

**A**  
**Support Group**  
**Training Manual**

*for*

**KINSHIP CAREGIVERS**  
**and**  
**GRANDPARENTS**  
**RAISING**  
**GRANDCHILDREN**

**A SUPPORT GROUP TRAINING MANUAL**  
**for**  
**KINSHIP CAREGIVERS**  
**and**  
**GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN**

*Sponsored by*

**The Governor's Advisory Council on Aging**

***Grandparent Networking Initiative***

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**GOVERNOR'S ADVISORY COUNCIL ON AGING**  
2000 - 2010 ♦ A DECADE OF CHALLENGE

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We gathered information from many sources in compiling this manual. Among them were:

- The AARP Grandparent Info Center (GIC)
- *Support Group Leader Training Manual*, published by the Alzheimer's Association, greater Phoenix Chapter
- *For Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: A series of workshops to help you cope*, published by the Grandparent Resource Center, New York City Department for the Aging
- *Kinship Support Services Program Training Manual* (1998), published by the California Department of Social Services
- *Parenting Grandchildren: A Resource Guide for Kinship Caregivers* (1996), published by the Center of Human Services Department, University of Maryland
- *The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Resource Notebook* (2000), published by The University of Arizona Cooperative Extension in cooperation with the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force.

## Preface

The Governor's Advisory Council on Aging's Grandparent Networking Initiative has been evolving for a number of years. In 1997, the Governor's Council on Aging sponsored a statewide Grandparent Concerns Task Force to address issues affecting grandparents and kinship caregivers. The Task Force membership is representative of individuals, private and public agencies, and organizations, statewide. The Task Force has been instrumental in sustaining the momentum of the goals and objectives that support the professionals, agencies, grandparents and kinship caregivers touched by this issue.

Statistics show that nationwide there is a growing number of grandparents raising their grandchildren; this was reflected in being the only new question added to the Census 2000 survey. The state of Arizona has the fourth largest increase in the U.S., having increased its number of caregivers 73% from 1990 to 2000. There are various complex situations that caregivers encounter which entail legal issues, school enrollment, housing, and eligibility for state support programs, to name just a few. The lack of community awareness of problems faced by these grandparents and kinship caregivers further adds to the already stressful situations they face. Locating and obtaining needed resources has been a difficult and frustrating experience.

When talking to groups and individuals across the state it is apparent that there are two things of equal importance that they need: Support and resources are the common threads they all mention. Support groups combat caregiver isolation, burnout, and help identify resources. They offer emotional support to grandparents and kinship caregivers facing common problems. Support groups provide an opportunity to meet others in the same situation to share experiences, knowledge, strengths, and hopes.

The Governor's Council on Aging hopes the production and statewide distribution of this training guide/resource manual will meet the needs of those involved in initiating and maintaining beneficial support groups. We owe nothing less to the thousands of kinship caregivers and grandparents in our state that have taken on the challenge of raising our next generation.

Barry Gold  
Executive Director  
Governor's Advisory Council on Aging

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## Chapter 1

### Whom This Manual is Designed to Help

***It was 2:00 a.m. when Martha was awakened by the telephone. Her 33-year-old daughter had been arrested – again. Someone had to take care of the three children.***

While there is a growing body of literature on grandparents and other relatives raising their kin, there is little material specifically focused on creating and maintaining support networks for the caregivers.

This manual was produced to assist anyone who wishes to learn how to start and/or maintain a support group. This may include:

- Grandparents<sup>\*\*</sup> who have guardianship of their grandchildren
- Grandparents who do not have sole responsibility for their grandchildren, but who still play a large parental role
- Extended family members raising children – “kinship caregivers”
- Social service agencies (e.g., governmental, church-based, private organizations, etc.) serving grandparents
- School officials who identify the large number of children in their system who are being cared for primarily by their grandparents.

Although the specific focus is on grandparents raising grandchildren, this manual will be of help to any individuals who wish to begin or continue a support / networking group. Because of the statewide distribution of this manual, the resource section is only a framework. Our aim is provide some broad contact information and to encourage manual users to develop their own list of local resources. View this document as one piece of a foundation to provide support for kinship caregivers.

*\*\* Please note that, for the sake of simplicity, we will use the term “grandparent” throughout this manual to refer to any older relative caregiver, such as great-grandparent, great-aunt, great-uncle, etc.*

## Chapter 2

### The Current State of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

#### You Are Not Alone

Based on data from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey, nationwide there are 5.6 million grandchildren living with their grandparents. Forty-two percent, or 2.35 million grandparents, are the primary caregivers for their grandchildren.

