

Starting a local parents' group

group action pack

Why start a group?

"I couldn't find any helpful information when Hayley was diagnosed. I started a local group so that other parents would know they are not alone. We really support each other through our ups and downs and have a laugh too."

Mary, Birmingham, on why she started a local group.

Parents of disabled children recognise the value of the mutual support of others in a similar situation. If this support has been difficult to find in your area, you may now be thinking of starting a local parents' group. Such a group can enable you and other parents to be in contact with each other and begin to overcome the isolation felt by so many parents of children with additional needs.

At this stage, it is helpful to ask yourself a few questions:

- Is there already a group in your area? It is worth checking with your Child Development Centre (CDC), Children's Centre, health visitor, social worker or hospital staff. Your local Children's Disability Register and Parent Partnership Officer should have lists of relevant local organisations. Contact a Family may also know of active groups in your area.
- Do you have the time and energy? Supporting others can make a lot of emotional demands. While a mutual support group means you receive as well as give, in the early days it is likely that the main demands will be on you. This can have an impact on your family and your other relationships. If you are going through a particularly stressful period with your own child, try to weigh up whether you have the emotional energy to spare to support others.

contact a family
for families with disabled children

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incorporating
The Lady Hoare Trust

- What about money? Getting a group off the ground will take money as well as time. You will need to pay out for postage and telephone calls. It may be a while before the group can meet these costs.

We can support you

You might find it helpful to talk over these and other questions with us. Contact a Family's development staff can offer support now, when you are about to start up, and at every stage of your group's progress. We can also put you in contact with other parents who have gone through this process and who can share their experience.

Contact a Family is in touch with hundred of parent support groups. This guide is based on the extensive experience of parents of disabled children who have set up local groups and want to encourage and support other parents in this venture.

Contact a Family's Local Parent Support Group Network Scheme

At this early stage you may be wondering if it would help to join a national charity, by affiliating or becoming a local branch (if it is a specific condition such as autism). You will need to explore any obligations attached to this.

Contact a Family does not provide an affiliation scheme for local groups but offers free membership to the **Local Parent Support Group Network Scheme**. The scheme has the advantage of covering all disabilities and does not stop your group from joining other organisations as well. Being a member of the network does not mean that your group can use our charity number or logo. However, you can say your group is a member of the Contact a Family Local Parent Support Group Network Scheme to give your group some local credibility in the early days. Joining the network also means our freephone parents' helpline can refer to you families or individuals who may wish to become members or use the services of your group. In addition, your group will also receive a free copy of 'Connected' (Contact a Family's magazine) each quarter and your local Contact a Family office's newsletter. Groups based in areas of the UK where there is no office receive a quarterly bulletin, specifically produced for local parent support groups

For further details, please get in touch with your local Contact a Family office (details are on the back pages) or, if you are based in an area where there is no office, please contact Jemma Black (Local Groups Officer) on 020 7608 8775.

First steps

Once you have decided to go ahead, try to test your ideas out on other parents. Making contact with some like-minded people at this stage can reassure you that you are on the right track and spark off new possibilities. Other parents can help to share:

- experiences
- ideas
- the development of the group

The more ideas at this stage, the more likely your group is to appeal to a wide range of parents and the more support you will have in running the group.

Who else can help?

Local infrastructure organisations (like Councils for Voluntary Action and Council for Voluntary Service) can provide very useful support and guidance to local groups.

To find your nearest local infrastructure organisation, contact the **National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA)**:

Telephone: 0114 278 6636

Email: navca@navca.org.uk

Address: The Tower, 2 Furnival Square, Sheffield, S1 4QL

It is also worth checking for any local carers' services which can offer support.

Making your first contacts

There is no blueprint for this. Every neighbourhood has its own particular grapevine of networks and contact points. Using your local knowledge and talking to other parents will be a good guide to where and how parents in your area will hear about you. The following ideas offer some starting points.

