about your name, now is the time to change it.

After your group agrees on its name you will need to call the agency in charge of incorporating to make sure that no other organization has the name you are considering. When you call, the clerk will only let you investigate a few names at a time, but you can have other group members call if you need to check multiple names.

Make sure your mission reflects who you have become. If you wrote a mission statement a few years ago and your group's services have changed or some of your values have changed, you will want to revisit your mission statement and change it to reflect your group now. For example, if your focus has shifted from serving parents to serving children or entire families, you may want to include that in your mission statement. Think this through carefully and make sure your mission statement does not describe who you used to be, but rather represents who you are presently, and who you want to be into the future.

ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES

Now is the time to generate a list of the group's current goals: the programs, training, and services the group now wants to provide. (See chapter 4 for more information on the planning process.) Maybe you want to write a newsletter or provide post-adoption training and workshops in your area. Think of the content of the workshops and the

TAKING YOUR GROUP TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Several years ago, a parent group in Ohio had great group attendance and families celebrated triumphs and helped each other work through problems. At the same time, something was missing for this group. In addition to helping its members, this group wanted to do more for their community, and the leaders realized any future services would take money.

The group incorporated, and then went through the process of obtaining nonprofit status. Since the group became a nonprofit organization, it has raised enough money to offer a regional conference on the African American family, host several adoption fairs, and provide workshops on transracial adoption and other topics. It has earned statewide respect and the group's leaders are often asked by Ohio's media and community to give their opinion on issues about adoption and African American children. Having formal nonprofit status really changed this group's services and position in the community.

audience you want to reach or how often you might publish a newsletter and how many pages it will be. Note that there are some restrictions on the activities that a nonprofit tax-exempt organization may engage in, such as lobbying, as outlined by the IRS. (See box on page 42.)

When you submit your application to the IRS, you will be required to provide a narrative describing the activities and the programs your group wants to provide with a brief analysis of how those activities fit the qualifications for tax-exemption. It is important to be as specific as possible.

OFFICERS

When you formalize your group, you will need to list the officers who will carry out the duties necessary to run your organization on your application form. Decide who will be the co-leaders or the president and vice president. You will also need someone to do the duties of a secretary and a treasurer. A president or vice president needs strong leadership qualities, while a successful secretary has good organizational and communication skills. The ideal treasurer is adept at setting up a system for recording financial transactions and tracking income and expenditures.

LOBBYING AS A NONPROFIT ACTIVITY

There are restrictions on the amount of time and money a nonprofit organization can spend on lobbying. According to the IRS, an organization seeking 501(c)(3) status “may not attempt to influence legislation as a substantial part of its activities and it may not participate at all in campaign activity for or against political candidates.” Legally a nonprofit organization can advocate for causes and educate the public without restriction. At the same time, nonprofits can only be involved in a minimal amount of lobbying (to influence the voting of legislators) and can only use a small percentage of the group’s budget for lobbying. The law, however, is vague about exactly what constitutes a small percentage.

If lobbying is one of your group’s goals and you want to avoid the vagueness of the law, or spend more time and money on lobbying, you can elect to come under the provisions of the 1976 lobby law and file IRS form 5768—*Election/Revocation of Election by an Eligible 501(c)(3) Organization to Make Expenditures to Influence Legislation*, at the same time the group files for 501(c)(3) status. Your group will be subject to tax on your lobbying activities. If you have further questions about lobbying, you can read about lobbying issues for tax-exempt charitable organization at www.irs.gov or seek the advice of a lawyer.

You may hear the word budget and think, “What budget? We don’t have a budget.” Look back over the past three years and think of the activities your group has done. Almost anything a group does costs some amount of money, even providing treats or child care for a meeting. Determine what your expenditures were and where the money came from to pay those bills. Gather this financial data and be ready to show your receipts for expenses. If members currently pay the bulk of your bills, this money is still considered part of the group’s income. Include donations made by friends or family. Membership dues are often another source of income for the group.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Your group will need to select board members to oversee the operation of your group when it becomes a nonprofit organization. According to the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, it is “the board’s responsibility to ensure the organization’s effectiveness, manage resources, and assess its own performance.” Determine the number of board members you will need (you should have a minimum of 5; always use an odd number to prevent ties), the election process, the number of board meetings per year, the length of a term (the IRS says no more than 10 years), and the number of terms allowed.

Officers are usually included as board members. When you begin to generate names of other possible board candidates, think of people from your community who have an interest in your mission, have talents to offer, and would be willing to donate their time. Clearly spell out to candidates the roles and responsibilities of serving on the board when you ask them to join.

If your group has only been in existence for one year, then identify expenditures for that year and project financial information for the next two years. See chapter 7 for more information on making a budget.

WRITING ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION

When you have completed the above-mentioned steps, you will be ready to write the articles of incorporation and file them with your state. The legal requirements and specific information that should be included in the articles varies from state to state. Fees can vary as well (about \$25 to \$100). The following information is usually found in articles of incorporation:

- name of the organization
- purpose for becoming a nonprofit—the group’s goals, programs, training, services, and the demographics of who will be served

- name of the principal agent and others willing to be incorporators—such as president, vice president, secretary, or treasurer
- address, county, and state where the president resides
- number of board members, including names and addresses
- dated signature of the principal or registered agent

When drafting your articles of incorporation you want to be sure to include the legal language that meets both state and federal requirements if your group is also going to apply for 501(c)(3) status. Sample articles of incorporation appear on page 46.

WRITING BYLAWS

Bylaws serve as a formal set of rules that regulate the affairs of an organization. When writing the bylaws your group can incorporate its own information into a template with the necessary legal language. Bylaws are filed with the IRS as a part of the 501(c)(3) application process and include:

- **Membership:** Describe the composition of your membership.
- **Meeting requirements:** Include when and how meetings occur, notice required for meetings, process for calling special meetings, quorum, or voting.
- **Board of directors:** Include how many members are on the board of directors, the election process, number of meetings per year, length of term, number of terms allowed, vacancies, voting procedures, officers, resignation, termination, and standing committees.
- **Fiscal management:** State when the fiscal year ends, name the officer or committee responsible for fiscal management, and policies governing the use of funds.
- **Amendments:** List your group's guidelines for amending the bylaws.

Sample bylaws begin on page 48. Check with your state to determine its specific rules related to bylaws.

FILING FOR TAX-EXEMPT STATUS

This final step—completing the IRS forms for tax-exempt status—is probably the most difficult part of the process. There are many questions to answer in the application form and it can seem overwhelming. Keep in mind that the IRS will understand that, as a new organization, some of what you write will be your best guess, especially information related to funding and budget.

To file for tax-exempt status you will need the following items from the IRS:

- **Publication 557—*Tax-Exempt Status for Your Organization*** explains rulings, regulations, and how to apply for 501(c)(3) status. This booklet helps you with application form 1023.
- **Form 1023—*Application for Recognition of Exemption Under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code*** is the actual application form. The form is 29 pages, but you will need to complete only 9 pages.
- **Form 872-C—*Consent Fixing Period of Limitation Upon Assessment of Tax Under Section 4940 of the Internal Revenue Code***. This form needs to be filled out in duplicate, signed, and sent in with Form 1023. It allows the IRS to give new groups five years to prove they will be publicly supported. Two copies of this form are contained within the 1023 application booklet, immediately following page 9.
- **Form 8718—*User Fee for Exempt Organization Determination Letter Request*** is a one-page form that determines your filing fee and provides space to attach your check. If your group's annual gross receipts are less than \$10,000, your fee is \$150, and if these receipts are more than \$10,000, your fee is \$500. This form should also be sent to the IRS along with Forms 1023 and 872-C.

- **Form SS-4—Application for Employer Identification Number** can be filed as soon as your group is incorporated. The Employee Identification Number (EIN) is a nine-digit number that the IRS assigns to your organization. Information you provide on the form establishes your business tax account. If you haven't previously applied for the number, write "applying for" in line 2 of Part I of Form 1023, and the IRS will assign your group a number and send you the form. Do not apply for an EIN more than once. Processing an EIN takes about 10 days. Banks require this number before an organizational account can be opened.