***David had been a good single father. Then the accident happened. With no other family around, grandparents Ted and June were asked to take responsibility for little Davey.***

Arizona has similar statistics. Almost 110,000 grandparents share households with their grandchildren. Over 45% of this group are responsible for grandchildren under the age of 18. More than one-third of these grandparents bear this important responsibility for five years or longer. Almost one in five of these families live in poverty.

#### Reasons for the Shift in Parental Roles

In today's society, we find that more parents are less able to function in the face of increased social, emotional, and economic pressures. Unfortunately, this often contributes to the biological parents' inability to adequately care for their children. Grandparents are frequently called upon to step into the primary parental role.

Several social trends have been identified as contributing to this phenomenon:

- Increase in drug abuse and parallel decrease in funding of treatment programs
- Children born to young parents who are unable, emotionally and/or financially, to care for them

- Incidents of child abuse, neglect, or abandonment by the parents, leading to the removal of children from their original home
- Breakdown of the traditional family structure, making it difficult for a single parent to raise a child
- Legal situations involving incarceration of parents
- Death or incapacity due to accidents or illness.

### Challenges, Concerns and Issues Grandparents Face

The number of challenges, concerns, and issues facing grandparent caregivers is overwhelming. They include a wide range of topics, such as legal problems, school issues, financial concerns, medical needs, housing, daycare arrangements, etc. Though this manual is not designed specifically to address each of these issues, they are certainly topics to be discussed in depth in a support group setting. A list of suggested topics for meetings is presented in Chapter 6.

## Chapter 3

### The What's and Why's of Having a Support Group

***Despite repeated stays in drug rehab centers, Donna could not seem to stay drug-free. Her mother, Elsie, was very worried about her two granddaughters. When Donna fails to come home one night, Elsie takes the children for good.***

Caring for kin is a rewarding but stressful task. Finding others who understand one's experiences can be a blessing. Many grandparents find support groups help in dealing with the emotions that accompany becoming a parent *again*. Support groups offer a safe atmosphere in which to share information, concerns, feelings, solutions, and coping strategies with others going through similar experiences.

It is important to keep in mind that a support group is not a substitute for private counseling. The main goal of a support group is to create a warm, non-judgmental atmosphere where members can share information and discuss concerns. Other primary goals are to promote fellowship and lessen the feelings of isolation, give support and encouragement to others, share coping strategies, work through negative emotions, strengthen self-esteem, concentrate on abilities (not disabilities), exchange ideas and resources, and make new friends.

#### Value of a Support Group

- Creates a safe and supportive environment in which to discuss experiences
- Provides respite from the cares and worries of day-to-day problems
- Educates and informs
- Develops methods and skills for solving problems
- Encourages personal growth and development

## Benefits of a Support Group

- Benefits to grandparents / kinship caregivers

It is difficult to be a good parent, at any age. One of the best things adults can do to improve their parenting abilities is to take good care of themselves. Actions as small as setting aside an hour a week to get emotional support from others can yield huge results. While there are many joys and challenges that caregivers face, being part of a support group helps them know they have assistance in meeting the daily challenges.

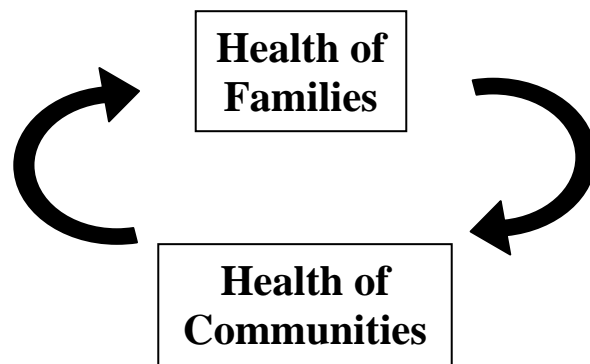
Caregivers can be strengthened through sharing information and resources, and knowing others have walked in their shoes – and survived and grew. Support groups also provide the social opportunities to help alleviate the isolation often experienced by caregivers.

- Benefits to grandchildren

By cultivating a strong support network, grandparents will be better equipped, both from a psychological and an informational perspective, to assist their grandchildren in maturing well.

- Benefits to community

Healthy communities are made up of healthy families. Healthy families – no matter what the biological family ties are – depend on good parenting and well-cared-for children. Without these elements, communities suffer. Our society as a whole is comprised of countless individual relationships. In turn, healthy communities contribute to healthy families. The process begins with interpersonal relations. Support groups can provide a means for improving these important relationships.