Useful allies

- specialist health visitor
- portage worker
- paediatric community nurse
- social worker
- children with disabilities database coordinator
- community nurse
- therapists e.g. speech therapist, occupational therapist
- parent partnership worker
- key worker
- national organisation, e.g. - Scope, Mencap, Sense

People will also usually be willing to display a card asking parents to contact you in places such as libraries, public notice boards in shops and GP surgeries. Professionals cannot give out parents' details but may be willing to pass on a letter or leaflet about your group. Likewise, you need to

protect your own confidentiality by just giving out your first names and phone numbers without addresses. Examples of publicity are given on page 9.

Getting to know each other

When you first meet up as a group, it is likely that you will spend time talking about your children, your own experiences, the difficulties you have overcome and the ones still to be faced. Allow yourselves time to get to know each other and listen to each other's personal stories.

One of you may have battled through the assessment and statementing process. Another may have a child who needs frequent medical care at the hospital 50 miles away. Someone else may be worrying about how to divide their time between their disabled child and their other children.

A number of aspects may emerge at this stage - people's strengths and knowledge, how much time they can commit to a group, any previous experience in a group and useful contacts they can offer.

Setting the group's aims

Sometimes you may get carried away by your enthusiasm and assume that everyone has the same aims and image of the group you are starting. It is safer not to assume but to talk through everyone's expectations of the group and its aims at an early stage. This will enable you to avoid any problems or misunderstandings among yourselves. It will also help you to create a clear image of the group and its role which you can present to the outside world, including potential members.

Some groups start with a very specific aim; others are more broadly-based. The majority of groups have some or all of the following aims:

- supporting parents in similar situations
- sharing information and exchanging ideas
- raising awareness of the needs of children and families
- pressing for better services for children and families.

"Our aim is to inform, encourage and support parents, allowing them to grow in strength and knowledge so that they are better equipped to give the best possible help to their children."

SNAP, multi-disability group, Essex.

Differences of approach may come to light during your discussion about the group's aims. For example, some parents may want the group to concentrate on supporting individual parents, while others may want to emphasise the improvement of services.

A group can do both, providing everyone is clear about what your aims are and you can maintain a balance with which everyone feels comfortable. It can be of help, though, not to be too ambitious to start with and so give the group time to develop. Small steps can lead to a more lasting and stable group.

GROUP AIM

To support families with disabled children

OBJECTIVES

- To hold a monthly meeting and evening social events.
- To bring carers together to share experiences and reduce isolation.
- To have a contact list enabling members to support each other in-between meetings.
- To expand knowledge of local and national services.
- To provide activities during school holidays.
- Develop personal skills of carers.
- Develop links with other carers support groups within the city and surrounding area.
- Maintain a safe environment for our children - Child Protection Plan in place.

Magic Roundabout, Birmingham.

Your aims are a reminder of what holds you together as a group and a base on which to build your publicity. They need not be fixed in stone but you may want to make changes as the group develops.

“To support and provide information to Asian women who have and care for children with a range of special needs.

“To organise educational and recreational activities for these women and their children.

“To meet on a weekly basis including during the holidays.

“To remain independent and represent the views of Asian parents of children with special needs.”

Hum Nwa, Bradford.

Creating an identity

Once you have decided to form your group, you need to establish its identity through choosing a name and, possibly, a logo or visual image. Choosing a name can be fun. A name might arise from your discussion of the role and aims of the group. For instance, a group may decide on a name that indicates:

Who they are for

- Families and Friends
- Jawaan Aur Azaad ('young and free', group for disabled young people)
- Asian Deaf Children's Group

The area they cover

- Edgbaston Mother and Baby Group
- Bordsley Integration Group where they meet
- Parents at '93
- Millwood Parents' Group

When they meet

- First Thursday Group

Their aims

- Parents for Parents
- SCOL: Supporting Children in Ordinary Living
- Dhek Bhal ('looking after'/'caring for')
- Time Out Social Group

The atmosphere they want to create

- Bridges
- Positive Parents
- Connect
- Open Door
- Oasis

In your discussion about names you may find that parents differ in their reaction to words commonly used about you and your child, for example:

- learning disability
- sufferer
- self-help
- special needs
- additional needs
- disabled
- support
- carer
- problem

If you do disagree about such terms, you should bring all your ideas into the open and listen to each other's feelings. Try to find a name that:

- reflects what you are as a group
- you all feel comfortable with
- doesn't give offence to others, or put them off
- is reasonably 'catchy' and memorable

A couple of points to remember when choosing a name:

1. Avoid a name used by another well-known group (if they are a charity, you would not be allowed to use the same name).
2. If you are linked to a national group, and want to take their name, be clear what that means for your group's independence, fundraising and other commitments to the national organisation.