You can get Form 1023, along with hints for how to fill out each section of the application, at www.nonprofitlaw.com, www.irs.gov, or from NACAC.

The above forms should be filed within 15 months of incorporation if you want the tax-exempt status to apply back to the date of incorporation. (Double check the exact number of months for your state because this can vary.) The average processing time for Form 1023 is 100 days. Applicants who state in their description of activities that they publish a newsletter or brochures might be asked to send examples. To avoid any processing delay, it would be easier to include samples with your application.



BEFORE YOU SUBMIT YOUR COMPLETED APPLICATION:

- Use the checklist provided with the application to make sure all required information is included.
- Make photocopies of the completed forms. (The IRS will not return your originals.)
- Make sure you have attached the appropriate fee to your application or it will be considered incomplete and returned to you without being processed.
- Attach your state-approved articles of incorporation and bylaws.
- Have your principal or registered agent sign page one of Form 1023.



FUTURE STEPS

After you have sent in the federal forms and you have your EIN, there are some additional things you can do. Depending on your state, some may apply to you and others may not.

- Find out if you can apply for a sales tax exemption in your state (some states don't offer this). Start by calling your state's Department of Revenue.
- Before you do any individual solicitation of funds, check to see if you need to register as a charity in your state (some states require it) and how it might benefit your group. Check to see if there is a "charities division" in your state Attorney General's Office or look for the state office that oversees charities in your state. If you find you need to register as a charity, you may have to pay a registration fee and complete an application form.
- If your group will have paid employees, your organization can file for workers' compensation insurance and unemployment insurance. Check with the economic security or labor department in your state for information on how to apply.
- You may also want to call the US Postal Service in your state for information on how to apply for a bulk mail permit.
- All 501(c)(3) organizations must annually file Federal Form 990, *Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax*, with the IRS and the state Attorney General's Office five and a half months after the end of the organization's fiscal year.

NONPROFIT STATUS IN CANADA

INCORPORATION

Parent groups in Canada can incorporate at the provincial or federal level. Although most groups incorporate provincially, groups that serve all of Canada incorporate federally. The advantages of incorporating are:

- structure to guide internal decision-making
- ability to enter into contracts
- protection of individual members from liability
- potential access to more funding
- access to loans through use of corporation's assets
- bylaws set guidelines to help keep membership active and effective

Total fees for incorporating, whether you incorporate provincially or federally, usually do not exceed \$300.

CHARITABLE STATUS

Parent groups need to decide whether registering for charitable status will be beneficial to them. The benefits are:

- exemption from paying income tax
- the right to issue official donation receipts to donors
- greater ability to obtain grants from private foundations, the government, and others

To apply for charitable status under the Income Tax Act, groups must register with Revenue Canada. There are four categories the courts have defined as charitable purposes:

- relief of poverty
- advancement of religion
- advancement of education
- of a charitable nature (similar to above categories but beneficial to the community as a whole)

Advocacy groups in support of controversial issues are not considered charitable by law.

An organization can apply to become a charity whether it is incorporated or not. If the organization is not incorporated, it must operate under the guidelines of a constitution that explains its structure and purpose.

Some organizations are considered a charity under provincial law, even if they are not registered with Revenue Canada. These organizations are subject to the provincial laws governing their activities, and are entitled to certain legal and tax privileges. These provincial laws also impose certain filing requirements and record-keeping obligations. Check to see if your group would be considered a charity under the laws of your province.

For information on how to incorporate provincially (except for Nunavut) or federally, or how to register as a charity go to: <http://cap.ic.gc.ca/english/8910.htm>. If you do not have Internet access or want Nunavut guidelines, contact the Adoption Council of Canada at 888-54-ADOPT or NACAC for more information.

SAMPLE ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION

Use the information below as a model, but be sure to check on your state's requirements. If you have any doubts or questions, contact a legal advisor. These materials have been adapted from materials produced by the Minnesota Council on Nonprofits and www.nonprofitlaw.com. Items in capital letters indicate where you insert information specific to your group. (Please note that these bylaws are designed for U.S. corporations. Canadian groups may need to use different language.)

This paragraph may vary depending on your state. Check for individual legal requirements.

States vary on who may serve as registered agent. The registered agent will receive all correspondence from the state. If your group doesn't have a location, list the address of your registered agent. The address must be a street address, not a P.O. Box.

The first paragraph contains language required by the IRS, while the rest is about your group's particular mission and purpose.

This language is required by the IRS to obtain tax-exempt status.

ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION OF NAME OF ORGANIZATION

The undersigned incorporator(s) is (are) of legal age and adopt(s) the following articles of incorporation to form a nonprofit corporation pursuant to the State Nonstock Corporations Act.

ARTICLE 1 – NAME

The name of the corporation is NAME OF GROUP.

ARTICLE 2 – REGISTERED AGENT/ADDRESS

The registered agent is NAME, who is a resident of STATE and a director of the corporation, and the principal office of the corporation is located at ADDRESS OF GROUP.

ARTICLE 3 – PURPOSE

This corporation is organized and will be operated exclusively for charitable, religious, educational, and scientific purposes as specified in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, including for such purposes, the making of distributions to organizations that qualify as exempt organizations under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, or the corresponding section of any future federal tax code.

Specifically, the purpose of the corporation is to:

- ITEMIZE THE MAJOR PURPOSES OF THE GROUP (SUCH AS SUPPORT ADOPTIVE PARENTS AND ADOPTED CHILDREN, RECRUIT ADOPTIVE PARENTS FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE, ETC.)

ARTICLE 4 – EXEMPTION REQUIREMENTS

At all times, the following conditions will restrict the operations and activities of the corporation:

1. No part of the net earnings of the organization shall inure to the benefit of, or be distributable to its members, trustees, officers, or other private persons, except that the organization shall be authorized and empowered to pay reasonable compensation for services rendered and to make payments and distributions in furtherance of the purpose set forth in Article 3.
2. No substantial part of the activities of the corporation shall constitute the carrying on of propaganda or otherwise attempting to influence legislation, or any initiative or referendum before the public, and the corporation shall not participate in, or intervene in (including by publication or distribution of statements), any political campaign on behalf of, or in opposition to, any candidate for public office.

Having voting members is optional. If you do not want voting members, simply state that the corporation will not have members.

Check with your state about the minimum number of board members required by law. Groups typically start with a small board, and then increase the number of members at the first board or annual meeting.

This statement can help directors avoid personal liability if the organization is run reasonably and legally. Directors can be held liable for debts to the IRS, debts due to fraud, or employment claims. Directors and officers insurance further protect board, staff, and volunteers.

Check with your state on the number of incorporators required by law and the minimum age of incorporators. Incorporators can be anyone willing to state that they want the organization incorporated, but often are members of the initial board of directors.

3. Notwithstanding any other provisions of this document, the organization shall not carry on any other activities not permitted to be carried on by an organization exempt from federal income tax under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code or corresponding section of any future tax code.

ARTICLE 5 – MEMBERSHIP

This corporation will have members. The eligibility, rights, and obligations of the members will be determined by the organization's bylaws.

ARTICLE 6 – BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The management of the affairs of the corporation shall be vested in a board of directors, as defined by the corporation's bylaws. No director shall have any right, title, or interest in or to any property of the corporation.

The number of directors constituting the initial board of directors is NUMBER OF INITIAL BOARD MEMBERS; their names and addresses are as follows:

LIST NAME AND ADDRESS OF EACH BOARD MEMBER

Members of the board of directors shall be those individuals elected, from time to time, in accordance with the bylaws.

ARTICLE 7 – PERSONAL LIABILITY

No member, officer, or director of this corporation shall be personally liable for the debts or obligations of this corporation of any nature whatsoever nor shall any of the property of the members, officers, or directors be subject to the payment of the debts or obligations of this corporation.