## Types of Support Groups

It is up to the members to decide what type of group they want. It can be a social group, a facilitated or unfacilitated discussion group. It can be closed or open to newcomers. Each type of group will require different skills to run. Broadly speaking, there are three types of support groups: discussion, educational, and advocacy.

- Discussion Group

A support group that focuses on providing emotional support. The main purpose is to allow members to talk about good as well as bad times.

- Educational Group

A support group that invites experts such as lawyers, counselors, teachers, and social workers to address members. The primary purpose of the group is to teach and inform members on relevant issues.

- Advocacy Group

A support group that works to solve problems on a bigger scale. The purpose is to change laws, rules, and attitudes about the group's major focus issues.

Of course, a support group can offer activities in each of these categories at different times.

## What a Support Group Is *NOT*

While a support group can offer emotional support and provide assistance in finding resources, it is imperative to keep in mind that a support group is not a replacement for:

- Formal private counseling

- Legal advice from a practicing attorney or paralegal
- Direction from a sanctioned School Psychologist or Guidance Counselor
- Any other services that depend upon professional training and certification.

## Chapter 4

### Starting a Support Group

#### Determine the Need

- Determine If a Support Group Exists Nearby

An easy way to find out if there are existing support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren within your local area, is to contact the AARP Grandparent Information Center at (202) 434-2296 or email to [gic@aarp.org](mailto:gic@aarp.org). You may also access it via the main AARP web site: [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org), search on “grandparents.”

There is no need to reinvent the wheel or go it alone. Likely, there are others out there who have knowledge and expertise that you can use and who want to help. Seek them out, contact them, and learn from them; it will make the process much easier. Even try linking with other types of support groups. There are many people who have organized support groups and it makes sense to talk to them before beginning your own process. The information you gather and the experience you gain during this stage will be very helpful when the support group has been formed.

- Asking Questions

If there is not a local group, ask questions in your community. Ask other caregivers about their experiences. (Chances are, if you are contemplating starting a support group, you have already done some work on this step.) Do they think they would benefit from a group? Have they been part of other support groups? Would they be willing to take part in one now? Would they be willing to take a leadership role in

***Bob loves his grandchildren, whom he adopted four years ago, more than he can express. However, he now has his own serious health concerns. He feels more depressed and helpless with each passing day.***

forming or maintaining a group? What do they want from a support group?

Participants can be reached in a number of places, including:

- After-school programs
  - Boys & Girls clubs
  - Community centers
  - Family resource centers
  - Healthcare providers
  - Pediatrician’s offices and healthcare clinics
  - Places of worship
  - Pre-school and daycare programs
  - School systems
  - Senior centers
  - Social service agencies
  - YMCAs & YWCAs
- Formal Needs Assessment
- Many social service agencies conduct needs assessments as part of their funding requirements. Also, many colleges and universities have conducted needs assessments in their local area. A formal needs assessment is a time-consuming and expensive process, but one that usually yields a wealth of data. Try to get access to this information. Needs related to caregiving are increasingly being assessed by social service organizations. Getting this information will help you assess the extent of the need for support in your local area.

### Logistics (When, Where, and How)

Decide logistical arrangements before the group begins. **You need to answer all of the following important questions:**

- Where will the group meet (location)?
- At what time will meetings take place (day or evening)?
- How often will the group meet (meeting frequency)?
- How long will each group session last (meeting length)?
- How will people travel to and from the group (transportation)?
- Will childcare be provided?
- Will refreshments be provided?
- Who will fund the expenses incurred?
- What are the expenses?
- How will the role of facilitator be decided?
- Is there a facilitator identified?
- What type of commitment, if any, is expected from members?

A crucial step in forming a new group is to organize a planning meeting. This process of organization has several logistical components: finding a space, letting people know who to contact, and covering expenses.

- Finding a Space to Meet

In many communities it is possible to obtain meeting space at little or no charge. Public libraries, schools, city or town halls, someone's home, bookstores, food cooperatives, and religious meeting houses may have meeting space available. Keep in mind issues such as safety, accessibility to public transportation, and wheelchair accessibility must be addressed.

When selecting a space, you need to look at the factors that will tend to influence whether people will come to your meeting.

- Is the meeting place convenient?
- Does it have free parking?

- Is it easy to find?
- Is the distance from the parking lot to the meeting place reasonable for people who are disabled or not physically strong?
- Is the area safe, is it well lighted, and is there sufficient security for the attendees?
- Is it available at various convenient times?

All of these factors can affect attendance. It is important to check out the space ahead of time before deciding to use it. Changing meeting locations creates confusion, so it is better to be sure you can use it before committing. Be sure to have ample signs posted both outside and inside the building identifying the meeting, giving the exact location and room number.