As well as a name you may also wish to decide on a logo – a visual image – for your group. This can range from the choice of typeface and/or colour for your letterheads/posters etc, up to an illustration or 'mascot' which you can incorporate into your publicity material. You may have a member with IT or design skills which can be useful here. Some groups use computer clip art cartoons.

Choosing a meeting place

It can take some time to settle on a regular meeting place for your group. And, as the group grows and develops, you may need to look for different premises.

Considering venues

You should bear in mind the following points when choosing a venue for your meetings:

- a central location, if possible served by public transport and with car parking space physically accessible
- a flexible enough space to use for your various needs - formal and informal meetings, private conversation, a crèche etc
- comfortable in terms of seating, heating and sound levels
- available at a time to suit the group's needs
- access to a kitchen if you provide refreshments
- storage space for your equipment or literature if required

Don't forget to check if any cost is involved for the hire of the venue and whether there are any concessions or help with funding

Many groups feel that independence is the most important consideration in choosing where to meet – a place where parents feel they can talk freely and which is their own space.

Special Parents

Special Parents met monthly in the church hall. It was rather out of the way and could be cold in winter. A couple of parents suggested rotating the meetings between different houses. Others felt uncomfortable with this idea, as they knew that some parents had very large houses and they would feel at a disadvantage or unable to offer to host the meeting. In the end, they decided to stay at the church hall because they all felt equal by meeting there.

The pros and cons of venues

There are advantages and disadvantages to most venues: these are a few examples:

A parent's home

For: may be comfortable, friendly, free and available when you want it.

Against: may not be accessible to all, sufficiently flexible as the group grows, or truly independent, as one member has more of a stake than the others.

Clinic or school building

For: may be free, accessible, comfortable and flexible.

Against: may not be welcoming or neutral to all parents and may depend on a professional worker to oversee the premises, thus also restricting availability.

Community centre

For: may be in a good location, accessible, offering a variety of rooms for different uses, and independent of outside influence.

Against: some buildings may not be very comfortable, or there may be a cost involved.

The Brum Mums' Group

The Brum Mums' Group met through the special school their children attend. When they decided to meet regularly on Thursday mornings, the head teacher offered them a convenient school community room. They soon realised, however, that the head teacher dropped in unannounced each week, which meant that some mums who were concerned about their children's education felt inhibited in discussion. They also realised they had a lot in common with other parents in the town, but were unlikely to grow as they were associated in people's minds with the school.

Two members offered to explore other possibilities and found that the nearby community centre had a free room available each Tuesday morning. The group decided to make the move, for their own independence and so that they could attract new members.

Publicity

The five “Ws” of good publicity

If your poster or leaflet includes the five “Ws” - what, why, when, where, who - you will have all the essentials you need to publicise the group.

WHAT: Sparkhill Parents’ Group

WHY: Support, friendship and information for parents of children with learning disabilities

WHEN: We meet on the second Tuesday of each month from 10.00am - 12 noon

WHERE: at the Community Centre

WHO: For more information, contact Sue on 43272 or Judy on 43115

Children welcome: crèche available.

We look forward to meeting you!

Help with producing your publicity

Whether you decide to have a hand-written poster, illustrated by one of your children, or a word processed one, using the various graphics packages now available, you will need to have it photocopied or printed. Check if anyone in the group has any relevant skills, experience or contacts. Someone in the local community may be willing to give the group support in kind by printing your posters and leaflets, such as:

- the schools your children attend
- a local printing firm or copy shop
- local charities
- a supportive professional worker

Your local infrastructure organisation may advise you about where to go for cheap printing and have someone who can help you with layout and design.

Contact a Family has written Group Action Pack guides on publicity and producing leaflets. See page 23 for details of all the Group Action Pack Guides we produce and how to get hold of copies.

