



Community Champions Network

Supporting Adoptive Parents Through Private Facebook Groups

April 2015

Around the country today, many adoption organizations are using private Facebook groups as a flexible, accessible way to enable adoptive parents to support one another. These groups enable parents to come together and support one another and to share the joys and challenges of parenting children who have experienced loss and trauma.

NACAC started its Minnesota Facebook support group in 2009 as part of our statewide Adoption Support Network. Today, we serve more than 1,000 adoptive parents statewide through several different groups, including one for all adoptive parents and specialized groups for those parenting teens;



“This community means the world to me.”

— *adoptive parent served by a Facebook support group*

lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender parents; single parents; and parents in transracial families. In 2014, parents posted more than 45,000 messages, through which they shared information, asked and answered questions, discussed behaviors and proposed solutions, requested and

received emotional support, and more. These families have developed a true community—a community they rely on daily for encouragement and support. Through the group, NACAC and group members are able to share important core values, including:

- We are all in this together. We are not alone
- Children and youth can heal from past trauma.
- Families can become stronger and more resilient.
- Adoption and permanency matter to children and youth.

In the fact sheet below, we explore how organizations or individuals can create safe, private, supportive networks using Facebook. Although we are specifically highlighting Facebook, other online

groups will have many of the same benefits and risks, so the lessons can be applied to other platforms. Given Facebook’s tremendous popularity, we have decided that it’s one of the easiest ways to implement online support. Its popularity does have some specific concerns, which we address as well.

The Value of Online Support

In recent years, families have gotten busier and many struggle to attend in-person support groups. At the same time, huge numbers of individuals are using social media—Facebook, in particular—for information sharing and community building. Taken together, these trends result in a wonderful opportunity to provide adoptive parents with needed support. Using a tool most are aware of and comfortable with, parents are able to get support when they need it and not just once a week or month at an in-person group meeting.

Online support has specific benefits for parents, including:

- Providing opportunities for more frequent and accessible support, on each individual parent’s schedule
- Enabling parents often to find almost immediate connections; there’s usually at least a couple of parents online when one parent posts a message
- Decreasing isolation

Community Champions Network is a project of the North American Council on Adoptable Children, funded by Jockey Being Family™.



- Reaching parents who are not able to attend in-person groups, whether due to lack of child care, distance from group location, or scheduling challenges
- Offering parents' multiple opinions; they can read multiple responses to their questions and see what best fits their family
- Enabling them to find respite providers
- Providing an avenue for parents to form friendships in their community
- Providing parents an opportunity to connect with and learn from others, even if they aren't comfortable posting their own questions or concerns
- Building a strong adoption community

How to Start a Group

As you start an online group, you'll need to think about the following:

- If you have a specific theme or purpose
- Who will monitor posts
- What ground rules to set to help participants
- How to reach families

Deciding on the Type of Group

Some organizations have open Facebook groups, which they use to post announcements about trainings and events, resources, and announcements. These have great value, but are quite different than a true online support group. An online support group should be a private (closed) Facebook group, with participants approved by a moderator. With a closed group, participants' posts are visible only to approved members of the group and do not appear on participants' walls or

home pages. (Beginning on page 6, we share details on how to create a closed Facebook group.)

But beyond open and closed, your organization has other choices to make about the type of group. Do you want one group for all adoptive families? Do you want a couple of groups based on issues families may be facing or for different populations? Do you want a group with a particular purpose?

Specialized types of groups include:

- Regional groups
- Groups for specific populations — parents of teens, trans-racial families, LGBT families, type of adoption (foster care, international, private domestic), single parents, parents waiting for a placement
- Groups on special topics — educational needs, advocacy, particular disabilities or challenges
- Book clubs in which parents read the same adoption-related book every month and then discuss the book and how it relates to their lives

If you have multiple groups, parents can choose to participate in one or more groups, depending on their needs.