As for the room itself, you want a room that has the amenities that are required for your group, or someone needs to be able to bring them.

- You may occasionally need an overhead projector, slide projector, television and VCR for some presentations.
- You may just want a comfortable quiet room for informal conversation, with chairs that can be arranged in a circle for a more casual atmosphere.
- It is better if the space is not too large to start with, since early group meetings tend to be small; you do not want to make people feel like they're in a huge barn.
- Having food, water, and Kleenex at the meeting or available nearby can be very helpful.

The time of day is very important. Be sure to come to a group consensus on meeting day and time. It is sometimes not possible to accommodate everyone when making this decision.

The meeting time, place and contact information should remain consistent. If you change the date or time, inform as many people, as far in advance, as possible. Some people may be anxious at the idea of attending a support group, and it may take them a while to get up the courage to come to their first meeting. Make sure these people can find you.

When you have found a meeting space, make sure to leave time to advertise. Usually 6-8 weeks is sufficient.

- Contact information

It is very helpful to list a telephone number, email address, or mailing address that people can contact for more information. Should you list your own address or phone number? Some people feel comfortable doing this, others do not. If you list your own number and have restrictions on when you are willing to be called, state that clearly in the flier or ad, such as "For information, call Maria at 555-2222 between 6 PM and 9 PM."

Another option is to ask a local agency (e.g., a senior center) to serve as your contact phone number. Whatever method you choose, be sure to return all calls promptly.

- Covering Expenses

Keep expenses as low as possible. These may include the cost of refreshments, mail, phone calls, and duplication of materials. Take turns providing refreshments. Other expenses may include childcare or transportation for members under special circumstances. Whenever you can, recruit volunteers.

If at all possible, find a sponsor for the group. This could be an individual who cares about this topic, a private organization that gives money to good causes (e.g., Rotary Club, Soroptimist Club, Kiwanis Club, a local church, etc.), or a public agency that deals with seniors (e.g., Area Agency on Aging, AARP, etc.). Additionally, groups like these may allow you to use their facilities for meeting purposes.

Until you can secure outside funding, avoid having only one person pay the expenses. Keep track of what the expenses were and keep all related receipts. Keep in mind that some kinship caregivers have financial difficulties and cannot afford to contribute.

## Get the Word Out

Once you have located a site and time for your first meeting, let as many people as possible know that it is happening. There are a number of ways to do this, mostly through newspapers and fliers.

- Publicize

- Newspaper calendars and classified ads

Many newspapers will list events open to the public in a "calendar" section. Check your local newspaper to see whether they do this. Calendar listings are usually free. Some also provide free classified ads to certain groups.

If a calendar listing is not possible, consider placing a brief classified ad. Keep it as short and inexpensive as possible, for example:

*Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support/discussion group forming. First meeting: November 22, 7:30 p.m. at Local High School Cafeteria. Call (123)555-6789 for info.*

You can also send a press release to your local newspaper, TV or radio station. Depending upon space availability, your announcement may be published or broadcast as a public service announcement (PSA). Be sure to include the who, what, when, where, and why. They need to be short and concise and only take 15 – 20 seconds to read. (See example on next page.)

Try to get this into as many publications as possible: local and nearby newspapers, newsletters, and senior and community center calendars.

**PRESS RELEASE** ← *for newspapers*

or

**PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT** ← *for radio & TV stations*

For Immediate Release  
Date submitted:

Contact: < *name* >  
Telephone #:

A support group for grandparents raising grandchildren will be held on <*date*>, at <*time*>, at <*place, address, and room*>. The meeting is open to any grandparents who are involved in the primary caregiving of their grandchildren or kin. For further information, call <*phone number*> or email <*email address*>.

– Fliers

Create a clear, concise one-page flier or poster about the meeting. State the time and place of the meeting, a contact for more information, whether it is wheelchair accessible, and what its purpose is. Distribute these posters to as many locations as possible:

- \* bulletin boards in
- \* local senior centers
- \* beauty parlors
- \* schools
- \* doctors offices
- \* local stores
- \* bookstores
- \* grocery stores
- \* daycare centers
- \* community centers

Use your imagination!

Remember: when choosing where to place calendar listings and to hang fliers, keep in mind that kinship caregivers are a diverse group, and to reach the maximum number of people you want to get the word out in many different locations. This means reaching people from all economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Diversity in your support group is a healthy goal to pursue.