ARTICLE 8 – DURATION/DISSOLUTION

The duration of the corporate existence shall be perpetual until dissolution.

Upon dissolution of the organization, assets of the corporation shall be distributed for one or more exempt purposes within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, or corresponding section of any future federal tax code, or shall be distributed to the federal government, or to a state or local government, for a public purpose.

ARTICLE 9 – INCORPORATORS

In witness whereof, we the undersigned have hereunto subscribed our names for the purpose of forming the corporation under the laws of NAME OF STATE, and certify we executed these articles of incorporation this DATE.

Signature (NAME OF INCORPORATOR 1)

Signature (NAME OF INCORPORATOR 2)

Signature (NAME OF INCORPORATOR 3)

SAMPLE BYLAWS

Use the information below as a model, but be sure to check your state's requirements and think about your group's wishes. If you have any questions, contact a legal advisor. These materials have been adapted from materials produced by www.nonprofitlaw.com and the Minnesota Council on Nonprofits. Items in capital letters indicate where you insert information specific to your group. (Please note that these bylaws are designed for U.S. corporations. Canadian groups may need to use different language.)

Your purpose statement here may be more detailed than in the articles of incorporation. When amended, bylaws do not need to be filed, so they can be amended more frequently.

You should decide whether or not to have voting members. If you have no voting members, omit Article 2.

If you do choose to have voting members, consider membership eligibility (adoptive parents, business owners, etc., who support the organization's purposes) and procedures. Before you describe your quorum (2.6), check to see if your state sets forth any requirements.

If you choose to have different levels of membership, add a section like: Classes. There shall be two classes of members: individual/family or corporate.

If you do not choose to have members elect the board of directors and officers, amend section 2.6 and include information about the board electing its membership in section 3.2 and 4.2.

It is reasonable to require 5 or 10 percent of members to call a special meeting.

BYLAWS OF YOUR GROUP

ARTICLE 1 – NAME AND PURPOSE

Section 1.1. Name. The name of the organization is YOUR GROUP.

Section 1.2. Purpose. The Corporation is organized for the charitable and educational purposes of YOUR PURPOSES.

ARTICLE 2 – MEMBERS

Section 2.1. Eligibility. Application for voting membership shall be open to MEMBERSHIP STANDARDS.

Section 2.2. Qualifications. Membership may be granted to any individual or corporation that supports the mission and purposes of the organization, and who pays the annual dues as set by the board of directors.

Section 2.3. Termination of Membership. The board of directors, by affirmative vote of two-thirds of all of the members of the board, may suspend or expel a member, and may, by a majority vote of those present at any regularly constituted meeting, terminate the membership of any member who becomes ineligible for membership, or suspend or expel any member who shall be in default in the payment of dues.

Section 2.4. Resignation. Any member may resign by filing a written resignation with the secretary; however, such resignation shall not relieve the member so resigning of the obligation to pay any dues or other charges theretofore accrued and unpaid.

Section 2.5. Dues. Dues for members shall be established by the board of directors.

Section 2.6. Meetings and Voting. The annual membership meeting shall be held in MONTH each year. A minimum of 10 percent of the members present in person or by proxy shall constitute a quorum for transaction of business at a membership meeting. At the annual meeting, the members shall elect directors and officers, receive reports on the group's activities, and plan activities for the following year.

Special meetings may be called by the president or at the written request of at least NUMBER percent of the members. Notice of meetings shall be given to each voting member, by mail, e-mail, telephone, or other delivery method, not less than two weeks before the meeting.

All issues to be voted on shall be decided by a simple majority of those present at the meeting during which the vote takes place.

Section 2.7. Non-Voting Membership. The board shall have the authority to establish and define non-voting categories of membership.

ARTICLE 3 – BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Section 3.1. Authority of Directors. The board of directors is the policy-making body and may exercise all the powers and authority granted to the corporation by law. The board delegates responsibility for day-to-day operations to the staff and committees.

Section 3.2. Number and Tenure. The board shall consist of not less than NUMBER directors. Each director shall hold office for a term of NUMBER years, but is eligible for re-election for up to NUMBER terms.

Section 3.3. Vacancies. New directors and current directors shall be elected or re-elected by the voting representatives of members at the annual meeting. Directors will be elected by a simple majority of members present at the annual meeting. Vacancies existing by reason of resignation, death, incapacity, or removal before the expiration of a member's term shall be filled by a majority vote of the remaining directors. In the event of a tie vote, the president shall choose the succeeding director. A director elected to fill a vacancy shall be elected for the unexpired term of that director's predecessor in office.

Section 3.4. Resignation/Termination. Resignations are effective upon the secretary's receipt of written notification. A board member shall be terminated from the board due to excess absences (more than NUMBER of unexcused absences from board meetings in a year). A board member may be removed for other reasons by a SOME HIGH PERCENTAGE vote of the remaining directors.

Section 3.5. Meetings. The board of directors shall hold at least NUMBER regular meetings per calendar year. Meetings shall be at such dates, times, and places as the board shall determine. Special meetings may be called by the president, or by vote of SOME PERCENTAGE of the board members.

Section 3.6. Notice. Meetings may be called by the president or at the request of any two directors by notice e-mailed, mailed, telephoned, or otherwise delivered to each member of the board not less than 10 days before such meeting.

Section 3.7. Quorum. A quorum shall consist of a majority of the board attending in person or through teleconferencing. All decisions will be by majority vote of those present at a meeting at which a quorum is present. If less than a majority of the directors is present at said meeting, a majority of the directors present may adjourn the meeting on occasion without further notice.

Section 3.8. Action without a Meeting. Any action required or permitted to be taken at a meeting of the board of directors (including amendment of these bylaws), or of any committee may be taken without a meeting if all the members of the board or committee consent in writing to taking the action without a meeting and to approving the specific action. Such consents shall have the same force and effect as a unanimous vote of the board or of the committee as the case may be.

Section 3.9. Participation in Meeting by Telephone. Members of the board may participate in a meeting through use of conference telephone or similar communications equipment, so long as members participating in such a meeting can hear one another.

Section 3.10. Reimbursement. Directors shall serve without compensation with the exception that expenses incurred in the furtherance of the corporation's business

Specify the number of board members you will have and the length of their terms. Some states require a certain number of members or limit members' terms, so check local laws.

If you have chosen to have the board select other board members, modify this section.

Consider including an absentee policy such as this one so that directors are aware of their need to commit to your parent group's effective operations.

Most states require at least one meeting per year. You can decide how many members (such as 20 percent or one-third) must be in agreement in order to call a special meeting.

Some states set minimum notice laws.

Check to see if your state has any rules about what constitutes a quorum, and then decide if you would like to set the standard even higher. It is reasonable to require that half of the board be present for action to take place.

In many states, action without a meeting—such as vote by board ballot—must be unanimous. Check local laws.

are allowed to be reimbursed with documentation and prior approval. In addition, directors serving the organization in any other capacity, such as staff, are allowed to receive compensation in that capacity.

Section 3.11. Conflict of Interest. The board shall not enter into any contract or transaction with: (1) one or more of its directors, or (2) an organization in which a director is an officer, or legal representative, or in some other way has a material financial or professional interest unless:

- that interest is disclosed or known to the board of directors;
- the board approves, authorizes, or ratifies the action in good faith; and
- the approval is by a majority of directors (not counting the interested director) at a meeting where a quorum is present (not counting the interested director).

The interested director may be present for discussion to answer questions, but may not advocate for the action to be taken, and must leave the room during deliberations and voting. The minutes of all actions taken on such matters shall clearly reflect that these requirements have been met.

Section 3.12. Paid Staff. The board of directors may hire such paid staff as they deem proper and necessary for the operations of the corporation. The powers and duties of the paid staff shall be as assigned or as delegated to be assigned by the board.

ARTICLE 4 – COMMITTEES

Article 4.1. Committee Formation. The board of directors may, by a resolution adopted by a majority of the directors in office, establish committees of the board composed of at least NUMBER persons which, except for an executive committee, may include non-board members. The board may make such provisions for appointment of the chair of such committees, establish such procedures to govern their activities, and delegate to them the authority necessary or desirable for the efficient management of the property, business, and activities of the corporation.