Publicity outlets

It is vital to build contacts with key friendly professionals who are likely to encourage other parents to make contact with your group. In addition to the Useful Allies listed on page 3, your group will also be able to come up with its own ideas for displaying material locally. There is no blueprint for what works – it is trial and error. Once your posters are up, or your leaflets circulated, check their effectiveness by asking new members where they heard about you. That information can feed

back into your planning for future events or meetings. Don't forget to amend your posters when necessary, especially if the contact name or dates and times change. Hence it is helpful to keep a record of where you put them all! Remember that publicity is more than just posters and leaflets. Many new members will hear about you by word of mouth as you promote the group when talking to friends, other parents at the school gate and professional workers.

Developing a website

As they become established, some parents groups decide to develop their own websites or look for ways of advertising themselves on the internet on other organisations' websites. For more information see Contact a Family's Group Action Pack guide entitled '**Websites**'.

Holding an open meeting

Local support groups may start off by a couple of parents meeting up, then spreading the word. Others decide to launch the group with an open meeting, hoping to reach as many potential members as possible and broaden the range of ideas at an early stage.

Holding an open meeting may seem a daunting experience. There are, however, a few tried and tested ways of making meetings more manageable.

Planning in advance - the aims

The most important aspect of your planning is deciding what you want to achieve in this meeting. For the first occasion, the aims will probably be short and simple, for instance:

- to share your ideas on starting or developing a group and to hear from other parents;
- to get names and addresses of those interested in forming or joining a group;
- to set the date of a second meeting.

From this you can prepare a simple agenda – such as the example shown – which can guide you through the meeting.

Parents' Support Group

Agenda for meeting on

1. Welcome
2. Introductions
3. Starting a group

- your ideas so far
- are people interested in a group?
- what would they like the group to do?

4. Refreshments

5. Next meeting

- date
- topic for discussion

6. Any other business

7. Take names and addresses

8. Close meeting

Planning in advance – the practicalities

If you are a small group, decide in advance how to share out practical tasks - this can avoid confusion on the day. If you are an individual parent who is at the stage of testing out potential interest in a group, think about asking a friend or relative to help you with some of the practicalities.

Practical details to consider include:

- seating arrangement: a circle is more friendly than rows of chairs and encourages discussion;
- who will put notices on the door to direct people;
- who will deal with refreshments;
- who will welcome parents as they arrive;
- who will chair the meeting;
- who will take names and addresses of interested parents;
- what notes do you want to take and who will take them.

Introductions

In opening the meeting, ask everyone introduce themselves briefly. It is worthwhile saying that if anyone prefers not to speak at this stage, this is all right. Take into account the number of people present. If there is a large number, individual introductions could take a long time: in that case, you could start by keeping your own introduction brief and moving on to someone else who will follow your lead.

Encouraging discussion

Ways to encourage people to join in include:

- making sure that you make eye contact with everyone;
- acknowledging people's contributions;
- addressing people by name;
- referring back to what someone said earlier, such as, "I think you said when you were introducing yourself ...";
- linking different ideas, for instance, "What you were just saying reminded me of what Jill said earlier. Has anyone else found ...?"

Reaching conclusions

Summarise the discussion, ensuring all the major points have been covered and everyone has had a chance to contribute. Confirm who is interested in developing the group and when you will next meet.

Coping with problems

One person dominates the meeting

Try saying "has anyone else got anything to say about this?"; or offer to discuss the person's concerns individually after the meeting. A coffee break might help break the flow!

No one speaks

Try asking open questions to which people cannot say yes or no; or put people into pairs to talk together about what they would like to get out of the group.

Reviewing the meeting

While the meeting is still fresh in your minds, it is worth the core group discussing how you felt about it and how far your aims were achieved. At this early stage, it can be helpful to avoid falling into fixed roles. For instance, some groups make a conscious decision to rotate the Chair, or have a rota for tea making. This allows everyone to try something new and build up their confidence and feeling of ownership of the group.

Recording the content and conclusions of the meeting can be as formal or informal as you wish. It will be useful, however, to keep some written record for future reference.

You can find more details in the Group Action Pack guide entitled '**Holding an open meeting**'.