- Spread the news by word-of-mouth

When promoting any type of service, word-of-mouth advertising is often the most effective method. When people hear of your group, they might be interested themselves, or they may pass on the information to someone else. Therefore, be sure to “talk it up” to all of your social circle. Encourage them to do the same.

***George and Molly were so looking forward to their retirement! They had both worked very hard their whole lives in order to save up a nice nest egg. They dreamed of traveling frequently and doing all the things they had put off until now. But just one month after George's retirement party, their adult daughter became terminally ill. George and Molly were asked to become their young grandchildren's legal guardians.***

## Chapter 5

### Leading a Support Group

Some groups like to have a more formal structure than others. In some, one individual – a facilitator – will chair the meeting and exercise some direction over who speaks and what the topics are. The key element is the flow of the discussion in the group. An unstructured group can get chaotic, but it allows discussion to range over all the topics that the members want to address. Facilitated groups are more orderly, but pressing issues for certain individuals may be missed. Group size and member mix determines how structured it should be.

#### The Role of the Facilitator

The role of the facilitator is to encourage participants to share feelings, concerns, and information in a safe, non-judgmental setting. The facilitator listens, energizes, and keeps the dialogue moving along. A good facilitator is:

- A helper rather than an expert
- An encourager rather than a leader
- A sharer of mutual concerns rather than a problem solver

## Qualifications of a Good Facilitator

Being a good facilitator is not an easy task, especially when highly emotional issues are discussed. Among other attributes, a good facilitator should:

- Be a good listener
- Remain neutral during discussions
- Understand and maintain confidentiality
- Encourage an atmosphere of acceptance and respect for group participants
- Create an environment where everyone feels welcome and is encouraged to speak
- Provide relevant information
- Resist the temptation of being the main “answer person”
- Understand and respect cultural differences in the group
- Share personal feelings, reactions and experiences when appropriate
- Respect each individual’s personal space
- Be willing to delegate authority and responsibility.

## Dos and Don'ts for Facilitators

- DO try to be:
  - + An effective communicator
  - + A quiet, patient listener
  - + Sensitive / empathic
  - + Nonjudgmental
  - + Humorous (when appropriate)
  - + Caring / compassionate
  - + Encouraging
  - + Open-minded

- + Knowledgeable of the issues
  - + Informative
  - + Flexible
  - + Culturally sensitive
  - + Resourceful
  - + Confident
- Try *NOT* to Be:
    - × Patronizing
    - × Flippant
    - × Insensitive
    - × Dismissive
    - × Condescending
    - × Intrusive or “pushy”

### Successful Strategies for Facilitation

The group facilitator plays a vital role in guiding the group, setting the tone, creating an atmosphere of trust and providing support. These strategies are useful for the group leader:

- Set the ground rules for attendance, confidentiality, and mutual respect for group members
- Be sensitive to the group members’ situation; begin where they are, rather than imposing your own agenda
- Initiate and stimulate discussion, allowing common themes to emerge
- Take an active part in the group process, especially in creating a comfortable atmosphere for participation
- Reinforce the expression of feelings, placing problems in a universal context when possible

- Instill hope for change and improved quality of life for group members
- Encourage networking of group members outside the formal group for additional support and socialization
- Help members join in the group discussion and encourage the more passive members when appropriate
- When possible, provide educational materials, articles and information on issues of concern to the group
- Leave sufficient time to discuss the next meeting date / time and any upcoming events.

### Welcome diversity

Sometimes we are more comfortable in a group of people who are similar in terms of gender, social class, race, politics, etc. However, we learn more in a group where a variety of diverse voices are present. Encourage individuals from all walks of life to join your group and be full participants.

### A Sense of Investment

A support group will be more successful if its members feel a sense of investment. If you are beginning a support group, make sure that the group -- and not one person -- shares decision making. Therefore, while it is important to go into your first meeting with some ideas about how you would like a group to be, be open to other people's ideas. Failure to do so will result in a situation where all members will not get what they need from the group, and you will get stuck doing all of the work, because other people will not feel invested in the group. And if you burn out or lose interest, the group may cease to exist.

## Chapter 6

### Conducting a Support Group Meeting

***Susan was so young and immature when she gave birth to Johnny that her parents agreed to raise him. She went on to finish high school and even earned a college degree. Eight years have passed and now she wants her son back.***

#### Typical Meeting Flow

- Pre-meeting / Sign-in
- Introductions
- Announcements / Comments
- Program (when planned)
- Discussion and Problem Solving
- Wrap-up
- Informal Socialization
- Opportunities for One-to-One Discussions

#### Making Everyone Feel Welcome

Everyone at the meeting should feel like they are welcome. This is especially true for newcomers. Create a group atmosphere that encourages members to speak to first-time attendees and incorporate them into the group.

