

*Thank you to Angela Alexander, developer of the Totally Awesome Parenting Group, and Mandy Lyons of Frankston City Council, Victoria, Australia, for their contribution to the development of this Practice Point.*

## Practice Point: Promoting Group Involvement and Attendance

This Practice Point outlines some important things to consider when conducting group work with parents with learning difficulties. It describes practical strategies that practitioners can use to encourage parents to attend and get involved.

### **Key facts**

Research into predictors for better child outcomes suggests that parental social support and health are key influential factors. However, it is reported that parents with learning difficulties experience more social isolation and mental health concerns than their peers without learning difficulties. We know that taking part in a regular parenting support group can benefit the social relationships and psychological well-being of parents with learning difficulties.

A regular group can provide a safe environment for parents to share and normalise concerns, and build relationships with others. But it is important to note research shows that parents with learning difficulties learn best when parenting skills are taught in a one-on-one setting (see Practice Point: Designing Parent Education Programs). While there is emerging evidence that group programs adapted to the needs of parents with learning difficulties can boost parents' sense of competence, it is recommended that a parenting group is not the sole method used to teach skills.

### **Practice tips**

Like all parents, a number of factors will influence the willingness of a parent with learning difficulties to attend a group, such as current family health issues and age of children. For these parents, additional barriers might be associated with previous negative experiences with services, fear of being scrutinised or judged, and fear children will be removed.

### **Be aware that parents might**

- feel uncomfortable about being in a group situation
- worry about, or have problems with, transport
- be concerned about their children's behaviour in public
- worry that others will be judging their ability to parent
- have had negative experiences with services in the past.

### **Before the parent attends the group**

- Explore individual circumstances surrounding the parent's initial referral to the group
- Be mindful that parents might be reluctant to take part in a parenting group

- Explain to the parent that a parenting group designed specifically for parents with learning difficulties can provide a safe environment for them to meet other parents and share experiences, access information, get new ideas, learn more about their children, or learn from others how to solve problems
- Establish the group's aims and purpose early, and refer back to this as group progresses
- Make sure parents are clear about whether or not their participation is likely to influence outcomes regarding the placement of their children
- Be aware that parents involved in the group might be reluctant to speak up in discussions at first.

### **Where to hold the group**

The location for the group is important for attendance. A neighbourhood or community house can be a suitable choice as these are often located within walking distance of public transport and might already have a suitable area for children. Choosing a community venue, rather than a government or service building, can also help group members feel comfortable.

Problem-solve with the parent about how they will get to and from the group. It might be helpful to consider planning:

- a community bus
- taxi vouchers
- volunteer drivers
- services collaboration to help with pickups
- volunteer buddies to walk with parents and attend during initial sessions.

Issues will be different for each area and each group, but encouraging open discussion about these and other possible barriers can help develop innovative solutions.

### **When to hold the group**

- Have a regular time and day. Weekly group meetings work well to help families establish a routine
- Consider the needs of working parents who may prefer evening sessions
- People enjoy an opportunity to share food and a chat so it can work well to hold the group around a morning tea or, if there are kitchen facilities, a shared lunch
- It is important for some parents that the routine continues throughout school holidays. It can be useful to plan alternative social activities for this time if the usual group is unable to run.

### **Encouraging fathers to attend**

There are many benefits to both parents attending, including the opportunity to learn together and to reinforce each other's learning at home. Also children usually benefit when both parents are actively involved in their care and education. Usually parenting programs are targeted at mothers and are not very effective at engaging fathers. It takes time and extra effort to attract and engage men in programs for parents and families (see Practice Point: Father-inclusive Practice).

Here are some tips for effectively attracting fathers to a parenting group:

- For working fathers consider scheduling sessions in the evening, on a Saturday or Sunday, or choose a Monday or Friday so fathers can attend on their RDOs
- If it's not possible to schedule sessions out of work hours, consider holding an occasional meeting (say once at the start of the sessions and again at the end) on a Saturday or an evening when fathers can attend
- Explicitly let fathers know that the group is for them. Refer specifically to 'fathers' and/or 'dads' in any notices you post. Many men tend to view the term 'parent' as meaning 'mother' because of their past experiences with a mother oriented service system (avoid the afterthought "dads are also welcome")
- Emphasise that attending the group will be an opportunity to access information, get new ideas, learn more about their children, or learn from others how to solve problems. Avoid describing the group to fathers as being a “chance to share your feelings and experiences”, which may not be particularly attractive to men
- When speaking with a mother about attending the group, ask her if you can speak to her partner or the child’s father as well (if present) to invite him personally to attend
- Remember that a child's father figure may be a boyfriend, stepfather, grandfather, uncle or family friend.

