

Creating, Enhancing, and Expanding Programs for Children and Teens

Most foster, adoptive, and kinship groups first form to support parents but even groups whose sole purpose is to support parents have an underlying commitment to the family—parents *and* children. There are also many parent groups that offer some type of program or service for their members' children, even if it is just providing child care during group meetings.

There is a wide range of services groups can provide children—from meeting children's basic child care needs, to offering seasonal events such as picnics and holiday parties, workshops or group meetings for children, and training youth to become child advocates. Over time, parent groups often want to develop, enhance, or expand their programs for children. If this is true for your group, you should first examine what you are offering now, explore what you hope to provide in the future, and plan how you might accomplish your goals. To develop a plan for your group, use meeting time to explore the type of children's programs and services you can realistically provide. As you discuss, plan, and begin to make choices, keep in mind to:

- > start simple
- > expand gradually
- > choose a service or program that meets a real need for your group or community
- > look for ways to collaborate with others who share your vision
- > evaluate your plan and your progress along the way

Providing Child Care

Groups that are starting out may barely be able to offer child care. Some may hold meetings in each other's homes and take turns watching children. Over time, members often find it is hard to miss the support from the meeting and look for other ways to provide child care. Some groups partner with an agency and the agency provides the child care; others look for help from community organizations.

Look for local resources that might help you keep your child care costs down, and plan ahead for how children with special needs will affect your child care needs. Some parent groups hire teenaged siblings who know and understand the needs of the children. Others train local high school or college students to provide child care for a stipend or in exchange for community service hours for their schools. Sometimes retired teachers or adults with social service backgrounds—who have the expertise to handle children with special needs—donate time to work with children a few hours a month. Some groups ask college students to provide music or art therapy for their children during meetings. There are many ways to meet your group's child care needs. See the box on the following page for two creative child care ideas.

Special Events

Some parent groups plan yearly child-centered special events for their families. Adoption Adventure Support Group, in Ashland, Wisconsin organizes an annual bowling event in the winter and has a picnic in the summer. Last year the group also sponsored a Heritage Day festival to celebrate the eight cultures of the internationally adopted children in the group. The festival featured a hands-on approach to learning,

Two Groups Find Child Care Solutions

The St. Cloud chapter of the Minnesota Foster Care Association found a clever way to provide a location for its parent group meetings and offer child care, with the help of a local Boys and Girls Club. Parents pay an annual fee of \$5 per child (age five and older) to join St. Cloud's Boys and Girls Club, which allows kids to participate in club-supervised activities such as air hockey, swimming, arts and crafts, and games in the gym. The parent group pays \$14 per meeting for the monthly meetings, which includes a child care room for children under five. The group hires their teenaged children to care for the few infants and toddlers who attend.

An adoption support group in Monticello, Minnesota holds its meetings at the local community center. The center does not charge nonprofit organizations to use meeting space but charges \$3.50 per child to use the basketball court and pool facilities. Some parents take advantage of the center's facilities, while others use their personal care assistants (PCAs) to watch their children during meetings. Some couples bank their respite hours for group meeting night, go out to dinner, and then attend the meeting. One couple divides the evening—one parent supervises their child for the first half while the other attends the meeting, and then they switch for the second half of the meeting.

ethnic music, foods, crafts, costumes, and toys from the various cultures.

When your group begins to consider the kind of special event you might want to sponsor, make a list of the activities that best fit your needs. Since many special events are labor intensive, look for groups, businesses, and organizations in your community that can collaborate with you. For example, a local business or park might provide the space for your event. Other businesses might donate food, decorations, or prizes. Local agencies or organizations might be able to help you find vendors to provide ethnic food or cultural activities. There may even be another foster or adoptive group in your area that will work with you.

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Diane Martin-Hushman, Parent Group Coordinator
North American Council on Adoptable Children
970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106 • St. Paul, MN 55114
651-644-3036 • info@nacac.org • www.nacac.org

Writer/Editor: Janet Jerve

Groups for Kids and Teens

Early on, some parent groups set a goal to provide regular structured group meetings for kids and teens. The youth meetings have the same purpose as adult group meetings—to nurture relationships; decrease isolation; provide a safe place to vent; provide a community of support for individuals; build on the collective energy, creativity, and talents of all group members; and make the world a better place through education and advocacy work.

Some children's groups are informal and run concurrently with adult group meetings. Children can be grouped according to age to better meet their specific needs. It is important to establish and follow ground rules for confidentiality within the group. Other groups might want to sponsor more formal workshops or training sessions (see the box on page 3).

Some ways to ensure success when organizing groups for kids or teens is to:

- allow the youth to help name the group so they are comfortable identifying with it
- make the group fun (include active learning activities such as music, art, sports, field trips, or some other creative outlet)
- alternate fun activities with more serious discussions or activities
- provide food
- find older adoptee role models to lead the group or lead activities

Possible topics for groups or workshops are:

- dealing with loss and grief
- learning how to handle adoption questions
- making the transition from foster care to adoption
- understanding racial identity and culture
- balancing childhood fantasies with knowledge of their birth families
- strategizing how to make the child welfare system more child-friendly

When children are included in a group learning situation with other like families it can help normalize the adoption experience and help children form life-long friendships with other youth who have had similar experiences (see the box *Making a Difference* on page 4). It also helps facilitate an open dialogue between parents and children, provides a common ground for understanding how adoption affects all members of the family over time, and helps the children work through any difficulties when they arise. Many children need a facilitator and the support of the group to help them work through grief and painful feelings that surface about adoption.

