

## Starting a Family Support Group

### See what is already in your community.

Check with local special education director, regional developmental preschool staff and/or case managers to see if there are groups already meeting or if there have been groups in the past. These providers will often know what has worked or not worked in the past and what can be expanded on successfully for the future. You can also call 2-1-1 for statewide resources and services.

**Find a neutral meeting place** such as a community room, library or YMCA. Some people are not comfortable going to a support meeting in the school or developmental preschool, particularly if they are having conflicts with program or personnel.

**Advertise the meeting.** Take or email a press release to the local newspaper, or public service announcement to the local radio station, create a flyer to hang up in grocery stores, local restaurants, public library. Ask the schools and/or regional developmental preschools to pass out or email flyers to parents. Call, email or text parents you know who have children with disabilities and tell them about the meeting. Invite them personally. Offer to provide a ride for a parent who may have no way to get to the meeting, or who may not feel comfortable attending alone. Post the notice on social media (i.e. Facebook, Instagram).

**Arrange for child care or respite.** Parents will come more frequently if child care is available at the meetings. Having children there helps the group become acquainted with one another's children and for the children to build new friendships. Many church youth groups or women's clubs will provide this at no cost. You can also get a youth who need community service hours (like school

groups or 4-H clubs) to provide child care services.

**Limit the group to parents, foster parents, and family members of children with disabilities and chronic illnesses.** When you try to get too broad, a group can lose their effectiveness or it makes it hard for members to relate to each other.

### Don't limit the types of disabilities.

In Wyoming, there are seldom enough families in one community who have children with one particular challenge to support a disability specific group. However, it is usually beneficial to focus on families with children of similar ages because the families will be dealing with similar issues. In smaller communities, that does not always work.

### At the first meeting set ground rules.

The most important is respect for privacy. Members must be able to trust that whatever information or feelings are shared in the group will remain confidential. Other ground rule suggestions: make sure each person who attends will have the opportunity to share, unless they choose not to. They should feel comfortable in saying "I pass." Another rule is to leave the "judgment" at the door. Sometimes members share something sensitive that other participants' may or may not agree with - but it is that sharing person's reality, and in a support group meeting they should not be judged. Remind members of the ground rules often and be sure that each new member understands them. Post them each meeting or have them available for everyone regularly.

**Allow meeting topics to evolve and be varied.** Sometimes it is helpful to bring in a speaker. The group should decide if they want to have speakers regularly or keep the main focus of the meetings on sharing and

supporting each other. The group may occasionally want to plan a workshop or a social event that involves the whole family.

**Provide refreshments and some time for casual networking.** Sometimes the most sharing and support happens during a break. Typically members of the group are willing to take turns providing refreshments.

### Be flexible and don't feel personally responsible if only one or two show up.

Revisit your meeting time or day to see if another time would work better for families. Support groups are never static -- they ebb and flow. Families will be faithful about attending when they have a conflict, but may not attend when they feel things are going well. Two people meeting regularly are better than no support at all, if those two people feel a need for support. If the group is available and consistent about meeting, families will make the effort when they need support.

## Revitalizing an Existing Group

**Show a DVD or YouTube video** and follow it with a time for discussion.

**Pose a problem.** An example might be on how to get a meaningful behavior plan. Have everyone in the group brainstorm suggestions for solving the problem.

**Share funny incidents that have occurred** in your family. Support groups generate a certain bizarre humor which has to be experience to be understood, and it can be very therapeutic.

**Share stories about people who have been most helpful to you** or your family in working with your child -- special teachers, doctors, neighbors, friends, therapists, etc.

Every family has encountered at least one champion who helped them through a rough time.

**Share the "gutsiest" thing you have done in order to help your child.** Did you appear before the school board? Testify at legislative meeting? Research a decision for IEP and present it to team? How did you do it? Why?

**Plan a way to make your community more aware of disability issues.** Can members present a disability awareness program for the Kiwanis, Rotary or a church group?

**Plan an "appreciation" event for teachers and others who work with your children.** Take snacks to the teacher's lounge at school /preschool with a note stating it is provided by families of the support group in appreciation for the education and encouragement provided to your children.

**Invite someone knowledgeable to discuss a topic of interest to the group.** PIC is available to provide a workshop on a variety of disability and IEP topics, a local physical or occupational therapist to discuss developmental milestones, or someone from Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities to explain WYABLE accounts.

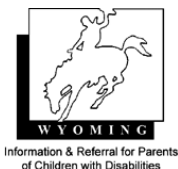
**Invite several adult siblings** of people with disabilities to tell about their experiences growing up with a sibling with a disability.

**Plan a family event-** a picnic, a movie party with popcorn, a holiday party -- to help families get better acquainted with each other.

**Do something fun or silly.** Make banana splits, rent a funny movie and watch it together, have a costume party, make your own YouTube video. Let your imaginations go!

## For more information on Support groups

### CONTACT:



## Parent Information Center

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PHP of WY is a non-profit, 501(c) 3 organization; therefore, your donation is tax deductible. We welcome all donations. Every donation helps us strengthen our network of support for families.

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*Disability Brochure #36*



## How to Start or Revitalize a Support Group for Families of Children with Disabilities

**Parent Information Center**  
1 (307) 684-2277

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