Article 4.2. Executive Committee. The four officers serve as members of the executive committee. Except for the power to amend the articles of incorporation and bylaws, the executive committee shall have all the powers and authority of the board of directors in the intervals between meetings of the board of directors, and is subject to the direction and control of the full board.

Article 4.3. Finance Committee. The treasurer is the chair of the finance committee, which includes NUMBER other board members. The finance committee is responsible for developing and reviewing fiscal procedures, fundraising plans, and the annual budget with staff and other board members.

ARTICLE 5 – OFFICERS

Section 5.1. Officers. The officers of the corporation shall be:

President—The president shall be a director of the corporation and will preside at all meetings of the board of directors. The president shall perform all duties attendant to that office, subject to the control of the board of directors, and shall perform such other duties as on occasion shall be assigned by the board of directors.

At a minimum, you should have an executive committee (of the officers) and a finance committee. If your board will be selecting future board members, you should also have a board nominating committee.

Detailed financial procedures are spelled out in Article 7 on page 52.

Your group can decide on the number and type of officers, but check with your state law first. Many require at least a president and a secretary/treasurer. In their early days, some groups combine the functions of secretary and treasurer.

Some states have legal limits on the length of officers' terms.

Many states allow nonprofit organizations to indemnify their board and staff members in the event they are sued over their work for the organization. You may want to seek legal advice about this provision and its effects on the organization.

Vice President—The vice president shall be a director of the corporation and will preside at meetings of the board of directors in the absence of or request of the president. The vice president shall perform other duties as requested and assigned by the president, subject to the control of the board of directors.

Secretary—The secretary shall be a director of the corporation and shall keep the minutes of all meetings of the Board of Directors in the books proper for that purpose.

Treasurer—The treasurer shall report to the board of directors at each regular meeting on the status of the corporation's finances. The treasurer shall work closely with the finance committee and any paid executive staff of the corporation to ascertain that appropriate procedures are being followed in the financial affairs of the corporation, and shall perform such other duties as occasionally may be assigned by the board of directors.

Section 5.2. Appointment of Officers; Terms of Office. The officers of the corporation shall be elected by the board of directors at regular meetings of the board, or, in the case of vacancies, as soon thereafter as convenient. New offices may be created and filled at any meeting of the board of directors by a majority vote.

Terms of office may be established by the board of directors, but shall not exceed NUMBER years. Officers shall hold office until a successor is duly elected and qualified. Officers shall be eligible for reappointment.

Section 5.3. Resignation. Resignations are effective upon the secretary's receipt of written notification.

Section 5.4. Removal. An officer may be removed by the board of directors at a meeting, or by action in writing pursuant to Section 3.8, whenever in the board's judgment the best interests of the corporation will be served by the removal. Any such removal shall be without prejudice to the contract rights, if any, of the person so removed.

ARTICLE 6 – INDEMNIFICATION

Every member of the board of directors, officer, or employee of the corporation may be indemnified by the corporation against all expenses and liabilities, including counsel fees, reasonably incurred or imposed upon such members of the board, officer, or employee in connection with any threatened, pending, or completed action, suit, or proceeding to which she/he may become involved by reason of her/his being or having been a member of the board, officer, or employee of the corporation, or any settlement thereof, unless adjudged therein to be liable for negligence or misconduct in the performance of her/his duties. It is provided, however, that in the event of a settlement, the indemnification herein shall apply only when the board approves such settlement and reimbursement as being in the best interest of the corporation. The foregoing right of indemnification shall be in addition to and not exclusive of all other rights to which such member of the board, officer, or employee is entitled.

ARTICLE 7 – FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION

Your bylaws should include information about your financial procedures. Procedures may change over time as your group grows and has added financial responsibilities.

Financial procedures should be designed to protect the organization—for example, requiring two signatures on larger checks, or having one person write checks and another balance the books.

Nonprofits may hold investments and may accumulate a surplus. Some groups hold a year's operating expenses in investments.

State laws often require that certain records be kept at a nonprofit's headquarters, or that certain records be made available to the public. Federal law requires nonprofits to make available to the public their IRS Form 1023 and their recent IRS Form 990s.

Bylaws are changed regularly to keep up with changes in the corporation's operation—changes in fiscal year, number/term of board members, etc.

Some groups that start having voting members select the board grow large enough to make this unwieldy, and change their bylaws so that the board elects its successors.

Section 7.1. Fiscal Year. The fiscal year of the corporation shall be January 1–December 31 but may be changed by resolution of the board of directors.

Section 7.2. Checks, Etc. All checks, orders for the payment of money, bills of lading, warehouse receipts, obligations, bills of exchange, and insurance certificates shall be signed or endorsed by such officer or officers or agent or agents of the corporation and in such manner as shall from time to time be determined by resolution of the board of directors or of any committee to which such authority has been delegated by the board.

Section 7.3. Deposits and Accounts. All funds of the corporation, not otherwise employed, shall be deposited from time to time in general or special accounts in such banks, trust companies, or other depositories as the board of directors or any committee to which such authority has been delegated by the board may select, or as may be selected by the president or by any other officer or officers or agent or agents of the corporation, to whom such power may from time to time be delegated by the board. For the purpose of deposit and for the purpose of collection for that account of the corporation, checks, drafts, and other orders of the corporation may be endorsed, assigned, and delivered on behalf of the corporation by any officer or agent of the corporation.

Section 7.4. Investments. The funds of the corporation may be retained in whole or part in cash or be invested and reinvested on occasion in such property—real, personal, or otherwise—or stock, bonds, or other securities, as the board of directors in its sole discretion may deem desirable and which are permitted to organizations exempt from federal income taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

ARTICLE 8 – BOOKS AND RECORDS

Correct books of account of the activities and transactions of the corporation shall be kept at the office of the corporation. These shall include a minute book, which shall contain a copy of the certificate of incorporation, a copy of these bylaws, and all minutes of meetings of the board of directors.

ARTICLE 9 – AMENDMENT OF BYLAWS

These bylaws may be amended by a majority vote of the board of directors, provided prior notice is given of the proposed amendment in the notice of the meeting at which such action is taken, or provided all members of the board waive such notice, or by unanimous consent in writing without a meeting pursuant to Section 3.8.

These bylaws were approved (or amended) at a meeting of the board of directors on DATE.

chapter ★ seven

FINANCIAL PLANNING AND FUNDRAISING

A challenge common to most parent groups is that of finding and keeping a secure funding base. Parent groups that want to provide services and programs to their members and the broader community need money, and therefore need a financial strategy. Taking the time to develop a financial plan is imperative for any group. The financial plan, however, should always grow from the program planning you do. Think about your financial needs and goals in terms of what you want to do with the money you seek.

DEVELOPING A BUDGET

The first step toward sound financial planning is to make a budget. Even if your group operates on a small scale, you have an operational budget and you should know your financial status and begin to keep records of those finances. Even if your group wants to remain small, it is a good idea to determine:

- what your income is
- what your operating expenses are
- that you are aware of all the money you have
- that you are not spending more than you have
- that you can account for all the money

In larger groups, financial planning is more complex. Some groups may have a general overall budget, and program budgets for their annual cultural fair and for a series of workshops. Each program category may have its own budget of income and expenses. It is also possible for budgets to overlap, such as when income from the workshops pays the expenses for the cultural fair. You want to make sure you have enough income to at least cover your expenses and maybe even provide a reserve for future needs.

Start by making a budget that reflects your current situation. Then develop a budget that reflects the program goals your group has identified. Think about your group, its programs, activities, and future plans. Make a list of current sources of income for your group (including non-cash income such as donated goods and services) and indicate where the income comes from, the amount, and what it funds. Next, make a list of your expenses. If you have a number of services or programs, develop a budget for each one, and then combine them for your group's overall financial plan. Located on page 54 are two sample budgets—one for the whole group, another for one program.

