

## ***Getting A Parent Group Started:***

**by Joanne Travers, MIM**

Starting a parent group takes time and energy. It also takes people. The primary actions to keep in mind are consistency and follow through. Before starting your parent group, find several dedicated parents and agree you will work together to carry out your goals and objectives. The burden should not fall on one person. Here are some steps you can consider:

- I. It's not necessary to legally incorporate a parent group unless you wish to do major fund raising or start an organization that can be listed as a corporation in your state or country. You may wish to start the group in the first year, and then determine if legalizing your organization is necessary.
- II. To incorporate a parent organization, you must consult local authorities on legal paperwork and procedures.
- III. Gather a list of parent names, including address, telephone/cell numbers, child's name and date of birth, plus relevant information such as degree of loss, cause of loss, school, and other useful data. Create a file, using index cards or folders. If computers are accessible, create a database that can be easily managed and updated.
- IV. Meet with a small group of parents committed to starting a parent group. At this meeting, discuss your objectives and goals. Discuss your purpose. Keep the first half of the meeting general.
- V. Determine if you want the group to have membership fees or if it should be free. Consider asking parents to contribute if annual fees are unaffordable.
- VI. Choose 2-3 tangible activities or events that you can easily coordinate amongst yourselves. Choose activities or events that you have contacts and resources for. For example, invite your doctor to talk about a subject matter, ask parents to present his/her story, or pull information from a library or the internet and have a discussion.
- VII. Find locations convenient for your parents. This will be hard since many parents travel a far distance, and you might consider alternating locations in order to accommodate families.
- VIII. Ask parents for their support. For example, perhaps a parent works at an office building that has a meeting room you can use on a weekend, and/or perhaps a parent works in a print shop and can create and print flyers or newsletters for distribution.
- IX. Plan the content of your first 2-3 meetings. Present ideas at each meeting.
- X. Set up regularly scheduled meetings: the last Sunday or first Saturday of every month...be consistent. You may want to poll several parents and ask what day and time works best before confirming a day. Evenings may work better for some while others prefer weekends. You might decide to have parent-only meetings alternate with weekend family gatherings.
- XI. When planning events, you'll need to always call people to encourage their participation. Word of mouth and personal chats are the best invitations.
- XII. Meetings can be as simple as a social gathering at a local park where everyone brings something to eat or drink.
- XIII. Circulating flyers at hearing clinics, health offices, schools and community centers serving children with hearing loss.

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- XIV. Promote your group meetings by word-of-mouth. Parents like to be invited, not told to attend. The main force behind motivation is that people want to feel they belong, and that they have friends. Build relationships.
- XV. Start a newsletter and keep it simple. Ask everyone to contribute and keep the tone of the newsletter educational and supportive. Ask children to draw pictures that you can place in the newsletters.
- XVI. Be sure to make all communication fun and interesting. It shouldn't always be serious.
- XVII. Your program content should add value and be educational. Invite a professional to present. For example, invite a pediatrician to talk about nutrition, or have an audiologist discuss troubleshooting hearing aid problems.
- XVIII. Find articles and printed information (internet has many resources) to give to people during every meeting.
- XIX. Find out what your parents need. Create a survey for parents with choices they can check off or prioritize. What are they interested in learning about? ...cell phones, nutrition, hearing aid technology, cochlear implants, child behavior, behavior management, a-v techniques, cooking with kids, etc.
- XX. Structure your meetings so they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. For example, begin with a social and introductions, then have your meeting, and end with a social.
- XXI. Always have a facilitator to keep the meeting on track. Disallow people from dominating and telling their problems.
- XXII. Limit parent meetings to two hours. Family gatherings can stretch to 4 hours, depending on the activity.
- XXIII. Every meeting must have an agenda. It must have a bit of fun, a bit of education, and a bit of socialization.

*Words of caution:*

1. Do not allow parents to gripe. Talking about problems is ok, but complaining is not allowed. Set this rule in the very beginning with gentle reminders.
2. Don't let one person dominate any conversation. Assign a facilitator who can gently interrupt and allow others to participate.
3. Discussion groups are not personal counseling sessions. Try to encourage participation by asking people to be brief. One way to do this is to relate the concern to others so others can respond.
4. Stick to your agenda...don't allow conversation to move away from the topic you planned. Say, "That's a great topic. Would everyone like to have a meeting to discuss this next month?"

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