Training Teens as Advocates

As children become teenagers and approach adulthood, they begin to gain a perspective about their past experiences, are more able to express their feelings in a large group, and can articulate their thoughts and opinions

A Workshop Success

Adoptive Families Today (AFT) in Barrington, Illinois, partnered with two therapists to develop a six-week curriculum *Empowering the Adoptive Family: A Workshop Series for Adopted Children Ages 8 to 10 and Their Parents*. The curriculum includes:

- a two-hour parent-only orientation
- five weeks of training
- separate sessions for children and parents
- sessions that combine children with parents

The curriculum first addresses how child development affects a child's understanding of adoption. The sessions are designed for 8 to 10 year olds because they are developmentally able to more deeply understand adoption

with their community. Teens who are trained and supported can become effective child advocates for the foster and adoptive community. Many groups, agencies, and advocacy organizations have pooled their resources to start and support speak-out groups, where teens from the foster care system speak as advocates for needed changes.

Kim Stevens, program co-director of Massachusetts Families for Kids, realized that in order to effect meaningful change in and support for the foster care system in Massachusetts, her group had to find a way to involve those who are most affected by the system—the children. She initially invited a group of foster and adopted teens to a meeting disguised as a pizza party. After the teens had ample time to eat and socialize, Kim asked them what they would like adults to know about what it was like for them as foster and adopted children. Together they made a list of things that were good and bad, important to them, hard for them, and what they would like to see changed.

Kim asked the kids if they were willing to speak at an upcoming State House breakfast. With little time to prepare the teens, she carefully chose those who knew how to speak in public. The breakfast was a big success. Kim saw that the voices of young people carried the message to the legislature better than anyone, and she became committed to training teens to become advocates.

A group that wants to organize a youth speak-out team needs to take the time to train their young people and prepare them to be skilled advocates. The teens need adult leadership to coach them on how to prepare a speech,

and can begin to express their feelings about it. They are also young enough to be receptive to taking a class with their parents. AFT's curriculum is aimed at facilitating family communication about adoption and helps set the stage for open family discussions on the topic.

One key to the success of the workshop was having two professionals—a child psychologist who was an adoptee and a social worker who was an adoptive parent—lead the children's sessions. The final session, where the adults and the children talked together about adoption, was powerful and helpful for many families. The workshop helped open lines of communication with families.

Contact Cindy Johnson of AFT to purchase a copy of the curriculum or to get more information: ctj736@aol.com or 847-382-0858.

articulate their message, be effective advocates, develop leadership skills, and be team players.

“When you invite young people to speak out as advocates, you are asking them to make a huge personal commitment,” says Kim. “In return they need the same level of commitment from their adult leaders.”

The following tips will help a group develop a speak out team:

- provide food at every meeting or training
- give teens time to socialize, get to know each other, and develop trust
- structure active learning exercises geared for teens
- take time to build your team and develop their skills before you ask them to be public advocates
- never send a speaker alone to a speaking engagement; send an adult team member to all speaking engagements to help field difficult questions and redirect inappropriate questions or comments
- include all teens who are willing and want to participate; those who do not want to speak can do behind-the-scenes work to support the speakers
- support teens with rides to and from events, dismissal notes for teachers, coaches, and employers when they must miss school, games, or work
- be available by phone when teens need to talk
- be willing to provide letters of reference to schools and places of employment for speak-out members

Massachusetts Families for Kids’ speak-out team has served as a national model for other like groups and has

Canadian Youth in Care Empowered

Canada has the most organized and extensive youth-in-care advocacy organization that trains and empowers youth in North America. The National Youth in Care Network is a national charitable organization of young people ages 14 to 24 who are or were in government care. The youth both run the organization and provide the services such as conducting research, producing publications, working on policy issues, advising child welfare professionals, and supporting the development of more than 70 provincial and community level youth-in-care networks in Canada. For more information, visit www.youthincare.ca or call 613-230-8945.

Making a Difference

Deb Reisner wanted to make a difference in the lives of transracially adopted children in Minnesota. She and her husband Tim have four transracially adopted children and know first hand the responsibility to help their children develop a connection to and an identity with their culture of origin. Deb also knows many families need help making connections with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. She began to organize the Harambee Project to help transracially adopted children have access to their birth culture and form relationships with African American community members. (Harambee means “pooling resources to enhance the quality of life in the village.”)

The Harambee Project now has 30 families participating in monthly support groups for children and parents. They also held their first cultural and educational conference this spring covering topics including identity formation and self esteem; creating multicultural communities; hair, skin, and diet for children of color; community resources; survival skills; advocacy skills for parents and kids; and the media and our kids.

helped start similar teams in Minnesota and Kansas. For more information contact Kim Stevens at kstevens@csrox.org or 617-445-4796.

If your group is interested in promoting youth advocacy, you may want to look for agencies, parent groups, or organizations to help you make it happen. You will have to think creatively to fund a speak-out team. Maybe your group could help provide the youth advocates and another local organization could find the money. A parent group can be the driving force behind an idea and seek others from the community to broaden the commitment to that idea and help implement it.

Conclusion

Your group may be at the basic level of trying to get the group started, or you may be at a transition point, wanting to offer more to children. You can’t accomplish anything if you don’t have a plan. Take time to survey the parents in your group, brainstorm ideas, and develop a list for what your group might want to do to offer services to children and teens. Prioritize your list, then make a one-, three-, and five-year plan for how you can make your group’s dreams a reality, and stay open to others in your community who can help you make it happen.