If name tags are used, provide them for all participants, including facilitators. Be sure the names are written in dark ink in large print.

#### Establishing Meeting Guidelines and Ground Rules

At the very first meeting, general rules for behavior need to be established. This is best done when developed as a group. By getting everyone involved in the process, they are more likely to adhere to the

guidelines as time passes. Without being aggressive or insulting, participants should be reminded of the guidelines and asked to observe them.

- Some common ground rules for meetings are:
  - Complete confidentiality
  - Mutual respect
  - Respect others' speaking time
  - Cell phones and pagers for emergencies only
  - Differences of opinions are acceptable, but not name-calling, blaming, or stereotyping
  - Meetings will begin and end as close to the schedule as possible

### Encouraging and Maintaining Group Attendance

Expect the group attendance to go up and down. As people's lives change, they may drop out and new ones join. Occasional "new blood" is good for the group process. Just try to avoid too much turnover, as that hurts the group process.

### Questions to Facilitate Discussion

The use of open-ended questions is an excellent technique for sparking discussion. Some possible questions are:

- What are some good things that happened to you this week?
- Does anyone have a success, no matter how small, they would like to share with us?
- What interesting things did you hear from your grandchild(ren) since we last met?

The use of questioning is also a very effective way of clarifying what someone said. Often, as typical humans, we hear what we *thought* we heard, and not what the other person actually said. Always seek first to understand fully before responding.

## Group Dynamics 101

Try to keep the support group size between 5 and 20 members. Very small groups are too disrupted by the absence of just a few members. Larger groups tend to be unmanageable and do not allow all individuals enough time to speak.

As we are all diverse individuals, we respond differently in various settings. There will likely be times when you encounter the following common types of group members, which may be problematic if not dealt with carefully:

- Quiet, withdrawn participants

Some members may be reluctant to speak in front of others, especially when new to the group. Try to assure them that your group setting is completely safe. Also, be aware of cultural factors that dictate how an individual acts in public. Once you ensure that the group is not directly threatening the “the quiet person” in any way, you must respect their right to silence. Sometimes just listening to others who are struggling through the same dilemmas is comforting.

Some helpful strategies are:

- Ask questions to make situations easier to understand
- Ask the person, “Would you like to respond?”
- Say, “Let’s hear from someone who has not spoken” or “Let’s hear from someone we have not heard from for a while.”
- Ask the person, “Would you like to share your experience with us?”
- Chat with the person privately during a break.

- Domineering participants and/or “Know-it-alls”

In any type of group setting, there are one or two individuals who want to be in the spotlight. They may not even be aware that their behavior is so dominating. Some helpful techniques when dealing with domineering members are:

- Call on other members by name

- Say to the group, “Let’s hear from someone who has not spoken” or “Let’s hear from someone we have not heard from.”
  - Kindly say to the domineering person, “Thanks for being so willing to share, <name>, but let’s hear what some others think, too.”
  - Worst case, call for a short break and talk privately with the person. Never, ever intentionally try to embarrass anyone in front of the group! (Even if you think they might deserve it.) That response will only cause ripple-effect problems and leave a bad feeling in the group.
- Argumentative, negative, or hostile participants

Most of the same techniques listed just above are also effective with nay-sayers. One additional strategy is to ask the arguer exactly what s/he would like to see happen and specifically how should it be carried out. Often, this type of person will be taken aback by having to say something creative rather than just condemning and complaining.

- Emotionally-distraught participants (e.g., crying or yelling)

Many kinship caregivers lead highly stressful lives. They are often struggling hard to cope with their problems. If a member becomes very emotional during the meeting, give her/him some time to work through the feelings. Don’t just jump to offering advice! Oftentimes, a person needs to vent some emotions. As long as the venting is not harming anyone else in the group, give them some time for expression, while also providing a safe, comforting environment.

If such an episode continues to get worse, without an end near in sight, call for a short break. Comfort the distraught individual and encourage them to regain their composure. Assure them that they are not alone, and the group is there to emotionally support them. Having Kleenex available and freely handing them around is another good method to encourage the appropriate expression of emotions.