Before you launch a group, you probably want to spend some time thinking about the adoptive and foster parents you work with and identify the group's needs and culture, ways group members successfully communicate, and what group members have in common. As you launch the group, you'll want to make your structure and your posts best fit the culture and needs of your community. For example, if your community members are more reluctant to share personal information with one another, you may want to create a group with more structure. You might have a book or article discussion group or post specific topics weekly for group input. If, however, you have a core group of parents who already know one another through an in-person support group or other adoption activities, you may be able to have a very open-ended group from the beginning. Even in communities where people don't share their own details, these online groups can help people make connections and learn from one another.

For our Minnesota group, many of the first participating parents already knew one another and we began with an open-ended group. The group has the following mission statement:

This forum allows Minnesota adoptive parents to connect with one another and share resources, information, and ideas. Please remember that what is said here should stay here. This group's success has been built on mutual respect, support, and trust.

Choosing Moderators

One of the most challenging aspects of running an active

About Us

NACAC has been developing and enhancing adoptive parent support groups and helping implement post-adoption services in the U.S. and Canada for 40 years. For many years, our staff have worked on building the leadership capacity of adoptive parents, adoption professionals, and youth who were adopted or have been in foster care.

Through our Community Champions Network, we can share this expertise with you so we can improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. To request assistance, contact Christina Romo at christinaromo@nacac.org or 651-644-3036, x17.

Facebook support group is ensuring that the page is successfully moderated. This can take more time than you might think. We recommend that you identify a team of experienced adoptive parents (whether on staff or volunteers) who will serve as moderators. Moderators need to know helpful resources, core adoption issues, special needs, the effect of adoption and foster care on the family, parenting strategies, and more. They also need to be able to directly address any problem behaviors or violations of the ground rules. Moderators should be responsive, respectful, supportive, encouraging, understanding, nonjudgmental, and positive.

Whenever possible, moderators should divide the workload—for example, one might moderate on Monday, another on Tuesday, and so on through the week. Moderators don't need to read every post, but they should review the page multiple times a day. Over time, as more experienced parents join the group, you may find others to add to your moderating team.

If moderators already have a personal Facebook page, they may want to create a new Facebook page for this group so they can keep their personal information private. Having a separate page helps them maintain a boundary between personal Facebook time and the support group's professional or volunteer Facebook time. If moderators don't create a new



profile, they certainly should check their privacy settings carefully to be sure group members can access only what they'd like to share.

We explore the ongoing role of the moderator more fully on pages 4 and 5.

Establishing Ground Rules

In the planning stages, it is very important to set ground rules that you will share with all prospective members of the group. You'll also want to share them periodically with the entire group as a reminder. We recommend the following, but your group may have more or different guidelines:

- Respect all members of the group—never insult another group member; it's fine to disagree but politely and respectfully
- Maintain strict confidentiality—what is posted in the group is never shared with others
- Never use your children's names and don't disclose anything that could be hurtful or embarrassing for the child

- Respect workers, therapists, and others—do not use the group to insult or disparage others
- Although the following are not part of NACAC's formal guidelines, they are general rules of behavior our moderators would enforce:
- Never use profanity
- Avoid politics

Be Careful!

Although a Facebook group is private, it is still a very public forum and confidentiality is only maintained if all members of the group respect the group rules. All participants need to be aware that others in the group could copy their posts, take a screen shot, or otherwise share information they post. It's important for all participants to make their own informed judgment about what they post. Moderators should regularly post a reminder to participants about the risks of any online group. Below is the information we at NACAC share with potential members of the Adoption Support Network Facebook groups, with reminders posted for other members periodically:

This page allows Minnesota adoptive parents to connect with one another and share resources, information, ideas, and support. If you ask to join the group, we'll send you a personal message to verify that you are an adoptive parent here in Minnesota. Please check the Other folder in your Messages folder for this message.

We ask parents not to use children's names or other identifying information and to respect their children, their workers, and one another. Please remember that what is said here must be kept confidential. This group's success has been built on mutual respect, support, and trust.

If people outside the group visit the Adoption Support Network Facebook page, they can see who is listed as a member of the group. However, the information you post on this page will not be shared on your Facebook timeline and is accessible only to approved members of this group.