KEEPING ACCURATE FINANCIAL RECORDS

As part of your financial plan, your group will need to keep accurate financial records. Consider asking a member of your group—preferably someone who has a background in accounting or has general business skills—to volunteer as the bookkeeper or treasurer. Be sure to include the list of products and services provided to your group at no cost, along with other income and expenses. If your group decides to apply for nonprofit status or is ever audited, you will be glad that you have kept accurate records of your financial information. Various financial planning books and software programs can help you organize your financial information and make recordkeeping easier to manage.

IDENTIFYING FUNDING SOURCES

After you have identified your program goals and a corresponding budget, you need to identify where the income will come from. Some sources will

SAMPLE BUDGETS

ANNUAL GROUP BUDGET

Expenses

| | |
|--|---------------|
| Staff Salary (half-time group coordinator) | 17,500 |
| Benefits (20% of salary) | 3,500 |
| Equipment (computer, printer) | 2,000 |
| Phone/E-mail/Web Hosting | 1,600 |
| Supplies (paper, furniture, treats, etc.) | 2,500 |
| Duplicating (copying, newsletter printing) | 5,000 |
| Meeting Space | 1,200 |
| Speakers Fees | 1,000 |
| Total | 34,300 |

Income

| | |
|--|---------------|
| Membership Dues | 1,000 |
| Donated Goods/Supplies (printing, meeting space) | 5,000 |
| Foundation Grants | 15,000 |
| Corporate Donations | 7,200 |
| Individual Donations | 2,000 |
| Workshop Fees | 4,000 |
| Special Events (bake sale, garage sale) | 2,000 |
| Total | 36,200 |
| Net | 1,900 |

ONE-DAY CONFERENCE BUDGET

Expenses

| | |
|---------------|--------------|
| Staff Time | 5,000 |
| Facility | 1,200 |
| Speakers Fees | 600 |
| Handouts | 800 |
| Food/Breaks | 1,500 |
| Total | 9,100 |

Income

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Registration Fees (100 @ \$30) | 3,000 |
| Donated Space | 1,200 |
| Corporate Donation | 2,000 |
| Foundation Grant | 3,000 |
| Sale of T-Shirts | 500 |
| Total | 9,700 |
| Net | 600 |

already exist, but others will require fundraising. A good fundraising program—for a newly formed group or an established group—needs to include diverse sources of possible income for your group. Below is a list of specific ways to raise support for your group:

- donated services and goods
- special events
- membership dues
- individual donations
- foundation/corporate support
- contract for services

The most common funding strategies are dues, donations, donated services and goods, and smaller special events. Applying for foundation and corporate grants is only possible for groups with tax-exempt status, because most grant-making organizations require applicants to have tax-exempt status. A newly formed group might even decide to apply for tax-exempt status as part of its fundraising plan. See chapter 6 for more information.

DONATED SERVICES AND GOODS

Parent groups often take advantage of situations where members or outside supporters volunteer time or offer free services, skills, or products. Below are a few suggestions for ways to save your dollars:

- Whenever possible, ask people to donate their time or services to your organization. One of your members (or a spouse, partner, or relative)

During your financial planning process, your group (and any interested members) should take the time to discuss answers to the following questions.

- What types of volunteer and donated resources are available to your group?
- Will your organization charge membership dues? If so, what will your rates be?
- Name three funding ideas that your organization has the ability to pull off this year. When is the best time to undertake each activity?
- List three organizations in your community that you can go to for assistance. Do you have any contacts within these organizations who could help?

who is an accountant can help with the books, a lawyer can help incorporate your group, or a writer can produce your group's newsletter.

- Teens often enjoy helping out by folding, stapling, addressing, mailing, babysitting, or delivering flyers.
- Members may ask at work to use the office copy machine for free or at a discounted rate. Some local businesses may be willing to donate the use of their copy machine if your group provides the paper, and still others are willing to provide office supplies at discounted rates.
- You can often have free event announcements placed in company, neighborhood, church, mosque, or synagogue newsletters.
- Many newspapers have a community section where groups can ask for donations such as computers, printers, and copiers.
- Merchants are often willing to donate goods and services to local charitable groups. For instance, if you are trying to organize a community event, contact your local grocery store. Ask if they can provide the food or donate gift certificates to raffle off or give as prizes.

Your group's financial records should include a dollar amount for the value of all donated services and

supplies. For example, if your group received donated space worth \$300, you would record the \$300 as both expense and income (donated goods and services). Accurate record-keeping of this type of in-kind donation will best reflect your actual operational budget and can help if and when you apply for nonprofit status and grants.

The sample letter on page 58 may help you compose a letter to request goods and services.

SMALL FUNDRAISERS

Fundraisers that typically produce a moderate return include

arts and craft shows, bake sales, dances, children's fashion shows, barbecues, picnics, and garage sales. Some groups ask local merchants for products that can be raffled at their fundraiser event. Others have a once-a-year raffle with a large prize such as a television or a weekend vacation. Check your local rules on charity raffles and auctions before you proceed.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Another way for your group to raise money is to hold large special events. Possible fundraisers include concerts, benefit dinners, magic shows, dances, and theater evenings. At such events, your group could also coordinate the sale of promotional pins, posters, cards, T-shirts, decals, or bumper stickers to raise money and advertise your group's mission. Silent auctions can enhance the fundraiser.

Although these events are time-consuming, especially for smaller groups, they can be a good way to bring the group together and draw in others from the community. It is a good idea to select a team to coordinate any big event so that the workload is spread out among several people. If there are individuals within the group's membership who possess skills you need, call on them to contribute their expertise at reduced fees or no charge.

SIMPLE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Parent groups can successfully take on any number of smaller, creative activities that raise funds as well as community awareness about adoption and foster care. Your group might:

- ask group members to host a traveling garage sale—unsold items from one week are moved to another member's garage for a future sale
- volunteer at concession stands during professional sporting events and earn a percentage (usually about 10 percent) of the total sales
- partner with related organizations to sponsor a booth at a large community festival
- staff a hot dog stand in the parking lot of a local grocery store—the store provides the supplies, the group provides the staff, and proceeds are split

On the other hand, you might think outside the box and host a non-event fundraiser. A Colorado adoption group recently held a non-event, sending out flyers to community members in the region that asked for a donation and promised no raffle tickets, no auctions, and no annual dinner. The flyer highlighted the fact that skipping the event reduced costs and ensured that all donations went directly to finding families for children who have special needs.

Another idea is to send donation request letters to individuals. These letters should include a brief history of your group, the mission, accomplishments, program goals, and needs. The letter should paint a compelling picture—with a family story if possible—of what you do to help vulnerable children and their families. Send the letter to your entire mailing list—including local therapists, school counselors, pediatricians, agencies, social workers, religious organizations, and your members. Even if they don't donate, you have made them aware of what your group is doing, and maybe they will give next time.

INDIVIDUAL DONATIONS

Sometimes asking for cash donations is the simplest, most efficient way to raise money. The greatest reward is when your group is handed a check without having to organize and sponsor a big event. Research local businesses and organizations in your area and find out which groups are interested in adoption or children with special needs. Compose a letter to invite them to donate to your general support or for a particular activity such as a workshop.

Your local Lions, VFW, Elks, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, and other service clubs are good contacts, as are local community leaders who have been touched by adoption. If there is a college or university in your area, include sororities and fraternities in your list of contacts. Some service organizations will help with fundraising events while others will contribute cash. Do your homework on what these organizations are interested in and know what you want to ask for before you contact them.

MEMBERSHIP DUES

Collecting membership dues is an excellent way to increase your income and build commitment among members. When deciding what amount to charge, it is wise to allow group members to have a voice in the decision, since people tend to support what they have helped create.

Generally:

- Dues should start out as a flat rate for all members.
- Dues should be sufficient to cover at least some of the ongoing operational expenses.
- Don't allow dues to keep anyone who cannot afford them from being a member.