## Your First Meeting

- Come to your first meeting prepared.
- Arrange chairs in a circle, or in a comfortable setting, so that everyone can see each other and everyone is included.
- Here is one possible format for a first meeting:
  - Welcome everyone.
  - Discuss the need for: confidentiality, respect for one another, no one having to speak who does not wish to, sharing air time.
  - Review the evening's agenda. Many people feel more comfortable when they know what to expect.
  - Make sure that everyone is comfortable physically: Let them know where the bathroom is, where they may and may not smoke, that they may get up and leave the room if they wish to, etc.
  - Do some sort of “check-in” or "go-around" in which each person gets a chance to speak. Have each person say their name and why they came. They may also include what they would like to get out of the meeting.
  - Set aside time to decide on the next step. Do people want to have another meeting, to start a formal support group, etc.? Make sure that you do not leave the meeting without scheduling your next meeting.
  - Talk about starting a phone list so that you (or someone else who is designated) can have a way to reach people interested in meeting again or talking to one another.
  - Ask the group if there are any subjects they would like to have a speaker on at a future meeting.
- Make sure that this meeting does not last more than two hours or people will start to drift out
  - Keep an eye on the time, and try to leave at least 10 minutes or so for a wrap-up segment.

- You may have to cut off an interesting conversation, but explain that you are asking people to cut short the current conversation now in order to work out a way to continue the discussion later.
- When the first meeting is over, sit down, review the situation, and decide how to go forward.
  - What was particularly successful about this first meeting?
  - What fell short of your expectations?
  - How will your next meeting be organized?
  - Is there anything you can learn from this first one?
  - Should you publicize differently?
  - Organize in a different way?
- Do not be too disappointed if the initial turnout is not as large as you hoped. It takes time for a support group to take root and begin to draw participants consistently month after month. Initial meetings can be poorly attended, but as the word spreads and as people get to know your group, the participation will increase.

### Subsequent Meetings

Depending upon the needs and desires of its members, support group meetings can be varied in focus, ranging from personal support via open discussion, education, and advocacy. Be sure to welcome and introduce any new faces at the beginning of the meeting, and then re-acknowledge them again at the end, by thanking them for coming and inviting them back.

- If you want a meeting to focus on personal support or empowerment:
  - Spend the meeting time with individuals sharing their experiences, with each member giving an update on current issues in her or his life.
  - Other group members should listen and, if asked, offer comments or advice.

- Occasionally, issues raised in the go-arounds might lead to impassioned discussions or ideas for future presentations.
- If you want a meeting to focus on education of topics:
  - Pick the topic in advance of each meeting. (See a list of suggested topics later in this chapter.)
  - Formal presentations
    - Focus on formal educational presentations by experts with question and answer (Q&A) periods following the presentation.
    - Find an expert in a particular field and invite them to give a presentation, then advertise that to your support group membership to be sure that they know in advance what the topic is for the meeting you are having.
    - Set up the presentation as a lecture, demonstration or discussion group, whatever the expert is comfortable with, provide some refreshments, and see how it goes. Sometimes it is good to have more open coffee-and-talk sessions after the formal presentation to get the informal support that people need.
    - Attendance is usually good if there is an expert on hand; people need information on a variety of resources.
    - Most experts will do these talks for free. However, the more often that you use professionals in your support groups, the more likely that costs are going to become an issue.
    - In rural or more remote areas, experts are harder to find or may even be unavailable, and travel and transportation often become a much larger issue. In these cases, printed literature, videotapes, libraries, and email or internet access can sometimes be used to provide expert information. However, internet sources are not verified in any systematic way, thus you must be careful in using such sources. Check the information obtained, making sure it is accurate and relevant before disseminating it to your support group.

- Whether or not you use experts or formal presentations, it is very important to allow time for people to mingle, network, and talk about their current situation, and to feel that their issues are being heard by other sympathetic human beings. Thus, having that chance to circulate, talk and listen, and carry something away is a very critical component of a successful support group.
- If you want a meeting to focus on advocacy:
  - At an advocacy-focused group meeting, members might discuss and plan specific action steps, such as writing letters to government officials or local newspapers.
- You can also focus on a combination of the above.
  - Arrange for brief sharing times followed by a topic discussion, or sharing times some weeks and topic discussions on others, with periodic advocacy activities.