Please note that other members of this group may be able to access personal information about you and your family through Facebook, depending on your privacy settings. If your past or future posts and other information on your Facebook page are accessible to the public, it may be viewed by others in this group.

- Don't promote or disparage any religion or belief system (or lack thereof)

Conducting Outreach

- Most online groups will start small, and it will take effort to find families to participate. Having an outreach plan in place from the beginning is a wise idea, but outreach will need to continue regularly. We recommend:
- Notifying leaders of existing in-person support groups
- Asking adoptive parents to share information with others they know
- Sharing flyers and other information with county, state, tribal, or other adoption agencies and adoption support organizations, asking them to distribute the information to their families
- Sharing information with therapists and others who serve adoptive families
- Posting information on your website, with a link to join

Some of the best outreach comes from other adoptive parents who are part of the group. We encourage group members to let others they know about how and why they value the online support.

Maintaining the Group

The key to running a successful group is the experience and commitment of the moderators. Moderators have to help develop a climate of trust and togetherness, while showing empathy and compassion for what other families are going through. Moderators can build trust by welcoming new members, being responsive to questions or concerns, reminding members that individuals can have differences of opinion and express them respectfully, and validating people's feelings. Once moderators have created a safe, respectful, and encouraging group, members will typically follow their lead.

Specifically, moderators are responsible for:

- **Approving or denying requests to join the group; possibly removing individuals from the group** — When we get a request to join the Adoption Support Network Facebook group, a moderator sends a message to that person asking about their role in adoption and explaining the ground rules. We only approve adoptive parents to join the group. If a group member becomes offensive or can't follow the ground rules, the moderator would need to dismiss the person from the group as well.
- **Reviewing posts, particularly to ensure the ground rules are being followed** — Although moderators don't review every entry, they do look at postings several times a day. They scan for themes, active discussions, and disagreements that could become a problem.

- **Removing offensive, inappropriate posts or posts that violate the ground rules** — Since starting our Adoption Support Network groups in 2009, we've only had to remove a few posts, but it's an important role for a moderator. Moderators will need to delete posts that offer bad or dangerous advice, insult workers or other parents, or violate ground rules such as those using children's names or pictures. In these cases, we recommend moderators remove the post, then send a private message to the participant letting them know why the post was removed and reminding them of the ground rules.
- **Offering suggestions and parenting tips** — Moderators respond to questions and make new posts sharing their expertise and experiences.
- **Identifying resources, trainings, events related to adoption or disabilities and challenges common in adoption** — Especially in the beginning when the group may be less active, moderators post good trainings, books, articles, and other resources that may be of use to parents. They also share ongoing news and events that might be of value to participants.
- **Generating discussion** — Again, especially early on, moderators have a great role in starting and maintaining discussions. They can post questions such as: What are the three best books you've read about adoption? What three things do you wish you had known when you first became an adoptive parent? What's the best thing about being an adoptive parent? Posts such as these help the more experienced parents in the group get comfortable sharing their expertise as well.
- **Encouraging group members and offering hope** — Sometimes, participants just need a reminder that they are not alone or that things can get better. Experienced adoptive parent moderators can share their own success stories and encourage others to hang in there. They can also inform participants of the serious, ongoing effects of trauma and how trauma manifests itself in many children. Moderators regularly post reminders on the following topics to help parents remain optimistic:
 - You are not alone; you are accepted and valued.
 - It's important to have and maintain realistic expectations.
 - Trauma and loss have affected our children, and there may be ongoing triggers of their past experiences.
 - Parents' own experiences of loss and trauma will affect how they parent and their ability to be resilient.
 - It's important to have fun with your kids.
 - We can't take our children's behavior personally.
 - We have to focus on building relationships with our children first.

- Children (and parents) are affected by core adoption issues; many of the behaviors and feelings that challenge us are normal in adoption.
- **Lightening the mood** — Sometimes, the group can begin to feel negative or depressing, and the moderator can take the opportunity to change the mood. A moderator might ask attendees to name their family’s theme song, share the music that gets them through the day, or provide them with their favorite strength-based quotation. For the Adoption Support Network groups, we have created High Five Fridays, during which moderators encourage parents to post positive stories and family successes.