Think creatively about membership with your group. In addition to including adoptive and potential adoptive parents, consider ways to attract outside community groups or organizations at various levels of commitment. Larger groups sometimes create different membership rate categories. The graduated membership rates can include varying products or privileges. Your group could build an incentive for membership by offering such things

as a specific number of newsletters, reduced rates for special events or classes, or other benefits.

FOUNDATION, CORPORATE, AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Your group may also choose to apply for grants from foundations or corporations, or seek grants or contracts from local, state/provincial, or federal agencies. Remember that tax-exempt groups will be best able to obtain funds from grantmakers.

Identifying Potential Funders

When you research potential funders, note each funder's geographical area, funding restrictions, and program priority areas.

- Identify past grants by reading grant guidelines, annual reports, or tax forms such as IRS Form 990-PF.
- Look for information that tells you what types of groups are eligible for funding, how and when to apply, and how funding decisions are made.
- Identify the type of programs the organization funds. Some grantmakers provide general operating support, others fund programs but not salaries, and others will fund only specific program areas.
- Check your local library for a guide to writing grant proposals and for an index of grantmakers. Develop a list of only those organizations that support projects similar to yours. One good resource is the Foundation Center, which offers

PROPOSAL OUTLINE

If you don't have detailed proposal guidelines to follow, consider using the following outline:

- **Introduction**—Very briefly explain your organization's mission, the basic nature of the program, and the outcomes you hope to accomplish.
- **Need/Statement of Problem**—Explain the community's needs, related statistics, personal stories, and other details that present a compelling picture of why your program is necessary.
- **Purpose/Objectives**—This section should include a description of the organization's goals, and how it relates to the impact the project will have. Include specific, measurable outcomes (15 families will have support, 20 children will find permanent families, etc.).
- **Approach/Work Plan**—This portion of the proposal should identify the services to be offered—how, when, and to whom—and why these services will achieve the outcomes described above.
- **Evaluation**—Include activities such as surveys, interviews, or focus groups that can help you make ongoing changes in the program while you operate it, and other activities to determine overall results of your work.
- **Qualification/Organization Experience**—This section allows you to describe your group and its ability to offer this program, as well as identify any staff who will work on the project.
- **Budget**—This section should include a detailed line-item budget (salaries, supplies, travel, equipment, printing etc.—see sample on page 54), a budget narrative, information about other current and potential sources of funding, and how you will continue the program into the future.

library collections with books and other materials that list private foundations and corporate giving programs. Contact the Foundation Center at www.fdncenter.org or 800-424-9836 for more information about proposal writing or the 200 Foundation Center library collections around the United States.

- Federal funds are sometimes available to adoptive parent groups for specific projects. Newsletters and web sites of national adoption organizations might provide information regarding this kind of opportunity.
- Your local United Way may also be a source of funds. Check its policy on adoptive parent groups.

Proposal Writing

To receive grants from foundations and many corporations, you will often have to write a grant proposal.

Below is a list of helpful hints to get you started:

- Request the funder's application guidelines. If possible, get the name of the contact person who handles your specific funding area.
- Follow the guidelines carefully—funders often want a short letter before they accept a full proposal.
- Ask if anyone in your group has written a grant proposal before or knows someone who has. These individuals may be able to provide your group with valuable advice or might even be willing to write the proposal.
- Write the proposal exactly the way the contact person or the guidelines state that it should be done. Some funders will send you a clear outline of things to include, but others will not. There are foundations that simply require grantees to submit a basic letter detailing the request. Other foundations and many government agencies require a formal application along with a detailed proposal.
- Pay attention to the foundation's deadlines. Some may be very specific, while others may make funding decisions on an ongoing basis.

SAMPLE LETTER TO REQUEST DONATED GOODS OR SERVICES

[date]

Dear *[contact name]*:

Michael turned 13 this fall. He and his sisters, Rosalyn and Alisha, have been waiting for a family to adopt them for more than a year. Each day in foster care they wonder if and when they will find a permanent mom or dad. Nationally, *[United States/Canadian figure]* foster children will never return to their birth parents, yet many wait years for the security of an adoptive family. This year *[organization/ group name]* is making a special effort to see that children like Michael find permanent homes. We need your help.

During November—National Adoption Awareness Month—we are sponsoring *[name or description of event]* to increase awareness about adoption and recruit families to adopt children who need homes. To accomplish our goals of building adoptive families, we need *[items such as paper or art supplies, brochure/ poster design, printing, or mailing services]*. By donating these items, you can play an important role in building a new family and changing a child's life. All donations are tax deductible.*

[Your group name] is a nonprofit organization composed of adoptive, foster-adoptive, and foster families, adopted persons, birth parents, adoption professionals, and other adoption advocates. We provide support to the adoption community, offer adoption education and advocacy services to the public, and *[personalized description of your services or mission]*.

Thank you for taking the time to review the enclosed information. *[name]* will contact you within a week to discuss the project in more detail. If you have any questions in the meantime, please contact *[name]* at *[phone number and e-mail address]*.

Sincerely,
*[name
title]*

**Note: Businesses can only deduct contributions made to registered nonprofit organizations.*

- Other things to keep in mind: never assume funders know anything about child welfare or adoption, keep your language simple, proofread your writing, and have someone outside of your group read your proposal and give feedback.

chapter ★ eight

REJUVENATING YOUR GROUP

A group is a living organism with a life of its own. Groups can become sick and die. They can heal and be renewed. They can even grow and mature to become something different than they started out to be. In order for a group to survive, the individuals within that group need to protect the life of the group. They need to listen to the rumblings within, pay attention to the outside forces, and take the necessary steps to keep the group healthy.

Not all groups have a long life. Some serve their purpose, and end quietly and gracefully. Some explode in discontent and scatter members in all directions. Some manage to continue to reinvent themselves, take in fresh ideas, attract new people, and remain energized. If a group has served its members and lived a good life, it may be okay to let it die. But what do members and leaders do when the group is floundering and no one wants it to die, but no one knows what to do?

It doesn't matter at what level a group operates—if the group achieves any kind of longevity, there will come a time when members will need to consciously plan for ways to rebuild the organization from within, rejuvenate membership and leadership, and refocus mission and energy. It takes a lot of energy to develop a group and to provide services to families. No matter how a group grows, it has to take care of its leadership and respond to its members' needs to remain effective and provide quality services to families.

BEING CREATIVE

Even if your group has found tried and true solutions to problems or has repeated efforts and events

that are popular with group members, always look for ways to be creative. Put a new twist in something you have done for years, and by all means try something different. When people tap into their creativity, their energy can spread and sometimes spark creativity in others. When group members tap deeper into their creative selves, obstacles to difficult problems can disappear. When that happens, your group drops its problem-focused mentality and becomes a solution-oriented group.

GROUPS THAT HAVE A LONG, PRODUCTIVE LIFE:

- tap into their **creativity**
 - work to build **community** among their members
 - see the **connectedness** in all human beings
-

RETAINING MEMBERS

Over time, many groups struggle with attendance. You can try a variety of strategies to keep members interested and engaged.

BUDDY SYSTEM

One program that has been successful for many groups is a buddy system. Leaders pair more experienced adoptive parents with new or prospective parents. The inexperienced member has someone to turn to for support, encouragement, parenting advice, and tips for how to successfully access services. Parents soon begin to share strategies and often trade child care. Sometimes the experienced parent can help the inexperienced parent negotiate the system. For exam-

NEWSWORTHY MEMBERS

A newsletter can give your group a built-in way to honor members and keep them connected. Parent groups have published:

- the names of group members who have welcomed a new adopted, foster, or birth child into their family
- a profile of a different family in each issue, including names, favorite foods, activities, pets, successes, and barriers overcome
- the names of each new group member—parents and children
- donations a family needs (a toy for a new toddler, musical instruments for a newly adopted teen, etc.) that other members might have available to donate or share

ple, if the newer parent is having difficulty getting services for his children, the experienced parent may have more inside information about how to access medical help or get results from social services.

Think about how you will pair families—geographic closeness, similar life experiences, etc. In addition to retaining members, the buddy system allows parents to form a close bond with others who have been through similar circumstances.