Developing your group

If the group's publicity hits the target, parents will be contacting you - in person, by phone or by coming to a group meeting. As first impressions are so important, it is worth giving some thought to how you respond to a new member.

Even if your group has only been going for a short time, a new member may imagine that you are all very close and have known each other for ages. Remember how hard it is to be the newcomer in any situation. Take care to create a welcoming atmosphere and put a new member at their ease.

Approaching your group may be a parent's first step in acknowledging their child's disability or additional needs. They may be easily frightened off at this stage unless your group makes sure that everyone is welcoming.

What works best depends on the size and formality of your group and what goes on in meetings. You can find suggestions about welcoming new members and involving them in the work of the group in the Contact a Family Group Action Pack guide '**Attracting and Keeping Members**'.

Do you need a committee?

At this stage in the life of the group, you may want to keep the business as simple and informal as possible. There is no need to have all the usual titles - chair, secretary, treasurer. But your group may reach a point where you decide to become more formal.

When deciding who will do what, and whether or not you need a formal structure to run the group, look at the group jobs. In the early days, you will want to do some or all of the following:

- create and distribute publicity
- talk to new parents
- make practical arrangements, e.g. booking a meeting place
- gather information
- look after any finances
- raise funds
- talk to professional workers about the group
- make contact with useful organisations and many other activities specific to your group

Sharing responsibilities

These tasks can be carried out formally or informally. Some can best be done by all group members, such as publicising the group. But it may be more effective to have just one member responsible for some tasks, such as looking after finances. Other activities can be done by a number of members in rotation, such as making practical arrangements.

If the group decides it would function best with formal roles, such as chair and secretary, agree at the outset how long any member will stay in each post and what each is responsible for. You

should also avoid all the work and responsibility falling on a small number of members. This can be done by discussing how you will share responsibilities, break down tasks and encourage new members to play an active part in shaping the group.

Inviting a speaker

Many groups like to invite guest speakers from time to time. They can:

- offer valuable information
- stimulate discussion
- bring in new ideas
- be encouraged to put other parents in touch with you
- maintain your contacts with other organisations.

Choosing a speaker

You can overcome any worry about small turnouts for guest speakers if you check in advance that there is a genuine interest in the speaker and topic and you publicise the event adequately. You will also feel more comfortable if you warn the speaker beforehand that attendance at meetings can fluctuate!

Your members may be interested in a variety of speakers, including people with specialised professional knowledge; with experience of running a support group; who are trying new approaches to supporting and informing parents; who are involved in local campaigns of interest to your group; who provide services or make policy. An example of a local group's programme is shown below.

Practical details

Don't forget to brief the speaker before the meeting with the details of the meeting time and place, what you want them to talk about and for how long and any expectations that the group might have of the session. They might also require travel expenses.

You will also need to publicise the meeting in advance and arrange the venue on the day, with seating arrangements, any audio-visual equipment and refreshments, if provided.

You may find it best to leave practical details to one or two members. Making arrangements for a meeting can be a good way of involving newer members, particularly if you prepare a checklist of what needs to be covered. Working alongside a more experienced member will help to share skills and responsibilities and develop confidence in new members.

Salisbury Footsteps Group Programme

January	Talkabout
February	Speaker – Educational Psychologist on Assessments and Statementing
March	Talkabout
April	Easter Holiday event for all the family
May	Talkabout
June	Relaxation Techniques Family picnic (bring and share picnic, drinks provided)
July	Summer coffee morning – introduce a friend to Footsteps (bring summer food/fruit to share)
August	NO MEETING
September	Talkabout Evening Social at the Pelican Inn
October	Speaker – Sex education and growing up for the special needs child
November	Talkabout Group Information Stall at the CDC Open Day
December	Coffee morning Christmas Party for all the family

TALKABOUT mornings are for you to talk about your concerns and to share experiences with other group members.

Adapted from a Footsteps Programme with kind permission of the group.

Finances

The cost of running a group at this stage can include the following:

- stationery
- postage
- phone calls
- photocopying
- room hire

The person who starts the group often bears the initial cost out of their own pocket. To overcome

this, many parents' groups like to have some funds available so that all members can participate fully without making too much impact on the family budget.