### **Appointment reminder strategies**

Reminder strategies, such as text messages, phone calls or letters to notify and remind parents about the meeting can be helpful. You can use one, or a combination of appointment reminder strategies, depending on which are most relevant to the parent.

- When sending reminder text messages you might include the option for clients to text back 'Yes' or 'No' to an appointment, which then gives you the opportunity to follow-up to talk about what’s stopping them coming
- Give the parent a copy of a picture-based agenda so they know what the topic will be at the next meeting.

### **Involve parents in planning**

Giving parents the opportunity to take an active role in the development of the program agenda is an important component of any group. A sense of ownership and commitment develops when parents are supported to contribute to the creation of a resource.

For example, use a picture-based agenda menu of topics/issues that are listed on a board like \*bullying, \*healthy eating, \*behaviour, \*sleep. Group members get to pick out which one(s) they want to address.

### **Set boundaries and group rules**

One of the first group activities might be a broad discussion about the purpose of the group and important things to keep in mind to make sure everyone feels comfortable. This can then lead into the creation of group rules. Explain the importance of group rules to the group members, provide some examples, and then facilitate a group brainstorm about what should be included on the list.

Group rules might include:

- having mobile phones on silent
- restrictions on food to be brought to group (eg. no food containing peanuts)
- taking turns to speak
- being respectful of others opinions, or listening while others are speaking.

### **Children attending**

Children attending with their parents adds another dimension to the group dynamics and boundaries. The group might need to explore particular issues in the group context, such as:

- keeping the child's needs in mind during group activities
- ensuring children are not breaking property or hurting others
- what are acceptable discipline strategies to use during group
- general child care requirements, such as changing clothes and providing food or drink.

### **Take opportunities for positive reinforcement and empowerment**

Facilitating a parenting group is a great opportunity to model praise. When issues and concerns arise in the group, point out what the parent is doing well, and then explore how a parent might approach a situation differently.

For example "We are talking about being responsible parents and what that might mean- Mary I noticed how you have been watching your son, and that when he started climbing up on a chair to reach that shelf, you went over and got him down. That is a great example of being a responsible parent".

Be careful not to label a comment or a behaviour negatively but instead use it as an opportunity for reflection. For example, in a group discussion about discipline, should a member suggest smacking and putting the child in their room without dinner, take the opportunity to ask all members how that might feel for the child. A parent might even respond that this was normal for them as a child, which might lead members to share their own feelings, ultimately helping the group explore new ideas whilst being listened to respectfully.

### **Create a thriving community resource - involve families and services**

A parent group can be a wonderful way to draw in a wide range of service providers and involve family members in a positive and empowering way.

Often service providers have only one or two parents with learning difficulties on their case load at any one time. This might create opportunities for several agencies to work together to help with planning and supporting a group.

Churches, community service groups, welfare organisations and tertiary institutions might also become involved. Students and volunteers can provide valuable help and the input of various sectors can be very useful. Explore the options in your local area and invite input and expertise.

***Want to know more?***

Practice Points which provide further information about the needs of parents with learning difficulties can be found in the resources section of the Healthy Start website.

The Healthy Start resource Me and My Community is a group program can be run by any experienced group work facilitator committed to strength-based family support.

## **References**

Alexander, A. (2012). Good practice: Parents with intellectual disability pilot project. *Disability, Pregnancy & Parenthood International*, 75, 12-20.

Llewellyn, G., & McConnell, D. (2005). You have to prove yourself all the time: People with learning disabilities parenting. In G. Grant, P. Goward, M. Richardson, & P. Ramcharan (Eds.), *Learning disability: A life cycle approach to valuing people* (pp. 441-467). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Mayes, R., Tozer, R., & Elder, M. (2011). An innovative support group for parents with intellectual disabilities whose children have been removed. *Developing Practice*, 29, 58-67.

McConnell, D., & Llewellyn, G. (2010). Supporting mothers' community participation. In G. Llewellyn, R. Traustadottir, D. McConnell & H. B. Sigurjonsdottir (Eds.), *Parents with intellectual disabilities: Past, present and futures* (pp. 205-224). Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.