Although we encourage moderators to try to keep things positive, we don’t suggest groups avoid talking about serious challenges—some parents have nowhere else to turn and those struggling really need the help. If a conversation on NACAC’s Facebook group is not appropriate for a larger group discussion or might breach confidentiality, staff offer

one-on-one support through Facebook private messaging or by phone.



Ensuring Self-Care

Moderating an adoptive parent support group online can take considerable time, and it is best to have a team of experienced parents sharing the responsibility. Since Facebook is a part of many people’s daily lives, moderators need to learn to set their own boundaries. It can be easy to look at Facebook while on vacation or during every weekend, and this can result in burnout for moderators. We strongly suggest that the organization hosting the page have a process in place to ensure moderators share the workload and have plenty of time away from the group when they need it.

Moderators can also spread the word among the group about the importance of self-care. They can ask participants to share their best tips for taking care of themselves and celebrate those individuals who share their best ways of relaxing and rejuvenating. NACAC’s Adoption Support Network group has a Self-Care Sunday once or twice a month, where moderators remind parents to take care of themselves.

Conclusion

Private Facebook support groups are great way to enable adoptive parents to support one another and to build a sense of community. Careful planning and moderation can ensure a successful group through which members find support whenever they need it. Members of NACAC’s Adoption Support Network group attest to the value of investing the time and attention to this type of post-adoption service:

- “It helps me immensely knowing that others go through what we do in our home. I was beginning to think I was the only one running around like a chicken with my head cut off too much of the time. Now I know it isn’t just me. Reaching out is my lifeline. Love it. Thanks everyone.”
- “I so love this group and the support given so freely even though everyone has their own dilemmas to solve. Sometimes all you need is to know you aren’t walking alone.”
- “Initially I was skeptical about joining this group, I thought that joining would reinforce that we are not a ‘normal family.’ But I have learned through this group that sometimes our issues aren’t as bad as they seem on the surface. And when our issues are bad, it’s nice to know that someone else has been there and dealt with the same or similar things. Just want to say thank you.” ♦

Common Themes

In NACAC’s Facebook groups, posts are most often on the following topics:

- Parenting
- Special needs such as attachment challenges, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and mental illnesses
- Challenging behaviors
- School issues such as IEPs (individualized education programs), homework, bullying, teachers
- Crises and safety
- Advocating for your child
- Adoption assistance
- Residential or day treatment programs
- Respite
- Adoption-competent professionals
- Out-of-home placements
- Marital stress
- Extended adoptive family issues
- Birth family connections
- Core adoption issues

Over time, it can be useful to look for themes and think about ways you can help parents further address key issues—such as through new pre- or post-adoption training, fact sheets, or online discussion groups.

How to Create a Support Group on Facebook

Plan Before You Start

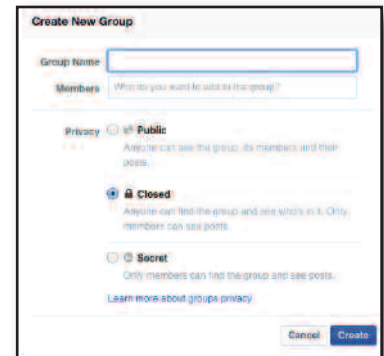
1. Decide on a name for your group. You can name it based on your support group or organization or anything that will have meaning to your members.
2. Determine the group's purpose. Is it a group in which information and resources will be shared? Is it a group that will provide online support? Is it a common-interest group? Knowing the purpose for your group will help guide your decisions for the privacy settings.
3. Decide who will create the group and be the first administrator. The group will be connected to that person's Facebook profile, and other administrators will not be able to dismiss that person from the group later. It's best to have this person create a separate Facebook profile for work purposes and share credentials with others. That way, the person can be removed as administrator in case she leaves the organization or the group.