Sources of funding

Some national organisations such as Scope can offer a starter grant to get you going.

Your Local Infrastructure Organisation should have information about local sources of funding. Many voluntary bodies, such as the Round Table and Rotary, like to support local good causes, including smaller ones like your new group.

Your Local Infrastructure Organisation will hold details of large and small grant-making bodies, as well as resources available to small groups at a reasonable cost. If you decide to apply for a grant, staff there may be able to help you prepare your application.

Many groups use their own resources, contacts and ideas to raise money. These can include car boot sales, raffles, social activities and sponsored events. But before you put a lot of energy and resources into fundraising, be clear about what you want the money for, so that fundraising does not become an end in itself, if that is not one of your group's main aims.

For further ideas on fundraising, see the Contact a Family Action Pack guide, '**Fundraising**'.

How two new groups raised money and resources

Four parents started a Saturday social group for all the family. They approached a catalogue company for a raffle prize: impressed with the aims of the group the company donated two car-loads of toys, with which they equipped their crèche.

Another group held an open afternoon at a local pub. On the day, £280 was raised from raffles and other stalls. A pub customer who heard about the event was also a member of the amateur dramatic society which 'adopts' a local cause each year, through fundraising at its productions. During their first full year, the group received £350 this way, and additional publicity.

Help in kind

Members or friends may be able to offer help in kind rather than in cash, such as providing photocopying, envelopes and paper or a raffle prize. Local publicity will sometimes result in offers of help, so when talking about the group use the opportunity to mention ways in which people can assist.

Looking after your money

Your group has a responsibility to its members and donors to keep an accurate, current record of finances. This does not have to be an elaborate or complicated exercise, just a simple, clear account of money coming in and going out.

If you anticipate raising a large sum of money each year, it is worth contacting the Charity Commission. Their contact details are:

Telephone: 0845 300 0218
Minicom: 0845 300 0219
Address: Charity Commission Direct, PO Box 1227, Liverpool, L69 3UG.
Website: <http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk>

If you have a bank account in the name of your group, ensure you have two signatories, not related to each other.

The role of professional workers

The relationship between parents' support groups and professional workers is very important, although the strength of the links and the level of communication will vary, depending on both the group and the worker.

From the outset, it is very important to think about how close a relationship a professional should have with your parents' support group. What feels right for one group might not feel comfortable to another group. If a professional worker is involved in starting and running a parents' group, it is better for both the worker and group to think about this at the beginning and so be able to manage it.

The strengths of parent-led groups

A parent support group which is led by the parents themselves tends to be very different from one led by a professional worker. In a parent-led group there can be a greater commitment from parents; they become more involved in the group and have a sense of ownership. This, in turn, can bring greater benefits to parents.

In contrast, in a group led by a professional worker it can be difficult for parents to feel responsible for the group's success. Members may miss important opportunities to gain skills. Confidence raising can be more difficult in a group run by a capable and efficient professional worker, where parents may feel that they do not need to do more than turn up for meetings.

Parents may also feel that they have more chances to influence service provision in their 'own' group. The greater confidence parents can gain in a parent-led group can help them to develop the coordinated and determined approach they need to influence local services. And, of course, it may be difficult for members to be open and honest in their views of local services if a local service provider is running, or closely involved in, the group.

A positive role

Professional workers can support and help groups without becoming directly involved in running the group. They play a vital role by helping to reach parents and build membership, offering practical support and making themselves available to the group.

Reaching parents

Parents hear about groups in different ways, but nearly all rely to some extent on professional workers telling other parents about the group. It is important that parents are given information about the support group and allowed to make the choice for themselves as to whether to become involved or not - it should be the parent rather than the professional worker making the choice.

Groups are also looking for procedures which allow organisations to put parents in touch with them. Such procedures mean that parents are not dependent on the good practice of an individual professional worker, who might of course move on. For example, a system could be implemented whereby all parents attending a clinic for the first time are routinely given information about support groups and can then choose if and when to make contact.