MENTORS

Assigning a mentor to new members is similar to a buddy system, but mentors can be assigned on a need basis, upon request, or to everyone for the first year. Either way, new members will feel more like remaining an active part of a group when there is a system in place that helps them feel valued and connected with other members.

PHONE TREES

Phone trees are simple ways for members to remind each other about future meetings and events. Each member is assigned a person to call or a team of people is assigned a list of people to call. Receiving a phone call from another member of the group can serve not only as a reminder of the meeting, but also as a reminder that each person is a valued member of the group.

One creative group tried a different phoning system when membership waned. The leaders asked a respected member of the group to call each member to announce a meeting to dissolve the group because of low attendance. The next meeting there was 100 percent attendance of concerned and motivated members. This idea proved to be effective, but can't be used often because members will likely consider it a false alarm.

VALUE YOUR MEMBERS' TALENTS

While it can sometimes be difficult to find people to take on a long-term leadership position, it is often easy to recruit people to offer their specific expertise or talent. Maybe you have an excellent web designer, writer, accountant, trainer, speaker, lawyer, or chef. Learn about and assess the talents of each group member and think of ways to tap into those skills. This will help your members feel appreciated for their skills and give them a chance to help the group.

Remember to look for all of your members' talents. Sometimes the last thing a chef wants to do is cook another meal after she leaves work, but maybe she is also a talented writer or speaker. Survey each member and keep updated records of their talents so that you benefit from the gifts each member has to offer.

GIVING PEOPLE FREEDOM TO CHANGE

ALLOW OTHERS TO LEAD

As a group leader, you have to let yourself step down when its time to move on to something new or when your vision for the group conflicts with group's desires. Group members who feel ready to take on leadership can feel discounted and ignored if longtime leaders won't let anyone else lead.

Building a system within the group to rotate leadership responsibilities can help prevent burnout and keep energy flowing. Early on, you should develop a plan to share leadership or pass the torch. Take time with the transition and make sure members accept the new leader. Allow new leaders to express their vision and offer their ideas and talents to the group. Remain connected and helpful, but let the new leader set the tone and make decisions.

ALLOW PEOPLE TO LEAVE

Even though groups should try to retain members, they also need to know there are people who need to leave. Some people are ready to move on because their needs have been met, they need something different than what the group can provide, they are unwilling to work with others, or other reasons. Let them go. When any member leaves, however, you should document the reasons. The telephone survey on page 65 has some questions that specifically ask exiting members about why they are leaving. Make sure you ask these questions of everyone who leaves. If many members are leaving for the same reason, your group should decide if you have a problem that needs to be addressed.

LOOKING INWARD

HONOR THE EFFORTS OF LEADERS AND MEMBERS

Take time to honor your current leaders and members and recognize their accomplishments. It is hard work to lead a group and take on the many tasks that members commit to. Every job is important because it helps the group achieve its mission. Take the time to celebrate the good things your group has done. Have an awards dinner with silly awards for all, give thank you cards and small gifts, and take the time to acknowledge what each person has done for the group and the community.

LAUGH TOGETHER

Figure out what it will take to get your whole group laughing. Laugh about the silly things that have happened in your group, even the failures or mistakes.

These are the funny stories that bind you together and forge a greater sense of community. The main perks of belonging to a parent support group are the sense of community that is earned through your relationships and the good work you do for families.

LISTEN TO GROUP MEMBERS

Groups exist for the group members and for the benefits they provide to the community, not for their leadership. If membership has dropped or people are unhappy, the leadership circle needs to take the time to find out why. Then they must respond to keep the group alive. Members will not stay if no one listens to them.

Early on, you provided a questionnaire to your members so that you could get information about members' needs. You should continually gather information from your members, because people and needs change. If you haven't been using the tracking and evaluating materials provided in chapter 4, consider doing this now. Record contacts with parents and track which events are successful, and which families are participating in meetings, activities, or projects.

If one faction of your membership seems uninvolved, maybe it is because you aren't meeting their needs. The survey on page 65 can be used during a phone interview where you record members' answers to specific questions. Or you can adapt it so that members can fill it out themselves. Phone interviews will probably be the most successful, because more people may respond and you can get clarification to answers if needed. Analyze the responses you get. For example, if parents are expressing a lack of time for the group (and most families today are overburdened), a scheduled event like a dinner can provide family time together and help you keep your members. Make sure any changes you propose reflect the data gathered from your members.

When you get feedback from members about things that could be improved or should change, how well does the leadership circle listen? How well do members listen to each other? How quickly does

your group respond to feedback? If a group fails to respond to feedback from individuals, group members will feel angry, discounted, and invisible and may leave. Groups with a shorter feedback loop have leaders who hear the solutions to problems or suggested changes, discuss them, and then take immediate action.

Sometimes the action a group takes is to institute change, and sometimes it is to discuss modifications to suggestions, or explain why changes are not recommended at this time. Responsiveness of this kind shows the group that the leadership is responsive to their members' needs and that what the members think, feel, and say is important even if leaders don't follow all the suggestions.

Some issues that members raise will reflect one person's opinion or the thoughts of a small group, and the group members or leader may decide not to change. Other times the idea may be eagerly embraced, even if one person suggests it, because the idea is good and the group unanimously wants it implemented. The leadership circle will have to decide which issues they want to bring to the attention of the whole group and which ones can be settled on an individual basis.

RESOLVE CONFLICT

A group that lives in constant turmoil and conflict cannot survive. Some people may stay to fight, get battered around, or watch the fighting, but the group won't be able to accomplish much and it certainly won't be healthy. Healthy groups try to resolve conflict either by openly seeking its source and planning a strategy for resolving it, or by bringing in an outside expert to help the group work through the problem. If you ignore conflict, you risk losing good people or the entire group.

PROVIDE SOLUTION-ORIENTED MEETINGS

Check to see how your meetings are run. Are the same people dominating group discussions? Are the meetings bogged down by continued discussions of problems with no mention of solutions? Are solutions repeatedly offered to parents who don't listen or try them? If you answered "yes," you may have a problem with facilitation. Is anyone monitoring and guiding the meeting? If meetings are focused only on problems and seldom look at solutions or members ignore offered solutions, other members will feel trapped in an endless negative cycle.

If meetings are always depressing and members begin to feel there is little hope, attendance will drop. If this sounds like your group, maybe you can create or re-activate the buddy system or provide mentors to help support the families in crisis. If several people can share the duties of support outside of the meeting time, it can help all parties involved. Group members should want to support each other, but not at the expense of the life of the group.

When the group comes up with solutions for a problem, break that solution into small, measurable action steps. Assign tasks to volunteers and ask that they commit to completing those

TAKING STOCK AND MAKING CHANGES

A group in Utah conducted a survey of all its members and collected information about race and ethnic background, family makeup (number of birth and adopted children), type of adoption, and services used in the past. After reviewing the results from more than 300 families, leaders made changes in the group's services to better reflect the changes in their group's needs.

For example, leaders discovered that fewer of the group's families had adopted from foster care than they had thought. As a result, they launched several efforts to promote adoption from foster care—a key component of their mission. In addition, to help its many transracial families, the group partnered with the local African American community to enhance two of the group's four main activities.

Another group found a quick way to get changing information from group members. They now have a few simple questions written on their membership renewal form.

action steps in a timely manner. The focus will shift from talking about problems to solving them.

REVISIT YOUR MISSION STATEMENT

Look at your group's mission statement. Sometimes a group simply needs to follow its current mission more closely. When group members get back in touch with the passion behind their mission and remember how to break their goals into action steps that produce results, group energy can be revitalized.

Sometimes the mission no longer fits the group, so your direction or the mission needs to change. Whichever may be the case for you, your group should set up a meeting to re-examine the mission statement, maybe even develop a new one, and recapture the energy you once had.

BECOME A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

For some groups, a needed boost comes from seeking nonprofit status. If your group has the desire and the know-how to implement needed solutions, but lacks the money to expand your services and programs, re-read chapter 6, get started, and move forward toward your goals.