Set Up the Group

4. Log in to your account on www.facebook.com.
5. On the main page, you'll see a light blue bar on the left-hand side of the page with a number of different options. Under the Groups heading, select the Create Group option.
6. A window will appear asking you to supply information to create your group. Enter the name of your group in the "Group Name" field.
7. You will need to add one other person. The person must be a Facebook friend of yours. Once others have joined your group, you can remove the person you initially added to the group, if needed. To add a member, start typing the person's name in the Members field, and the name should appear. Select the person you wish to add.
8. The privacy settings of your group are very important. Here is a brief explanation of the different settings:
 - Public — If you would like to have a group that is open to anyone and don't foresee it being used as a source of online support, you can choose to make your group public. This will mean that anyone can join and the group posts will be visible to people outside of the group.
 - Closed — This option is ideal if your purpose is to

have the group as a place for online support. The group name will show up in a Facebook search and the member list will be visible, but only approved members will be able to see the posts. The posts will appear in each member's newsfeed, but they are only visible to group members and are not visible to anyone's friends.

- Secret — This option isn't necessarily recommended if you are trying to grow an online group, but can be used if there are concerns about privacy. If you choose to make your group secret, the group name will not appear in a Facebook search, and only members will be able to find the group.



Once you have selected the privacy setting for your group, click the Create button. A group administrator can change the privacy settings at any time.

9. The next window that appears gives you an option to choose an icon for your group. This step is not necessary, so we recommend selecting Skip.

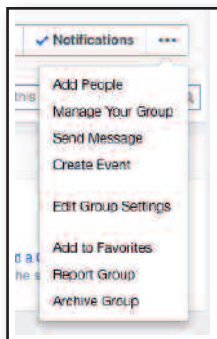
Customize the Group

10. You should now see the basic template for your group. At the very top of the page, you are asked to upload a photo. The photo will be used as the cover page, or banner, and main image for your page. This step is not required. If you do not upload a cover image, the Facebook profile pictures for the group's members will appear at the top of your page, and will continually rotate as group members interact on your page.
11. Before you launch your group page, you should create a description. In the description, it is helpful to share the purpose of your group, describe your goals, and share

NACAC's Community Champions Network is available to help organizations create Facebook support groups; contact Ginny Blade at ginnyblade@nacac.org or 651-646-5082 for more information.

rules for the group. (See page 3 for a sample.) You don't need to add the description right away, but it is best to have a description before you start adding people to your group.

- At the top of the page, you will see four buttons that include your group status, an option to share the page, notifications, and an “...” option. Click on the “...” button and a dropdown menu will appear. Select the Edit Group Settings option.



- On the Edit Group Settings page, you will see options to change the group name, the privacy of the group, etc. You will see an option for Membership Approval. If you select the option to allow any member to add or approve members, you won't be able to manage who is being added to the group. We don't recommend this if you are using the group as a source of support.



- The Group Address option allows you to personalize your Facebook group link. You can choose to include your group's name in the link; spaces and special characters are not allowed.

- The Posting Permissions option is also important. Our recommendation is to allow both members and admins to post to the group. We do not recommend the Post Approval option, as this would require an administrator to approve all posts before they are added, which could become very time consuming.

- Once you have updated your group settings, select Save.

Add Members and Administrators

- Next, select the Members option right below the banner or cover photo at the top of the page. This will bring you to the page with your group members. If you would like to assign additional administrators for the group, scroll to each person's icon, and click on the little gear icon below his or her name. Select Make Admin.

- You can invite people to join by adding friends in the Add People to Group field in the right-hand bar, or by inviting them by email. You can also copy and paste the group link into an email you send from your email account or post on a website.

Start Posting!

- From the options at the top of the page, you can create events for your group, post photos, and share files with your group. Posting to the group is similar to posting a status update to your personal Facebook page. Make sure you are on the main group page, and type your post in the Write Post field.

- Another useful tool is the ability to pin one of your posts to the top of your page. Because posts are continually revolving based on comments or likes, you can use the pin feature to highlight information and keep it in view at the top. Only one pinned post is allowed. To pin, just go to an item you have already posted and click on the down arrow at the top right side of the post, and select Pin Post. ♦