Getting together

A good relationship between your support group and professionals will develop by a good understanding. You therefore need to have some knowledge of each other, and this may be best achieved by meeting together from time to time. It can be difficult for professionals to tell parents about a group if they know very little about it.

Likewise, it is difficult for parents to convey their views to professionals if they feel anxious about talking to them.

You may find it helpful to have a list of tips for professionals on how they can help your group flourish. Here are some – your members may well have more ideas.

Tips for professionals

On helping to reach parents:

- set up a procedure between your organisation and the parents' group;
- be clear about how this will operate;

- tell parents about groups and support networks early on;
- give written as well as verbal information to parents;
- allow the parent to make the choice;
- make sure you have adequate and up to date group information;
- make introductions on behalf of the parent, if requested;
- keep the group informed;
- tell colleagues about the group so that they can also inform parents.

On helping with practicalities:

- provide a meeting room;
- display posters;
- hand out information to other parents;
- offer financial help, where possible;
- provide or arrange transport;
- help with photocopying;
- offer advice on form filling and letter writing;
- put groups in touch with any helpful professional workers, other organisations or sources of support.

On being accessible:

- suggest a good time for contact;
- suggest the best means of contact;
- keep groups informed of any changes.

Helping with morale:

- provide a listening ear to groups;
- be there to share ideas;
- make suggestions and give tips;
- offer encouragement;
- give honest feedback.

It helps to know each other

- have open meetings for parents and professional workers;
- offer to talk to professionals or accept invitations to do so;

- invite professionals to talk to you;
- sit on committees or forums;
- don't accept professional jargon.

A win-win situation

There are many benefits for professional workers in encouraging your group to thrive.

These are:

- understanding better the needs of parents caring for a disabled child;
- having access to parents' views;
- getting feedback on services;
- having an additional source of available support for parents;
- reducing inappropriate demands by parents;
- broadening skills and experience.

Reviewing progress

"The group's been going for a year now. I think we need to look at where we go from here. There is a social side on Saturday afternoons that is very successful as well as the parent support group which is dwindling a bit as a lot of parents have moved on. We'd like to know about courses and training and I think we need a new publicity drive to get more people involved."

Janine, Greater Manchester.

From the outset, you will be making an informal note of the group's progress: a meeting that went really well; a fundraising event that was a bit of a disaster; those new group members you were able to help. Keep a record of your successes (and any failures!) and lessons learned.

By reflecting on what succeeds, and why, in your activities, the group can become more successful in achieving its aims and meeting parents' needs. The following checklist will also be a good basis to review how you are doing.

CHECKLIST: reviewing our progress

- Are our aims still appropriate?
- Do we now have new, additional aims?
- Do we need to update our publicity?
- Are we sharing jobs?
- Is our venue still appropriate?
- Where is our publicity most effective?
- Do we want to take on anything new, such as a newsletter?
- Do we have sufficient funds?
- What have we enjoyed?
- Anything we won't try again?

A review can be a basis for planning for the coming six to twelve months. Setting some goals and targets can give the group a sense of direction and achievement and can help you focus your energies.

Some possible targets your group might want to aim for:

- to hold an evening meeting each term, particularly to attract dads;
- to start a newsletter to keep in contact with members who can't always attend meetings;
- to hold a Family Day at the Safari Park;
- to investigate the best way your group can influence local services;
- to raise £X to cover the cost of producing a newsletter;
- to attend a groups' training session run by your Local Infrastructure Organisation;
- to combine fundraising with a social event at the community centre;
- to get an item about the group into a local paper.

Speaking up for disabled children and their families

There are many opportunities now for parents to influence local service delivery because professionals have to seek users' views. When your groups feel ready, you could use your combined voices to press for better local services from health, education, social services and leisure. Local groups do this in a variety of ways such as:

- Finding out about key disabled children's planning groups and nominating a group member to sit on it and represent the group's views.
- Joining with other parent groups in your area to work together to influence local services.
- Feeding your group's views to the local Parent Carer Council or Parents' Forum.

Contact a Family development staff can give you information about starting a local Parent's Forum and how your group can become involved in shaping local services. More information can be found on the Contact a Family website at:

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/influence.html>

For further details, get in touch with your local Contact a Family office, or if you do not have an office in your area, contact our Parent Participation Manager on 020 7608 8784.