Suggested Discussion Topics For Meetings  
(there is room below to add more of your own):

- ADHD (Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder)
- Anger management techniques
- Child/Adult relationships
- Child and adolescence developmental topics  
(e.g., Physical development, Psychological / Mental development, Social development, Emotional development, Sexual development, Spiritual development)
- Child identification cards
- Child safety

- Crisis hotlines
- Crisis management
- Current legislation
- Financial planning
- Finding resources
- Grief and loss
- Health insurance
- Legal issues (e.g., custody, guardianship, adoption, visitation rights, power of attorney, etc.)
- Medical care
- Nutrition and health issues
- Options for respite care
- Parenting tips
- RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder)
- Recognizing clinical behavior problems
- Self-care for the caregiver
- Social service agencies and programs
- Special-needs children
- Stress management
- Substance abuse
- Tax-related issues (e.g., how to apply for tax credits)
- Techniques for managing misbehavior
- Time management
- Training on how to deal with difficult people
- Upcoming events or programs
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_



- When to seek professional help

Support groups are facilitated by a variety of people. In most cases, the group members are not professionals. Members should keep an eye out for participants who seem to be having more-than-normal amount of trouble coping. If such a case is suspected, never suggest in front of the group that the troubled person needs to get help. Instead, be sure to have such conversations in private.

If possible, try to have contact with professionals who can help your support group in an advisory capacity. If you have these contacts, check with them before proceeding on your own. Remember: When in doubt, ask a bona fide expert for advice!

- Dealing with setbacks

It is important to acknowledge that not all support groups are initially successful. Groups may fail due to absenteeism, dropouts, or internal division; personality types such as monopolizers or silent members may disrupt the flow of discussion; or groups may focus only on "safe" topics to avoid discussion about their core feelings. No matter how difficult, each new group should be seen as a learning experience. It is often helpful to discuss meetings with a colleague or a counselor to keep things in perspective. Some groups take time to develop and may have an ebb and flow of participants. This is a normal process.

***Alice has been caring for her frail 98-year-old mother in her own home for the past 11 years. Now Alice finds out that she must also take care of her great-grandson.***

## **Chapter 7**

### **Support Group Collaborators**

Because kinship care is becoming an increasingly visible social phenomenon, more and more social service groups are willing to provide assistance. Do not hesitate to ask for help!

Some potential partners you may have in your area are:

- AARP chapters
- Area Agencies on Aging
- Governor's Advisory Council on Aging
- Clergy / Churches groups
- County Cooperative Extension agencies
- Family counselors
- School officials
- Senior Centers
- Social Service agencies
- YMCAs & YWCAs
- Other local support groups

## Chapter 8

### Resources (With Room To Add Your Own)

***The choices were clear:  
Leonard and Sarah's  
grandchildren could  
come to live with them  
indefinitely or they  
could remain as foster  
children living away  
from the family.***

#### Developing a resource manual

One of the most important purposes of support groups is to provide useful information to its participants. We recommend spending time with each group member in developing a personalized resource manual. Items can be added directly to this manual or individuals may want to use a separate notebook. Whatever is used is not nearly as important as obtaining the data, keeping it updated, and keeping it handy.

The list of information can seem endless, but at different times many caregivers will need access to a variety of resources. A particular resource may not be needed often, but having the information available will help when it is necessary.

#### Information about local support organizations

Contact information you may want to list in your resource manual:

- Current teachers and teachers' aides
- Educational or training programs
- Emergency numbers (e.g., friends and family)
- Head of the PTA/PTO
- Healthcare providers (doctors, dentists, etc.)
- Legal Aid Society
- Legal-Financial resources:
  - Adoption

- Child and Dependent Care tax credit
  - Child support
  - Dependency action
  - Earned income tax credit
  - Food stamps
  - Grandparent visitation rights
  - Medical care / Insurance
  - Power of attorney
  - Social security options
  - Special needs adoption subsidy
  - Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
  - Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)
  - Title 14 Guardianship
- Local and State elected public officials
  - Local and State Public Health Offices
  - Local daycare / childcare facilities and services
  - Local Dept. of Aging Services
  - Local Dept. of Economic Security
  - Local Dept. of Human Resources
  - Local Dept. of Mental Health
  - Local Dept. of Social Services
  - Local Head Start program
  - Local Social Security Administration Office
  - National support organizations
  - Principal(s)
  - School Psychologist(s)
  - Superintendent of Schools

The following page can be used to record contact information. Feel free to make additional copies and/or to modify it to meet your own needs.

Other items you may want to include in your resource manual might be:

- Books titles and where to get them
- Video titles and where to get them
- Other guides/manuals on the topic of grandparents raising grandchildren

**Service / Office**

**Contact name**

**Position/Title**

**Phone**

**Hours**

Family physician(s)

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Family dentist

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Family pharmacy

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## TEMPORARY NOTES TO AUTHOR

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### **Possible items to include in the manual pockets**

- *About Grandparents raising grandchildren* (1997), Channing L. Bete Co., Inc.
- *Grandparents Guide: Helping to raise your children's children* (1997), Beatitudes Center D.O.A.R., Inc.
- A list of support groups, by region