RETREAT WITH YOUR GROUP

The energy in a group changes just like it does in people. Sometimes group members need time to get away, relax, and recharge at a retreat away from other pressures. This time together can help build relationships among members; help people recommit to the group; and give the group time to plan,

MEET GROUP MEMBERS IN CYBERSPACE

If, over time, attendance drops and more and more members are unable to attend meetings due to scheduling difficulties or geographical barriers, consider offering support on the Internet. Your group could do something as simple as creating an e-mail group or listserv for all group members. You could communicate with each other anytime day or night and not have to leave home for a meeting. Your group could also create a web site to function as an online support group. Consider using online chat rooms for more structured discussion times, or message boards where parents can post questions or ideas whenever it is convenient for them and check back later to see who has responded. You may find that you still want to meet in person and you could do this from time to time.

A group in Virginia realized the value of using the Internet to provide the benefits of a parent group without having to work within the limitations of the schedules and locations of the group's members. Offering help, hope, wholeness, and support, the group translated the goals of a traditional face-to-face parent group to cyberspace. The group's motto, "support is support," captures the idea that the goal is to provide parents with the support they need, regardless of the strategy you use to connect parents to that support. Demonstrating the potential of an online group to break down geographic barriers to parents connecting for mutual support, this once-local group now attracts participants from other counties, states, and even countries.

strategize, and determine the direction it wants to take. If your group decides to take a retreat, make sure you give your members time to socialize so that the retreat is relaxing. When people are enjoying themselves, they will be more cooperative and better able to focus on the tasks you give them.

Plan the content of your retreat carefully, looking at the main issues, decisions, or work the group needs to do. Prior to the retreat, collect information from your members regarding what people most want addressed and then have the leadership circle or a subcommittee plan retreat activities.

Some groups have a yearly retreat to carefully plan what they want to accomplish in the coming year. At the retreat they assign duties and responsibilities so that group members know well in advance when they have to complete a task and can plan how they will accomplish their volunteer efforts around a busy family schedule.

LOOKING OUTWARD

REASSESS YOUR COMMUNITY NEEDS

Make sure your group is offering services or meeting a real need in your community. If you are stuck doing things the same old way and have lost touch with what your surrounding community needs, attendance and enthusiasm for what you have to offer will decrease. You may want to survey community members to find out what their current needs are. When your group becomes enlightened about a real need, passion and commitment can return to the group and give it strength, energy, and a new focus.

LOOK FOR NEW FUNDING SOURCES

Sometimes groups become passive because they have good ideas, but no money to do the work they want to do. If your group doesn't want to give up, you simply have to work to find money for your

projects. If you are having trouble with money issues, organize a meeting to specifically outline the roadblocks to securing funding. If the members of your leadership circle don't have fundraising skills, you need to recruit someone who is good at writing grant proposals, asking for donations, or planning funding strategies. Although new money coming into an organization can't solve fundamental problems, it does wonders for increasing motivation and enthusiasm.

TALK TO SUCCESSFUL GROUPS

All groups experience times when they need rejuvenation and may want to learn what other groups do to get rejuvenated. Talk to other leaders to gather ideas for your group. Look at groups that are like yours and others that are different. Be open to new ways your group can approach the work it wants to do.

GROUP MEMBER TELEPHONE SURVEY

Hello, my name is *[your name]*. I'm calling on behalf of *[your group's name]*. We are conducting a survey to better understand the needs of our members and would very much like to include your opinions. Your comments will remain completely confidential. We will take the survey information we compile from the group, and prepare a summary of our results. With the information we gather we hope to learn how to better support our membership. Do you have time to do this now or would it be better to schedule another time?

1. How many children do you have? _____
2. How many of those children came into your family through adoption? _____
3. What are the ages of all your children?
Adopted children _____
Birth children _____
Kinship children _____
Foster children _____
4. At what age were your children adopted?
_____ <1 year _____ 6-10 years
_____ 1-3 years _____ 11-15 years
_____ 3-5 years _____ over 15 years
5. Have you adopted any children of a different race or culture than your own? (If yes, ask for specific details on race/ethnic background.)

6. What age group are you in?
_____ <25 years _____ 45-49 years
_____ 25-34 years _____ 50-55 years
_____ 35-44 years _____ 55+ years

7. How many years have you been an adoptive family?
_____ <2 years _____ 7-10 years
_____ 2-5 years _____ 10-15 years
_____ 5-7 years _____ 15+ years

8. What specifically do you like about *[your group's name]*? What are the group's strengths?

9. What do you dislike about *[your group's name]*? What are some of the weaknesses?

10. With what degree of regularity do you attend the *[your group's name]* support group meetings?
_____ frequently _____ rarely
_____ regularly _____ never
_____ occasionally

If the respondent rarely or never participates in meetings, ask:

What are some of the reasons you don't attend the *[your group's name]* meetings more often? _____

11. What are some of the things *[your group's name]* might offer that would make group meetings more meaningful to you? What would you like to see more or less of? Are there issues you would like addressed?

12. Should group meetings involve children as well as parents?

_____ yes _____ no

Why or why not? If yes, in what way should children be involved?

13. Do you currently volunteer or have you ever volunteered for any of *[your group's name]* activities?

_____ yes _____ no

If yes, which activities?

If no, why not?

What are some of the things that would make you more interested or likely to volunteer for *[your group's name]* activities?

14. Do you have any other comments that you think are important for *[your group's name]* to consider?

Thank you very much for your valuable input.



CONCLUSION

We hope you have found the information in this guide to be helpful to you as a parent group leader. While the job of a parent group leader has numerous rewards, there are also hurdles and challenges along the way. When you feel caught up in a problem or can't see your way past a crisis, remember to return to your sources of support. Talk to other groups in your community, look for sources on the Internet, return to chapters in the guide, or contact NACAC to find solutions and renew your energy.

There isn't a leader who hasn't been discouraged, made mistakes, or wondered what to do next.

Whether you know it or not, you are linked with other parent group leaders across North America whose dedication, hard work, and persistence make all the difference in the world to individual children, families, and communities. The passion and commitment from parent leaders has changed public policy and legislation and made a difference in the lives of many people. Follow your passion, ask for help when you need it, and never lose your vision. Even as society changes, the simple truth that *children need a family* and *families need support* will never change.



NACAC MEMBERSHIP

Staying abreast of current adoption and foster care issues can be difficult for parent group leaders. At NACAC, we provide information and connections to make your life easier as you help children and adoptive families.

voting rights in NACAC's parent group member assembly.

- **Individual/family members** receive one copy of each *Adoptalk*, one discounted registration at NACAC's annual conference, technical assistance, and a complimentary copy of the *National Adoption Awareness Month Guide*.

NACAC OFFERS FOUR MEMBERSHIP LEVELS:

- **Parent group members** receive one subscription to *Adoptalk* (our quarterly newsletter), one discounted conference registration, technical assistance, *Network News*, a complimentary copy of several NACAC publications, and a 30 percent discount on other publications. Parent group members also have voting rights in NACAC's parent group member assembly.

To join NACAC, fill in the membership form below and return it with payment to: 970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106, St. Paul, MN 55114-1149.

To request more information or obtain a sample *Adoptalk*, contact NACAC at 651.644.3036 or info@nacac.org.

NACAC MEMBERSHIP

I/We would like to become a NACAC member at the following level:

Parent Group—\$45 U.S./\$60 Canada
 Enhanced Parent Group—\$200 U.S./\$270 Canada
 Organizational—\$200 U.S./\$270 Canada
 Individual/Family—\$45 U.S./\$60 Canada

Name(s) _____

Organization _____

Address _____

Phone _____ Fax _____

E-mail _____

Payment Type:

check money order credit card* (if credit card, please complete information below)

MasterCard VISA

Card Number _____

Expiration Date _____ Name on Card _____

Signature _____

*Credit card payments are charged in U.S. currency at U.S. rates.

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