Group Action Pack

This guide is one in a series produced for parent groups. They are available either on their own or as part of our complete Group Action Pack. The guides are based on what parents have asked and have shared with Contact a Family staff over several years. Without parents' comments and experiences, these guides could not have been written. Special thanks to the groups who have provided us with examples and quotes.

Current Group Action Pack titles are:

For local groups:

- Starting a local parent's group
- Holding an open meeting
- Attracting and keeping members
- Local campaigning
- Professional workers and parent support groups

For national and local groups:

- Charity registration
- The role of trustees
- Leaflets
- Publicity
- Patrons and celebrity support
- Writing a news release
- Speaking to the media
- Public speaking for parents
- Effective meetings
- Reaching Out to Disabled Parents
- Reaching Out to Black and Minority Ethnic Parents
- Reaching Out to Fathers
- Data protection
- Websites
- Virtual communities
- Meetings via telephone conference
- Fundraising
- Newsletters
- Employing a paid worker
- Child Protection

All Group Action Pack guides can be downloaded free of charge from the Contact a Family website at: <http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAP.html> .

If you do not have access to the internet, printed paper copies are also available without charge - please contact us for a publications order form.

New titles will be added so do check the Contact a Family website or contact us for an up to date list of these and our other publications.

Further information

Our Contact a Family offices can give advice and support to local parent groups on a range of issues including starting up, registering as a charity, ongoing development and everything in between!

Getting in touch

Contact a Family Northern Ireland

Telephone: 028 9262 7552
E-mail: nireland.office@cafamily.org.uk
Address: 1 Wallace Avenue, Lisburn, BT27 4AA

Contact a Family Scotland

Telephone: 0131 659 2930
E-mail: scotland.office@cafamily.org.uk
Address: Craigmillar Social Enterprise and Arts Centre, 11/9 Harewood Road, Edinburgh, EH16 4NT

Contact a Family Cymru/Contact a Family Wales

Telephone: 029 2039 6624
E-mail: wales.office@cafamily.org.uk
Address: 33-35 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9HB

Contact a Family North East Region

Telephone: 0191 213 6300
E-mail: northeast.office@cafamily.org.uk
Address: The Dene Centre, Castle Farm Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE3 1PH

Contact a Family North West Region

Telephone: 0161 743 0700
E-mail: northwest.office@cafamily.org.uk
Address: 6th Floor, St. James House, Pendleton Way, Salford, M6 5FW

Contact a Family West Midlands Region

Telephone: 0121 415 4624
E-mail: westmids.office@cafamily.org.uk
Address: Prospect Hall, 12 College Walk, Selly Oak, Birmingham, B29 6LE

Contact a Family Ealing

Telephone: 020 8810 8151

E-mail: ealing.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: Room 3, First Floor, St Andrew's Church Centre, Mount Park Road,
London, W5 2RS

Contact a Family Lewisham

Telephone: 07794482632

Email: lewisham.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: c/o 209-211 City Road, London, EC1V 1JN

Contact a Family Southall

Telephone: 020 8571 6381

E-mail: southall.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: St. Georges Community Centre, 8-12 Lancaster Road, Southall, UB1
1NW

Contact a Family Southwark

Telephone: 020 7277 4436

E-mail: southwark.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: 54 Camberwell Road, London, SE5 0EN

Contact a Family Sutton and Merton

Telephone: 020 8640 5525

E-mail: suttonmerton.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: Hill House Community Centre, Bishopsford Road, Morden, SM4 6BL

Contact a Family Wandsworth

Telephone: 020 8947 5260

E-mail: wandsworth.office@cafamily.org.uk

Address: 1 Siward Road, Wandsworth, London, SW17 0LA

If you are based in an area that does not have a Contact a Family office, please contact:

Adele Meader, Local Groups Officer

Telephone: 01799 543043

E-mail: adele.meader@cafamily.org.uk

Address: Contact a Family, 209-211 City Road, London, EC1V 1JN

This guide is part of the Contact a Family Group Action Pack. For more information please visit www.cafamily.org.uk or telephone 020 7608 8700.

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